1 The social context of literacy

Mary Hamilton

Understanding literacy in its social context

Introduction

This is an exciting time to be involved in literacy education. Wherever we turn, written texts of some kind are part of our lives. From the MP3 player to the DIY shop, written language, pictures, diagrams mediate our activities and interactions. At the same time, researchers are developing new insights into the importance of literacy for social inclusion – particularly in the light of world economic changes and the growing importance of digital media. In England, the government has put literacy at the centre of its educational policy, both in schools and in the lifelong learning sector. There has never been a time when it is more important to reflect on what we mean by literacy, what assumptions we make about it and what theories should guide practice.

There are long traditions of literacy teaching and research in the English-speaking world that see literacy as a discrete set of skills that can be acquired step by step. Some are foundation skills, such as being able to map words onto sounds using phonics, to spell accurately or form letters through handwriting. Some are more complex linguistic and information-processing skills that enable people to recognize different kinds of texts and to take account of purpose and audience when they read or write. There are continuing debates about what these skills are and about which ones should be included or excluded in definitions of ‘basic literacy’.

In this chapter, we maintain that foundation skills are, of course, important, but that literacy is also more than this. To be effective teachers, we need to understand this ‘more’ – how skills are shaped by the social contexts, purposes and relationships within which reading and writing are used. As an example, something as basic as writing down the bare facts of your life is never done in a vacuum. These facts are written in a CV, a diary or an autobiography. They may be written by another person in medical case notes, given as a speech at a funeral or other ceremonial event, or reported in a police statement. In each situation, the form and process of the writing will be different. Very often the physical act of writing and the materials used to carry it out will be different (a pencil or a computer, a set of notes, a form or a book). Different outcomes will hang on the accuracy of the account, how persuasive it is, or
whether the spelling and layout are correct. In other words, literacy is situated and embedded in local activities, and can never be pulled out and captured as a separate and unvarying thing.

This perspective, of the contextual and embedded nature of literacy, has become known as literacy as situated social practice. It draws on situated theories of learning which see learning as taking place in day-to-day relationships between people in their environment, whether this is a formal college classroom, a workplace or a self-help medical group. It draws a bigger landscape than that of seeing literacy as a set of discrete skills, and is concerned with local differences, diversity and variety as well as with universal principles.

Ways of understanding literacy

Task 1.1

Definitions of literacy
Explore one or two of the following websites for definitions of literacy:

- Wikipedia: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy
- National Literacy Trust: www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/quote.html
- Canadian Education Association: > Focus on Literacy >Framing the Debate > What is Literacy? www.cea-ace.ca/home.cfm

- How have definitions of ‘being literate’ changed over the centuries?
- What current definitions can you find?
- Which do you prefer and why?

We have mentioned above two contrasting views of the nature of literacy – the ‘discrete set of skills’ and the ‘situated social practice’ accounts – and suggested that we need to draw on both of these in this book. Another important way of understanding approaches to literacy education is to consider the purposes of literacy learning and teaching. Literacy is an ‘elastic’ idea: most people will agree that it is a good thing to have, but it can mean vastly different things from one person to the next. At different points and under different policy conditions, adult literacy has been seen as:

- a set of functional skills that help people to meet the demands that society puts on them, especially in terms of employment;
- a civilizing tool, allowing people to access a literary culture that is part of their cultural heritage;
- a means of emancipation, enabling people to control their lives, challenge injustice and become autonomous, participating citizens in a democracy.
These different perspectives on the purpose of literacy can often exist side by side in different settings, though, at a particular time and place, decisions about policy and practice are usually guided by one dominant view.

If we see literacy as a form of situated social practice, we do not need to search for one true definition of literacy. We can accept that different purposes for literacy exist, and that this will give rise to a variety of literacy education provision, different ways of thinking about teaching and learning and different goals for programmes and policies. Given these inevitable variations, it is probably more useful to use the term discourses to describe the different ways of thinking and talking about what literacy is. For example, a programme in a community development setting could be seen as rooted in the emancipatory discourse of literacy, enabling people to ask for their rights, manage schooling, access better employment or participate in local democracy. In contrast, an employer-sponsored workplace programme may seem more functionally oriented, enabling people to perform literacy tasks needed in their jobs more successfully. This is not to say that different purposes can’t be relevant in each setting. The literacy learned in a homelessness project can also be functionally useful, and workplace literacy programmes can be emancipatory.

**Literacy as situated social practice**

In 1983, Shirley Brice Heath published a study of two communities in the US, documenting the different cultural ways in which very small children were initiated into literacy; these early experiences of literacy enabled them to fit more or less easily into formal schooling. The key idea of a literacy event was first coined by her. She identified a literacy event as being any occasion in which a written text is involved in a social interaction (see Heath 1983: 93).

### Task 1.2

**Everyday literacy events**

Think of your own recent experience.

