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Published version

EDWARDS, Martyn (2012). Literacy practices: using the literacies for learning in further education framework to analyse literacy practices on a post-compulsory education and training teacher education programme. Student Engagement and Experience Journal, 1 (1), 1-10.

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Research Article

Literacy practices: using the *literacies for learning in further education* framework to analyse literacy practices on a post-compulsory education and training teacher education programme

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Abstract

The *Literacies for learning in further education* framework describes nine aspects of a literacy practice that elaborate the basic questions of **what?**, **why?**, **who?**, and **how?** that are needed to understand and describe literacy practices.

The framework was used to analyse two literacy practices encountered on initial teacher education courses in the post-compulsory education and training (PCET) phase of the Teacher Education Department in order to understand those literacy practices and improve them.

The framework was found to be a useful tool in articulating competing and contradictory purposes in literacy practices in order to clarify them particularly in the context of the complex partnership and stakeholder relationships within teacher education. It was also useful as a planning tool to support collaborative work between the PCET phase of the Teacher Education Department and faculty-based and central support services in supporting the academic literacy of trainees.

The use of the framework by other University departments should be considered in supporting academic literacy.

Introduction

The learning, teaching and assessment strategy of the Faculty of Development and Society (Sheffield Hallam University, 2009) comprises of four enhancement themes of effective and efficient assessment and feedback practice; ensuring students are well equipped for the world of work; supporting student transition, progression and achievement; and preparing students for a global world. Developing the academic literacy of students is included as a component of supporting student transition, progression and achievement.

This paper challenges the traditional "deficit view" of literacy and instead proposes a social view where academic literacies are seen as situated within the context of specific settings and social relationships. It adopts the *literacies for learning in further education framework* (Pardoe and Ivanic, 2007) that has been used to explore literacy practices on vocational courses in further education settings and considers whether the framework may also provide a useful tool for exploring literacy practices for professional learning in higher education. Two case studies from teacher education are used to illustrate how the framework can be used as a tool to evaluate and improve literacy practices for professional learning. It is argued that the framework does provide a useful tool, particularly where academic subject groups seek to work collaboratively with faculty-based support and central services to improve the academic literacy of their students.

Theoretical framework for a social view of literacy

The traditional view of literacy is as a neutral and technical skill where remediation is required when reading and writing are deficient. In this view teachers' discussions of literacy often become about illiteracy, with a focus on what students cannot do rather than what they can do. Such a deficit model of literacy has been challenged by a social view where it is seen as literacy practices and literacy events that occur within meaningful social and cultural practices (Street, 1993; Gee, 1990).

The assertion that literacy is a social practice was elaborated on in the form of six assertions:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.

- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.

- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.

- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.

- Literacy is historically situated.

- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000, 8).

The term *literacy practice* is understood to mean the ways in which people use written language in their everyday lives. These practices involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships (Street, 1993, 12) and so cannot be simply defined as observable behaviours. They are in the simplest sense 'what people do with literacy' (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000, 7) and are internal to individuals whilst at the same time being social processes that connect people with one another.

Literacy events are activities where reading or writing has a role and usually involves a written text or texts central to the activity. Literacy events 'are observable episodes which arise from [literacy] practices and are shaped by them' (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000, 8). The situated nature of literacy within a social context is implicit within the phrase *literacy event* and draws on ideas from sociolinguistics that the social event of verbal interaction, rather than the formal linguistic properties of texts in isolation, should be the starting point for the analysis of spoken language (Lemke, 1995).

Written texts and how they are produced and used is a crucial aspect of literacy events and these three components of practices, events and texts are drawn upon to provide the social view of literacy as 'best understood as a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts' (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000, 9).

Literacies for learning in further education

Literacies for learning in further education (Pardoe and Ivanic, 2007) was a research project undertaken jointly by Lancaster University and the University of Stirling in collaboration with four further education colleges that focused on the learning and teaching of literacy skills that were embedded within the vocational contexts of childcare, construction, science, catering and media studies. The project adopted an approach to practitioner research advocated by Dick Allwright (2003) that involved three stages of actions for understanding, reflection and review, and actions for change.