- Do you ever write or give poems to other people? In what context?
- Which languages have you spoken or read during the last two weeks?
- Do you keep family records? What? Where?
- Have you ever written a fan letter?
- Have you ever taken on the job of secretary or treasurer for a local organization?
- When was the last time you asked for help with writing or reading?

*For more on literacy events see below.*

Another key idea used by researchers – literacy practices – is a broader, more abstract one which refers both to people’s behaviour and to their understandings of the uses of reading and/or writing. ‘Literacy practices’ incorporate not only ‘literacy
events’ – observable occasions in which literacy plays a part – but also the ways we understand, feel and talk about those events.

Around the same time as Heath was researching, the psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) were looking the different ways in which literacy was being learned at home and in school in a North African community. They showed that very different literacies resulted from this learning – different scripts, different skills and procedures, different outcomes. Brian Street (1984), an anthropologist working in Iran, also showed how different literacies were acquired in a religious setting, in formal schooling and in the market place. These researchers all showed that literacy skills and practices grow and are shaped within the social system and contexts of which they are part.

David Barton (2007: 29–32) has borrowed the metaphor of an eco-system to describe this – how human activity interacts with the environment. Literacy flourishes in particular ‘niches’, will take on the characteristics of that niche while other literacies fail to take root, may be diminished or even disappear. For instance, many kinds of specialist workplace literacies flourish – a business or organization will develop ways of keeping records or reporting on its production processes, for example. Reading novels, however, would be inappropriate in most workplaces, except during lunch breaks. Reading and speaking in minority languages very obviously flourishes within communities in the UK, but may be limited within educational or work settings. Train travel favours portable reading that can be engaged with quietly by individuals, whereas a political campaign meeting might involve noisy and collaborative reading, or the drafting of a document.

The social practice approach encourages consideration of how literacy works within the social ecosystem of which it is part. It focuses attention on the cultural, political, economic practices within which the written word is embedded – the ways in which texts are socially regulated and used and the historical contexts from which these practices have developed.

Many literacy researchers lay great store by ethnographic methods – sharing in, and documenting, the everyday context in which literacy is acquired. These methods have become an important resource for literacy studies and for teachers and learners today. Teachers can use this approach to engage with learners in documenting, reflecting on and better understanding the literacy practices in contemporary life in which we all participate.

The perspective of literacy as part of situated social practice, therefore, means not just talking to students about their personal histories but encouraging learners to explore collectively the broader social context in which literacy is used. The topic ‘Writing a letter to school’, for example, would not only mean practising writing the letter individually, but students finding out together how the school uses the letter and why it is needed, and sharing ideas of what it should contain. It would also mean discussing broader issues such as managing relationships with schools, and ways of feeling powerful around your children’s education.

The situated social practice view emphasizes that any teaching and learning activity should take place with the following wider aspects of context in mind:
what people do with texts rather than focusing simply on the texts themselves – literacy events or moments where a text is used in practice; how people help one another to accomplish written tasks (such as writing a letter, filling in a form);

how reading and writing are embedded in everyday activities (e.g. in weddings, in doing karaoke, in finding your way round a strange town), and how the reading and writing involved in these local ‘ecologies’ of literacy are formed by cultural convention and reflect and support social relationships;

how literacy is changing (such as computer-based assessment, sending emails rather than postcards, shopping online, blogging);

the diversity of different languages, scripts, cultural conventions and modalities (written codes, images, symbols) used in reading and writing. Some of these will be more familiar to particular learners than others. Different literacy activities may also require different physical and cognitive skills (such as using pen and paper or typing with digital keyboard, reading Braille, painting a sign board, reading a graphic novel or a poem, using Arabic, Chinese or English script);

the existence of ‘funds of knowledge’ that reside in communities and individuals. These can be valued, drawn on and shared in literacy learning (such as childcare, specialist health knowledge, raising plants for food; travelling in a particular climate).

Documenting literacy as part of situated social practice

As we will discuss later in this book, there are currently two key theoretical perspectives on learning literacy. These match the two approaches to understanding literacy described above.

Theories stemming from a cognitive approach focus on how we process language at every level, from recognizing individual phonemes (the smallest unit of sound) to understanding the characteristics of a whole text. Teachers need to work with learners with the full range of these building blocks, which we will describe later as being at ‘text’, ‘sentence’ and ‘word’ level.

The social practice theory of literacy takes a different perspective. It looks at literacy events and practices, i.e. the overall context in which literacy is being used, and considers:

- participants: who is involved in an interaction with a written text;
- activities: what participants do with texts (and this is not just reading or writing, it can be displaying it, passing it on to others, hiding or even erasing it);
- settings: where they do it physically – in the kitchen, on the bus;
- domains: the different areas of social life, such as family/household, community/public life/citizenship; workplace; education, commerce, reli-
region, dealing with public services and bureaucracies; health; children; legal matters. The notion of ‘domain’ involves values and purposes, not just places;

- **resources**: these might be cognitive skills and knowledge; they might also be paper, a wall or other surface to write on, a computer, a printer, a set of coloured pens or a can of spray paint, a hammer and chisel.

Using these social practice building blocks it is possible to document with learners how literacy fits into their lives, what it means to them and where sources of difficulty or interest might lie. Most important of all, this can reveal why certain kinds of literacy are so important in society, how they are changing and what the significant connections are across time and space.

### Task 1.3

**Documenting a literacy event**

Choose a domain or setting that interests you. Observe one literacy event, e.g. keeping a class register, ordering takeaway food. For something to qualify as a literacy event there must be a written text and at least one person involved. Since you will be recording this event in various ways and talking to those involved, choose an event that you feel confident about approaching. Best of all is to choose something that you are already knowledgeable about and have easy access to, but which might be slightly ‘specialist’ to other people who are less familiar with it.

Notice the interactions, the visual environment, the texts that are involved and those that are visible in the surroundings. Take written notes of what you have observed and take at least two photographs. Try and get the people and a sense of the activities into your photos; don’t just focus on the texts themselves.

Talk to the people involved with the literacy activity and make notes, or a tape recording from your conversations with them.

Write a short account of what you have found out to discuss with others.

*For some examples of case studies of a literacy event, see [www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/resources/studentprojects.htm](http://www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/resources/studentprojects.htm).*

### How literacy is changing

One aspect of a situated approach to literacy is to take account of how literacy itself is changing – the skills that are involved, the actual physical form it takes, the value people place on it and the meaning it has within our lives. Literacy practices will probably always change, but we seem to be living through an especially significant period where there is a shift away from traditional print towards carrying out a lot of our reading and writing online, in digital form. Deborah Brandt (2005) has shown...
how this has happened rapidly in workplaces in recent years, leaving a big 'generation gap'. These changes in knowledge and technologies call into question the nature of literacy and communication.

Task 1.4

**How literacy is changing**

Carry out the literacy event task above, but do it with two people of different ages, or ask someone to compare how they carry out a literacy event now, and in the past, e.g. communicating with a friend, carrying out a work-related task, obtaining a service such as healthcare.

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**Literacy: institutions and power**

Seeing literacy as part of situated social practice is just one part of a growing recognition that learning and 'knowing' is not simply concerned with individual skills and understanding but the product of social interactions and relationships. Not all forms of literacy are seen as equal. What counts as 'proper' literacy depends on who is using it and why. Not all the participants in a literacy event are immediately obvious. When a care worker fills in a health and safety report, this is likely to have been designed by someone in another agency and passed around the care setting, and will be looked at by others and perhaps checked and evaluated at a future point in a chain of connected events.

Denny Taylor (1996) has coined the term 'toxic literacies' to express the point that literacy can often feel like something oppressive that is used by powerful people and organizations against others, eroding confidence and status and making you feel deficient or out of control. Literacy may feel very different on different sides of the fence – or the desk – for example bureaucrat and job applicant, literacy teacher and learner.

The fact that some literacies are supported, controlled and legitimated by powerful institutions implies that others are devalued. Many of the literacies that are influential and valued in people's day-to-day lives, that are widely circulated and discussed, are not seen as having a place in educational institutions. Neither are the informal social networks that sustain these literacies necessarily drawn upon or acknowledged. Most people have views about who uses 'serious' or 'proper' English.

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**Task 1.5**

**Literacy and power**

Think about your own reaction to, for example, the following text message:

CU Sun b4 I go xx

Consider:
Supporting literacies through lifelong learning policy

These observations about literacy suggest that a learning strategy for adult literacy should pay attention to the social relationships which frame the literacy taught in education, and the power dimensions of these relationships. A lifelong learning strategy for literacy is generally driven by the needs of government and other institutions. This strategy may or may not sustain and develop the literacy practices and funds of knowledge that already exist in civic life. A social practice approach to literacy recognizes these funds of knowledge, and also that people experience changing literacy demands at different stages of their lives (see Chapter 2). It offers convincing evidence of the need for lifelong learning systems which people can access at critical points. Whilst community resources and funds of knowledge exist locally, these are often unevenly distributed. There are uneven and varying levels of formal and informal educational provision available to support them. Formal, structured learning opportunities are one important component of lifelong learning, but they are only one aspect of a solution to sustaining literacies. A wider focus is needed.

Funds could be used to support literacy/lifelong learning in many innovative ways. Some examples are:

- increase the physical spaces available for people and groups to meet/exchange ideas/display/perform;
- strengthen access points for literacy: libraries/cyber cafes/bookshops/advice centres, etc. so that citizens can access information they are searching for through print, video, electronic forms, etc., engage in virtual or actual meetings with experts;
- strengthen open local government structures that facilitate consultation and access to existing routes for change/citizen action;
- support local media which help circulate and publicize news, events, space for debating issues, ideas;
- provide structured opportunities to learn both content and process skills and link up with others interested in the same issues.
Contexts for adult literacy education: diversity and change

Note: There is a glossary on page 366 to help with some of the names and terms used in this section.