The actions for understanding involved three ways of finding out about students' literacy practices in their lives outside college. The first of these was a *literacies around the clock* activity where students were asked to chose a day and record on a clock diagram the things they had done through the day. This was then followed up through discussion to identify the reading and writing involved in each of these things. The second activity involved asking students to take home disposable cameras and take photographs of anything that was important to them that involved reading and writing. They were asked to choose the six most important photographs to discuss. The third activity involved providing students with a set of icons/pictures and asking them to select those that represented reading or writing practices that were really important to them in defining '… who you are and who you want to

become.' They mapped their selected icons or ones they added themselves to a Venn diagram showing whether those practices occurred at home, at work, in college, or in a combination of these.

The reflection and review carried out by researchers with college lecturers and students showed different insights from each of the three activities. Reflections on students' literacy practices outside college showed that students who appeared to have low levels of literacy in college were often using reading and writing skillfully in other areas of their lives. Students had more experience of reading and writing than they themselves realised but they weren't transferring these to college because it was embedded within their everyday practices of home and work. Low status associated with some everyday literacy practices also prevented them from being transferred to college. A further finding was that students showed an enthusiasm for reading and writing in their everyday lives that was not evident in college. They tended to value literacy practices that were purposeful, had a clear audience, were active, involved generating ideas or creating something, involved a range of modes and technologies, involved interaction and collaboration, and were things associated with their identity and who they wanted to become.

The review of literacy practices used in college courses involved asking lecturers to identify a literacy practice that was not working effectively in their subject and to use the *literacies for learning in further education framework* to make small incremental changes in order to improve it. The framework is shown below (Figure 1) and is useful to "… elaborate the basic questions of **what?, why?, who?** and **how?** that are needed to understand and describe any use of reading and writing" (Pardoe and Ivanic, 2007, 16). The use of the framework enabled college lecturers to view reading and writing as social and vocational practices rather than just as basic skills. It also enabled them to see where college based activities may resonate with students' wider experiences at home or work in order to make them more meaningful for learning.

The LfLFE framework

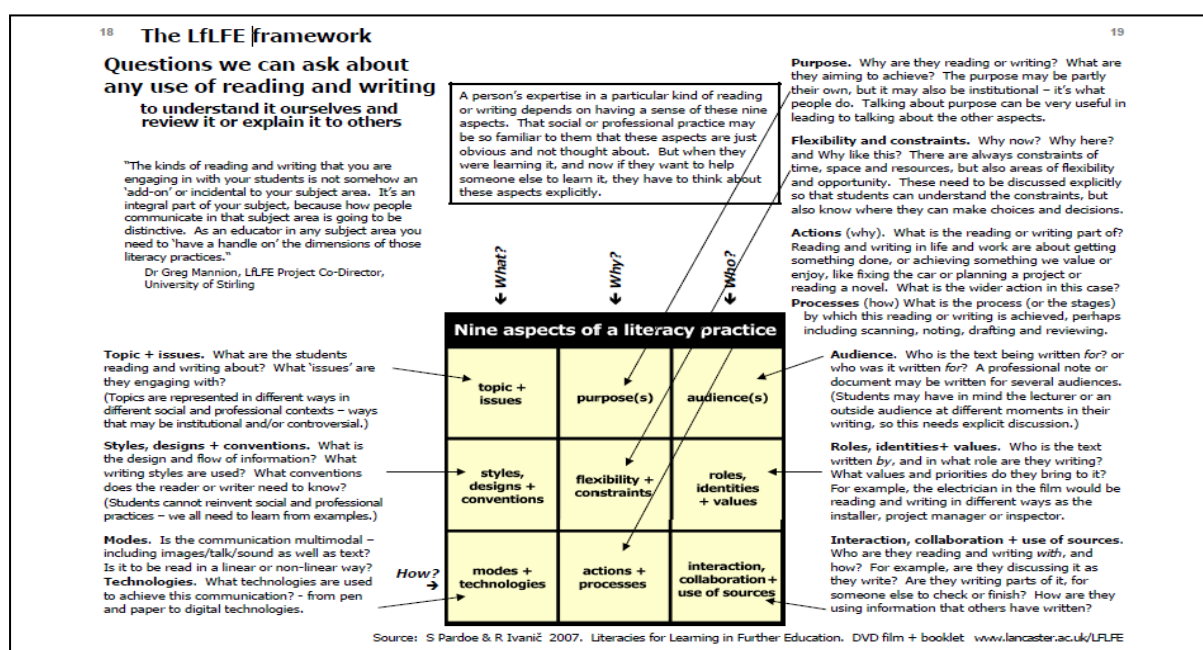Questions we can ask about any use of reading and writing to understand it ourselves and review it or explain it to others

Source: S Pardoe & R Ivanič 2007. Literacies for Learning in Further Education. DVD film + booklet www.lancaster.ac.uk/LFLFE

Case Studies from teacher education and discussion

The framework developed through the *literacies for learning in further education* project was used to analyse literacy practices within the post-compulsory education and training phase of the Teacher Education Department at Sheffield Hallam University in order to improve those practices by making the reading and writing more useful for professional learning. The study took place with one cohort of full-time pre-service trainees within a two-hour taught session which was then repeated one week later with a cohort of part-time in-service trainees. Approximately forty trainees attended the session from each cohort. All trainees were towards the end of their initial teacher training courses. The sessions commenced by defining a literacy practice as '… the use of reading and writing to get something done …' (Pardoe and Ivanic, 2007, 5). The trainees were then asked to recall a literacy practice they had encountered on their course that had worked well and one that had not worked well. They then self-selected into discussion groups based on the modules where those literacy practices were encountered. Once these discussion groups were formed the trainees were presented with the *literacies for learning in further education* framework and asked to use the framework in their groups to critique the literacy practices they had identified and make suggestions to improve them. This involved using the nine aspects of the framework to consider the basic questions of what?, why?, who? and how? needed to understand and describe the literacy practices. Each group was asked to feedback on the use of the framework and their suggestions for improving the literacy practices to the larger group at the end of the session.

This report will focus on two literacy practices that were identified by the trainees as being particularly problematic; firstly the self-assessment of practical teaching undertaken using a paper-based checklist derived from Ofsted grading criteria for the assessment of the characteristics of trainee teachers, and secondly the introduction to the *litsearch* facility and the *library gateway* by an information skills advisor using a web-based presentation. These will be used to exemplify the use of the *literacies for learning in further education* framework to understand and improve the literacy practices. The usefulness of the framework in other professional contexts across the University will be considered and implications for academic teams and central services explored.

Self-assessment of trainee teachers' characteristics

The self-assessment of trainee teachers' characteristics was completed by all trainees towards the end of their initial teacher training and required them to self-assess their performance using descriptors drawn from the Ofsted grading criteria for trainee teachers of outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate. This self-grading was then to be discussed with their subject specialist mentor in their teaching context and with their academic tutor in order to arrive at a moderated grade for practical teaching against Ofsted criteria. Feedback from trainees indicated that many of them did not have a clear understanding of the purpose of the self-assessment activity and treated it as an administrative process required by the course

tutors rather than as a meaningful learning and teaching activity that required their engagement.

Using the *literacies for learning in further education* framework with the trainee teachers to analyse the literacy practice identified its characteristics as summarised in Figure 2. These were contrasted with the purpose of the task as perceived by the teaching team in the context of the impending Ofsted inspection of its provision shown in Figure 3.