Introduction

The second part of this chapter discusses the diversity and innovation of adult literacy as a field of practice, and the ways in which it has responded to the changing context of adult lives. We focus on the period since the early 1970s when adult literacy became recognized as a field in its own right and a focus for social policy in the UK. We look at the different contexts in which learning has taken place during this time and how these have changed. Each of the sections will be a short overview, with further reading at the end of the chapter. Much of the information and the quotes from practitioners included in this section were collected from the Changing Faces project2 (see Hamilton and Hillier 2006).

The section aims to set the Skills for Life strategy in a wider perspective. Although this has been an extremely important moment for the development of adult literacy in England,3 things will inevitably move on and some of the structures we take for granted now will continue to evolve, some will be lost and some sustained as funding changes. A good example of this is assessment of learner progress and achievement. Currently funding in England is linked heavily to targets, achievement and a national test for literacy. However, we may find these emphases being modified in the future as government policy changes.

The longer view: what we have inherited from the earlier history of literacy

Adult literacy has only recently been identified as a field of social policy and education in rich western countries. Up to the 1960s it was seen as a problem for countries without compulsory schooling systems and Western European countries returned statistics to UNESCO recording a zero for illiteracy. Adult literacy first emerged in the UK with the Right to Read campaign in the early 1970s. However, teaching literacy and other basic skills to adults had gone on in various forms throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From the mid-twentieth century, the British Army had a programme of education for recruits in their Preliminary Education Centres. Apprentices in the 1960s attended day-release courses including ‘general studies’ or ‘remedial English’ at technical colleges. Outside these settings, there were few opportunities for adults to improve their literacy. Some (estimated to be around 5000 in 1972) found their way to the scattered programmes organized by social welfare projects and local authority adult education. Recently arrived immigrants had some opportunities to improve
their English Language, for example in the Neighbourhood English Classes, but these were a small part of the patchy provision available for adult learners. Little is recorded about what the learners did or how they felt about what was on offer at the time.

The longer history of how literacy education has developed in the UK is well documented and there are many good sources. We have listed some at the end of this chapter. The roots of literacy education lie mainly with the religious organizations that originally controlled it. The struggle for literacy was central to the emancipatory and self-help political movements of the nineteenth century. All the purposes for literacy – moral and functional and political – that we still debate today – can be seen in these origins.

Adult literacy was greatly affected by the development of free universal primary schooling, which has always been centrally concerned with the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics. It is also important to look at developments in popular culture, and how writing and communication has fitted in to bigger changes in society. As an example, development of a speedy postal service had a big effect on letter and postcard writing in Victorian England and beyond. Similarly, the development of mass media and digital technologies today is affecting how people can access information and entertainment and how print-based literacy is valued.

The wider view: literacy and international movements

International as well as national policies have always affected adult literacy. From its beginnings in 1948, UNESCO has always promoted adult literacy in developing countries without formal schooling systems. Mass campaigns in countries such as Cuba and the Soviet Union were well known, as was the radical literacy work of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, published for the first time in English in 1972. Freire linked literacy learning and political emancipation and his work had a big impact on many literacy practitioners in the UK.

In the 1970s UNESCO funded an ambitious, and largely unsuccessful, programme of employment-related functional literacy, targeting particular groups in developing countries. It designated 1990 as International Literacy Year, and has run world conferences and congresses on lifelong learning, ‘education for all’ and women’s education. Along with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) it continues to influence the policy and research agendas of governments around the world.

European Union (EU) funding has been another key influence on adult literacy work in the UK. Apart from the volume of financial support given by the EU, the funding is targeted at specific groups, is project-based and has particular auditing mechanisms – all of which are extremely influential in shaping programmes.

The OECD co-ordinated the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which for the first time offered statistical evidence of the ‘problem’ in Westernized countries. A series of studies carried out in the 1990s resulted in an international league table. This produced the figure of seven million adults in need that has underpinned the current Skills for Life strategy in England (OECD 1997; DfEE 1999).
International agencies continue to be active and influential in the field. They promote assessment frameworks to harmonize standards across the EU countries and beyond (see Lisbon European Council 2000).

Finally, bodies like the World Trade Organization and the World Bank affect the UK as well as the poorer countries of the South. Through their advice and monitoring, national constraints are placed on public funding, and common strategies are suggested such as the introduction of internal markets and flexible working practices within public services, like education.

**Task 1.6**

**Exploring international developments**

List the ways in which international developments affect your own day-to-day work in adult literacy:

How much do you know about the following?