Nine aspects of a literacy practice (trainee perspective)		
Topic + issues Self-assessment of practical teaching; familiarization with Ofsted criteria for practical teaching.	**Purpose(s)** Self assessment of practical teaching to inform professional development planning.	**Audience(s)** Self; subject specialist mentor; academic tutor.
Styles, designs + conventions Grade descriptors set out in columns for outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate trainee teachers.	**Flexibility + constraints** Census point in trainee teacher's professional formation; snapshot of current capabilities against published benchmarks.	**Roles, identities + values** Trainee teacher seeking to develop own professional practice.
Modes + technologies Tick box format for self grading against criteria followed by unstructured dialogue with mentor and academic tutor.	**Actions + processes** To inform academic tutorial processes.	**Interaction, collaboration + use of sources** Engagement with published Ofsted criteria; moderation of self-assessment with subject specialist mentor and academic tutor.

Nine aspects of a literacy practice (teaching team perspective)		
Topic + issues Self-assessment of practical teaching; familiarization with Ofsted criteria for practical teaching.	**Purpose(s)** Grading trainee teachers to provide data that can be interrogated to inform programme planning.	**Audience(s)** Ofsted inspection; Self Evaluation Document.
Styles, designs + conventions Grade descriptors set out in columns for outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate trainee teachers.	**Flexibility + constraints** Census point in trainee teacher's professional formation; snapshot of current capabilities against published benchmarks.	**Roles, identities + values** Programme manager; academic tutor.
Modes + technologies Tick box format for self grading against criteria followed by unstructured dialogue with mentor and academic tutor.	**Actions + processes** To make judgements on quality of provision across the programme area and collaborative partnership.	**Interaction, collaboration + use of sources** Engagement with published Ofsted criteria; moderation of trainee teachers' self-assessments.

The use of the *Literacies for learning in further education* framework as a tool to critique the literacy practice suggested the **what?** (topic) that the trainees were being asked to work on was understood but that there was a lack of clarity in other aspects of the framework, most noticeably the **why?** (purpose) and **who?** (audience) of the task.

Ambiguity in the purpose of self-assessment in higher education has been identified in the literature. Lew, Alwis and Schmidt (2009) identified that whilst students and teachers shared an understanding of the intended purposes of self-assessment they differed in their

perceptions of its actual use. Teachers believed that self-reflection improved learning whilst students believed they could influence the teachers' impressions of their performance and therefore influence their final grades. An earlier study into first year undergraduate students by Maguire, Evans and Dyas (in Lew, Alwis and Schmidt, 2009) identified that students were sceptical about self-assessment tasks and described them as "mechanical, meaningless tasks" which did not improve their learning.

Ambiguities and contradictions are also prevalent in the use of competency-based standards in initial teacher education such as the Ofsted grading criteria for trainee teachers described above. Lawy and Tedder (2009) identified misgivings amongst teacher educators regarding the manner in which the prescription of standards has resulted in a focus on achievement that provides a measureable accountability framework for Ofsted inspections and encourages the incremental development of a skill-set and the assimilation of techniques rather than the acquisition of understandings needed to operate effectively in the classroom. Their view that '… The skill set and knowledge required to teach cannot be captured or translated into a set of written standards nor reduced to a set of atomised practices…' (Lawy and Tedder, 2009, 56) is widely held by teacher educators.

The *Literacies for learning in further education* framework can be used not only as a tool to critique and improve literacy practices but also to expose and explore the cultural assumptions and power relationships that form the context for those practices.

Introduction to litsearch and the library gateway

The introduction to *litsearch* and the *library gateway* was completed by trainees in their induction week at the start of their training and evaluations of the induction processes revealed that this activity was not perceived as useful by students. The task was repeated with a different group of trainees at the mid-point of their training within the context of a module requiring trainees to undertake a literature review into an aspect of learning, teaching or assessment in their subject specialist area. By contrast to feedback in induction week this event was highly regarded with trainees commenting that "this answers all my problems", "why didn't we get this earlier?" and "this is exactly what I needed". It was interesting to note that both of these sessions were delivered by the same information advisor using similar teaching materials in an IT suite within the Learning Centre. The key distinction between the two presentations was that the first took the form of a stand-alone presentation delivered by central services during induction week and not related to the course of study whilst the second was part of a series of sessions organised around the assessment requirements of a course module with the session delivered by central services in collaboration with the module tutor and using the trainee teachers' areas of enquiry to contextualise the use of the *litsearch* and *library gateway* tools. The *literacies for learning in further education* framework has been used in Figure 4 and Figure 5 to attempt to make sense of the very different trainee teachers' responses to the *litsearch* and *library gateway* presentations in these different contexts.