- The EU’s development of key competencies [www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/showPresentation?pubid=032EN](http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/showPresentation?pubid=032EN)
- The International Adult Literacy Survey [www.statcan.ca/english/Dli/Data/Ftp/ials.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/Dli/Data/Ftp/ials.htm)

**Adult literacy since the 1970s – from campaign to Skills for Life**

In 1973 a Right to Read campaign was mounted by a voluntary organization, the British Association of Settlements, supported by the BBC. This launched adult literacy as a named field of social policy and educational practice for the first time in the UK, resulting in a new public awareness of the issue. The mobilization of new students and thousands of volunteer tutors created excitement, innovation and a variety of local responses.

Over the next thirty years, literacy classes for adults grew steadily in number. The form of provision changed from one-to-one teaching by volunteers, to small group teaching, drop-in centres and e-learning. Teaching took place in adult and community learning centres, further education colleges, the workplace, in voluntary organizations, and in people’s own homes.

During this time, adult literacy was often considered to be a marginal field and had to fight hard for recognition and funding. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 brought statutory status to adult literacy for the first time. It became a recognized subject area controlled by further education colleges. However, it was not
until the creation of the Skills for Life strategy in 2001 that serious money was committed from central government to develop provision.

**Four phases in the development of adult literacy in the UK**

**Mid-1970s**: Literacy campaign led by a coalition of voluntary agencies with a powerful media partner, the BBC.

**1980s**: Provision developed substantially, supported by Local Education Authority, Adult Education Services and voluntary organizations, with leadership, training and development funding from a national agency (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Agency, ALBSU, later the Basic Skills Agency, BSA).

**1989–98**: LEA funding and control of adult education was substantially reduced. Control of much of adult literacy provision was passed to the further education colleges.

**1998 to present**: Prompted by the OECD international literacy survey, a national Skills for Life strategy was developed, closely directed by central government. £1.5 billion of government money was committed, with unified funding across the learning skills sector through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

Despite its high importance for everyday opportunities in employment and education, numeracy has been a much less visible and resourced field than literacy. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), with its strong links to English as a Foreign Language (EFL), to the politics of immigration and language policy, to debates around language variety, racism and international developments, has an uncertain relationship with ‘basic skills’. Policy creates, and sometimes breaks, these links between overlapping areas, which are also specialisms in their own right.

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**Task 1.7**

**Different specialisms**

In your own employment or teaching practice, note how literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT are organized. Are they linked or treated as separate specialisms? How does this affect your work? How does it affect learners?

In the report produced by his committee in 1999, Claus Moser argued that provision was fragmented and inconsistent, and that teachers were poorly equipped and qualified to teach. The result was government action in the form of the Skills for Life strategy, which set ambitious targets for improvement in England. It aimed to set up an infrastructure for the field to support its expansion, including:

- new professional qualifications for teachers;
new learner qualifications;
• core national curricula in ESOL, numeracy, and literacy;
• materials and training to help implement these changes;
• a media campaign to raise awareness in the public at large and among potential learners.

At the same time, ambitious targets were set to bring in adults to learning for the first time from a range of social groups. ‘Hard-to-reach’ adults from homeless to young unemployed men were targeted, with the aim of bringing them back into education, training and ultimately employment. Special funds were available to community-based organizations and trade union representatives.

In 2004 the strategy met its aim of 750,000 adults gaining an appropriate qualification at three levels in the new curricula: Entry Level, Level 1 or Level 2.

Separate strategies have been adopted in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Details of the four strategies can be found at:

• **England**: www.dcsf.gov.uk/readwriteplus
• **Scotland**: Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (2001) www.scotland.gov.uk
• **Wales**: www.basic-skills-wales.org
• **Northern Ireland**: Essential Skills for Living Strategy (2002) www.delni.gov.uk/essential-skills-for-living-strategy

### How the field has grown: learner participation

Adult literacy provision has expanded considerably since its beginnings in the early 1970s. The following table shows how participation has increased:

**1972**: Survey of local authority provision showed that just 5000 adults were receiving help with reading and writing in England and Wales (Haviland 1973).

**1976**: 15,000 adults were receiving tuition across England and Wales.

**1985**: ALBSU estimated 110,000 adults receiving tuition in literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

**1995–96**: BSA reported that 319,402 people were receiving tuition in England, two-thirds of whom were studying in the FE sector (BSA 1997).

**2003–04**: DfES (2004a) reported that 639,000 learners had undertaken at least one Skills for Life learning opportunity. By the end of 2004, Skills for Life had reached its target of 750,000 adults passing the national tests for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL at Level 2.

DfES (2004) reported that the figures for learners undertaking at last one Skills for Life learning opportunity were as follows:
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July 2000–01  453,000
July 2001–02  585,000
July 2002–03  653,000
July 2004    639,000

2005–06:  2005 target exceeded and a total of 1,130,000 learners had achieved their first Skills for Life qualification.

By 2010:  2.25 million adults should have improved their basic skills as measured by gaining a qualification up to Level 2 in the national qualification framework.

Ideology and ethos: what has changed?

As will be clear from this brief account, people who have been involved with literacy work over the years have seen a major shift in the culture of the field. Changes in accreditation, professional status and the institutions where classes are provided have inevitably led to changes in what is defined as good or bad practice, and what counts as goals for literacy work.

When the literacy campaign began, an ideology of emancipation (or empowerment) dominated. It emphasized support for individual literacy needs and informal, democratic relationships between teachers and learners. There was little specialist training and few teaching materials, so practice was exploratory and improvised. ‘In the beginning it was well-meaning, do-gooding people volunteering’, one practitioner explained. ‘We had … a lot of emphasis, not on literacy for vocational preparation, but for self-fulfilment, empowerment, being somebody.’

This early work emphasized the diversity of learner needs and the importance of being responsive to these. Central to this approach was support for student-centred learning, enabling students to make active and informed decisions for themselves. The national resource agency, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU), endorsed this view: ‘A participatory approach has been the “bedrock” of adult literacy tuition … students not as passive receivers but as active participants in their own learning’ (ALBSU 1985:5). Entry to what was then termed Adult Basic Education (ABE) was open, groups were mixed ability and there were no screening tests or eligibility criteria. There was a conscious philosophy that ABE should not replicate the experience of traditional schooling, which for many learners would have been before 1950. Many teacher–student relationships strived for equality and mutual exchange of expertise, and the roles of teacher and learner were often blurred, implying the possibility of movement between them.

Through the 1980s public discussions about literacy increasingly became linked to human resource investment. The Skills for Life strategy linked literacy not only to employment prospects but to social inclusion more generally, and particular groups of adults were targeted as learners. Although at the start literacy was said to be part of a broad system of lifelong learning for its own sake, an alignment with vocational training became more explicit over time. In the way it is delivered, adult literacy has moved much closer to the school system and to work-based training.
Where – physical settings and institutions

As we will see in Chapter 2, the range of learners that adult literacy aims to serve is very wide, from those who have recently left school to those who have been away from education for many years; people with different motivations, different past educational and life experiences, different language histories and different employment needs. This means adult literacy provision has to be flexible to accommodate this wide range of learners, wherever possible, offering learning opportunities that are easily accessible and welcoming. Table 11. shows some of the variety of organizations and settings in which adult literacy now takes place.

For people who have had a negative previous experience of education, or can’t afford travel, standard college classes are not necessarily the best starting place. A great deal of effort has been made over the years to offer adult literacy in the variety of settings where learners are – from workplaces to tenants’ groups, playgroups to prisons as well as in schools, adult community centres, libraries and FE colleges. As you might expect, the facilities available in these different settings vary widely and teachers have often to carry resources with them, including books and laptops.

Table 1.1: Forms of provision for adult literacy in England

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of provision</th>
<th>Where?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Further education colleges</td>
<td>In main college facilities but also community-based centres and drop-in workshops. A few adult residential colleges exist around the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult community learning centres</td>
<td>Premises run by local authorities or voluntary organizations that are often multi-functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family learning</td>
<td>Primary schools, family learning centres, libraries, football clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learndirect</td>
<td>High street and other venues, drop-in access to literacy programmes on computer or online from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace learning</td>
<td>Employer premises; private training providers, Jobcentre Plus, trade union centres; online support in national employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary community-based literacy</td>
<td>Homeless foyers, centres for young unemployed, drug rehabilitation projects, residents’ associations, travellers’ programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-based learning</td>
<td>On-the-job support or as part of vocational training sessions in training bases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisons and probation service</td>
<td>In prisons, sometimes with dedicated education facilities; offenders and ex-offenders in community-based venues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>On-site, bases in a range of countries. This is one specialized type of workplace. Purpose-built classrooms exist. Soldiers also connect online to UK from overseas bases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For many years, adult literacy could be offered in a wide range of institutions under different names, such as ‘Remedial English’, ‘General Studies’ or ‘Adult Literacy’. At first there were no purpose-built rooms for the work to be carried out and many learning groups met in makeshift, ill-equipped and inappropriate venues: portacabins, huts at the back of car parks, primary school classrooms with tiny chairs. Teachers pushed for flexibility in the timing and location of courses, and also argued for better practical facilities such as créches and disabled access. Very few teachers now still work in people’s homes, though many travel to community or work-based venues to teach small groups of adults. The nomadic life of the part-time teacher is part of the mythology of the field: ‘We were always being moved about from one building to another’; ‘I had to cross town to use the photocopier.’

Accessibility and good quality resources are now expected of any provider who receives LSC funding, and Ofsted inspection criteria apply to literacy programmes, wherever they are carried out. Teachers in all settings are likely now to have dedicated teaching space, equipped with appropriate technology and materials and often including some kind of drop-in workshop provision. In further education colleges teachers and learners can usually access the same facilities as others on vocational or other courses.