Nine aspects of a literacy practice (during induction week)		
Topic + issues *Litsearch* and the *library gateway*; academic literacy.	Purpose(s) General introduction to the Learning Centres at the start of the course.	Audience(s) Self
Styles, designs + conventions presentation in IT suite by information advisors from central services; handouts showing screenshots of literature search tools.	Flexibility + constraints During induction week; trainees unfamiliar with new settings, peers and academic staff; course expectations unknown; session planned and delivered by central services.	Roles, identities + values Not yet established.
Modes + technologies Interrogation of *litsearch* using data projector with live logins to the library gateway supported interactivity of the presentation.	Actions + processes Dissemination of information/resources for future reference.	Interaction, collaboration + use of sources Listening and receiving information; passive.

Nine aspects of a literacy practice (embedded within a taught module)		
Topic + issues *Litsearch* and the *library gateway*; academic literacy.	Purpose(s) Related to completion of an assessment task for a particular module.	Audience(s) Module assessment task requires a report addressed to peers in own subject specialist area.
Styles, designs + conventions presentation in IT suite by information advisors from central services; handouts showing screenshots of literature search tools.	Flexibility + constraints Session taught within a module; session planned and delivered by central services in partnership with module tutor.	Roles, identities + values Practitioner/researcher
Modes + technologies Interrogation of *litsearch* using data projector with live logins to the library gateway supported interactivity of the presentation.	Actions + processes Dissemination of information/resources for completion of post-session task.	Interaction, collaboration + use of sources Dialogue between trainee, tutor and information advisor; interrogation of databases.

Conclusion

The learning, teaching and assessment strategy of the Faculty of Development and Society (Sheffield Hallam University, 2009, 8-9) places emphases on "planned and timely interventions to support student writing" and "encourage[ing] departments to work with central and faculty-based support to support the development of student writing". The *literacies for learning in further education* framework can be used to support the planning of collaborative work of departments with central and faculty-based support. The framework can also be used as a tool to make explicit assumptions and power relations on which literacy practices, such as the use of Ofsted grading criteria as seen in the earlier task, are based. Street (1995) argues that the introduction of such critical language awareness is a necessity that teachers have a social obligation to address.

There is an increasing trend amongst scholars for literacies to be seen as socially situated practices that are embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices rather than literacy as a neutral, technical skill.

The *literacies for learning in further education* framework can be used to critique literacy practices in order to improve them and explain them to others. The framework comprises of nine aspects that elaborate the basic questions of **what?, why?, who?** and **how?** that are needed to understand and describe any use of reading and writing. If any aspect of the framework is changed then the literacy practice itself will be changed.

Teacher education is a highly regulated area of the curriculum that draws upon many stakeholders and complex partnership relationships. The *literacies for learning in further education* framework can provide a model for articulating competing perspectives so as to clarify the cultural settings and power relationships in which literacy practices are situated.

Trainee teachers value support with academic literacy including faculty-based support and support provided by central services. This support is most highly valued when it is embedded within course contexts and delivered in a timely fashion rather than being stand-alone. The *literacies for learning in further education* framework can be used as a tool for planning collaborative work by departments with faculty-based and central services to support academic literacy.

The *literacies for learning in further education* framework may provide a useful tool in other departments of the University, particularly where complex partnership and stakeholder relationships exist or where departments are keen to plan timely interventions with faculty-based and central services to support academic literacy.

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