Who the tutors are and how this has changed

When adult literacy was first established, many of the tutors were volunteers or were taken on as hourly paid part-time tutors. In 1975 when the BBC programmes On the Move were broadcast, many people (90 per cent of them women) called to volunteer themselves as tutors. These volunteers were inexperienced in teaching adults, but full of enthusiasm and ideals about social justice. Many were women with young families looking for interesting part-time opportunities to carry on their vocation. Unlike other areas of teaching, no previous training or experience was necessary in the early days.

These volunteer beginnings, and the early marginalized status of Adult Literacy, has meant that developing a professional workforce has always been problematic. There are now more opportunities for training, specialist qualifications and a career structure, but the working conditions are still insecure. This means that it has been difficult to develop stable networks and professional bodies for adult literacy.

When adult literacy moved into the more formal further education sector in the early 1990s, this might have been expected to lead to better working conditions, greater job security and more full-time jobs. However, when the Skills for Life strategy began, statistics still suggested that only one in ten adult literacy or numeracy staff in England and Wales were full-time (BSA 1997). In 2004 a NIACE/TES survey into the Skills for Life workforce found:

One in seven colleges and adult training centres depends on hourly-paid staff to run their entire basic literacy, numeracy and language courses ... More than half of all the institutions responding to the survey said hourly-paid staff did at least 40% of the work.

(TEA 2004).
Further education colleges are more likely to have full-time staff, often working as managers who co-ordinate a team of part-time tutors. Agency staff are often employed, especially in job centres and workplace programmes, hired on a temporary basis. Those working in community-based programmes have always depended largely on short-term project funding and have become expert in bidding and proposal writing. In short, the experiences of staff in adult literacy mirror the diversity in the lifelong learning sector as a whole – working conditions and funding depending on the kind of institutional setting they are in.

Professional development has been accelerated by the Skills for Life strategy. Skills for Life also brought requirements for more standardized teaching, record-keeping and performance output measures that some staff have found difficult to deal with, feeling under scrutiny themselves. Some are not paid for the extra time needed to complete the paperwork and worry that these demands detract from their teaching.

**Task 1.8**

**Your entry story**

Reflect on your own ‘entry story’ to adult literacy work. How does it compare with the following?

_**Interviewer:** Can I just go right back to the beginning. What made you go into that prison environment and what made you stay?_

_**Interviewee:** Absolutely by default. I lived next door to an assistant governor who could recognize that the education team were always short of teachers … He asked me to do English Literature at evenings with 21 year old men … I left [primary school teaching] after my first child – there was no such thing as maternity leave then – and I was going to go back to supply teaching and he offered me this evening work. I hated it. I had never ever had such abuse, such an awakening to the world of prison, and my husband said to me, you do not quit, you’ve never quit in your life. Give it six weeks. Within six weeks I was hooked. I then enjoyed the environment, enjoyed the challenge, enjoyed the humour, enjoyed the breakthrough. It sounds very altruistic to say changing people’s lives, but I knew I did touch lives because I got to the stage where they were asking me to bring a certain piece of work in, to continue with something the next week, to help write letters. The achievement of somebody being able to write, be it four lines to their Mum, was quite touching. And I suddenly thought, I’ve done it! I enjoyed primary school teaching immensely but this was a new challenge, it was a new dimension, it was a new exciting field and … in all honesty it just fitted in with my situation. I could do sessional work and I did a lot of supply cover work and really it got under my skin as being a worthwhile challenge._

(Practitioner interviewed for the Changing Faces project)
How and what? Approaches to curriculum

During the first phase of the adult literacy campaign there was little existing wisdom about how to teach this new group of learners. Tutors brought their experience from primary, further or special education, from community development work or from teaching English as a Foreign Language. With minimal resources and institutional support they proceeded to invent a new field. They created methods of teaching, training and managing for adult learning that drew on what they already knew as they responded to the learners who arrived. They developed a range of innovative methods, including approaches to student writing and publishing, functional and linked (now ‘embedded’) skills.

Because of these origins, teaching in adult literacy has always been eclectic and pragmatic, and teachers have used a range of methods appropriate to individual learners. On the other hand, poor training opportunities have meant that teaching has not been systematically informed by theories that could be useful, especially for teaching those with specific learning needs.

Originally teaching was one-to-one, mainly by volunteers. This was succeeded by group work, partly as funding became available to pay for teachers and to provide appropriate accommodation. Teachers, often with volunteer support, would work with small groups of learners where a low student–staff ratio was promoted. This was important since many learners were taught in mixed-ability groups that were demanding on teachers’ time and ingenuity.

By the mid-1990s two-thirds of all adult literacy learners were based in the more formal environment of further education colleges. Computer technologies arrived gradually in adult literacy, offering new pedagogical possibilities. The wider influences of technology and the increasing use of accreditation (see below) changed the nature of the curriculum and methodology. However, learners were still generally taught in smaller groups than in more mainstream provision and were increasingly encouraged to learn through individual programmes agreed with their teachers.

Skills for Life accelerated the trend to more formal and standardized approaches to teaching and learning, with the introduction of a core curriculum, developed from the school English curriculum, which separated skills (not learners) into different levels and a national test that measured achievement across these levels.

Assessment

In the 1970s and 1980s, assessment of learning within voluntary and adult education programmes was conducted informally through discussion and feedback with learners. There was a strong concern not to replicate the negative experiences that some adults brought with them from school. A premium was placed on face-to-face discussion and counselling around student needs and aspirations.

Teachers quickly realized the need to chart progress and plan learning. Systematic, adult-related, though not quantitative, assessment began to develop and teachers
had a great deal of freedom to experiment. Records of progress, the forerunners to Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), were introduced and many variations tried out over the years.

At this time, policies that were reshaping other areas of education and training also significantly influenced assessment in adult literacy. The Educational Reform Act in 1988 introduced a national curriculum in schools and testing of children which enabled league tables of achievement to be produced nationally. In 1986 the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was formed to develop a competency-based framework which would harmonize academic and vocational qualifications and simplify the maze-like world of post-school education and training.

In the 1990s, the earlier informal approaches to assessment were replaced by a new competency-based national qualification (Wordpower) that responded to the need for adult literacy to be incorporated into the national framework for vocational qualifications (NVQs). From 2000 onwards, the competency-based model was further developed in adult literacy during the ensuing Skills for Life era with the introduction of a national curriculum, national testing and a range of competency-based qualifications eligible for funding.

Where are we now? Tensions and enduring struggles

How change has happened

The last seven years have seen big changes in the face of adult literacy as serious amounts of government money have been committed to it for the first time. For staff new to the field, it is hard to imagine adult literacy without Skills for Life. For those with a longer involvement, this recent period has been one of significant and sometimes difficult change, but only the latest in a tumultuous field that has experienced constant reorganization. This seems set to continue with further planned changes to funding and to the government agencies that control the field. This ever-changing landscape has been commented on by researchers (see Edward et al. 2007) who point out both the opportunities and the obstacles this presents to teachers who often find their work being restructured or jobs changing with very little notice. It often feels as though ground is gained and then lost, wheels are reinvented, provision takes two steps forward then one step back. Bev Campbell (Campbell and Bradshaw 2007) has written about the similar experiences of practitioners in Australia and uses the image of the spiral staircase to express this feeling of cyclical change and rediscovery, always in a moving context.

What has been gained and lost under Skills for Life?

We have a field more closely connected to other forms of education and training, offering routes onward for learners. The increased funding, research and policy attention has made adult literacy more visible and given it higher status for tutors and programmes. The diversity of settings is accepted, with Skills for Life courses
funded in a range of non-educational settings, like foyers for homeless young people, to ex-offenders and parent groups. The core curriculum, regular inspection and a national test has given a stronger structure to teaching and learning. Teacher qualifications will ensure a more professional workforce.

Alongside these achievements are some danger areas to keep an eye on. The targets may have been achieved at the expense of older learners and those with more complex learning needs. There is more top-down definition of what learners need and it is more difficult to negotiate a programme of learning with students, given the pressures of paperwork and funding categories. We are in danger of losing the more open-ended perspective on literacy as part of lifelong learning to a narrower view of it as functional competencies needed for employment, a trend set to continue with the Leitch (2006) report.5

Many tutors are still in precarious positions and working long hours over the odds. We have lost a specialist national agency for adult literacy as the BSA is dismantled. ESOL is being separately treated with the ending of free courses.

In an era emphasizing evidence of achievement, funding is used to steer and reward behaviour which will lead to meeting targets: for learners to achieve qualifications by set dates, and for national standards of professional practice. Practitioners need all the imagination they can muster to make sense of and to shape the frameworks they now work within, while responding to the needs of learners who are as diverse as ever.

One thing that is clear from the discussion above is that the very diversity of the learners, the expectations society holds for literacy and its deep connections with issues of inequality and citizenship will ensure debates will continue about what counts as adult literacy, what the goals of it should be, and the best strategies for supporting learning.

Further reading and resources


Notes

1. You may also want to browse Google Literacy Project website, sponsored by UNESCO: www.google.com/literacy/search.html Use the ‘scholar’ links to
2. The Changing Faces project was a research project which charted the development of Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL (ALNE) over thirty years, carried out between 2001 and 2004. A total of 200 interviews were undertaken with practitioners and adult learners, from four case study regions in England. Documentary evidence and an archive of materials were collated, and from this a series of timelines were created.

3. Adult literacy has developed differently in each of the countries of the UK. These differences have become more pronounced since devolution.

4. See Briggs and Burke 2005.

5. In 2006, the British Treasury produced a report, *The Leitch Review of Skills*, which was the result of an enquiry by Lord Leitch into the skill levels of the British workforce. The report warned that Britain would be left behind as a world economy unless it took immediate action to improve work-related skills. The report advised a target of 90 per cent of the workforce to have qualifications at Level 2 (GCSE level) by 2020.