



Research and Practice in Adult Literacy

Informal input-gathering by the High Level Group on Literacy (HLG)

Response from the Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) network, UK

September 2011

Background and Introduction

RaPAL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to debate on this important topic. This submission has been prepared following consultation with RaPAL members. It begins with a brief introduction to RaPAL, which sets out our approach to literacy and the aims and principles which we believe should underpin all literacy education. This is followed by answers to the specific questions posed by the HLG.

RaPAL is the only UK national organisation that focuses on the role of literacy in adult life. We are an independent network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers in adult literacy and numeracy. RaPAL was established in 1985 and is supported by membership subscription only. It is an associate member of the European network Eur-Alpha.

RaPAL campaigns for the rights of all adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives. We offer a critique of current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill. We argue for broader ideas of literacy starting from theories of language and literacy acquisition that take account of social context. The theories we draw on are broadly known as the new literacy studies.

RaPAL encourages a broad range of collaborative and reflective research involving all participants in literacy work as partners. We support democratic practices in adult literacy work

and believe that a learning democracy can only be achieved if teaching, learning and research are kept together. A dynamic relationship between research and practice keeps the meaning of literacy open and responsive to the variety of changing social contexts and practices that exist in our society.

We recognise the role of professional development in this process and of activities which enable learners to make their views known, in all media. As we see it, students are central to a learning democracy and their participation in the decision-making processes of practice and research is essential.

Further information about RaPAL can be found on our website

<http://www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/>

Response to the Discussion Questions

RaPAL is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the input-gathering process initiated by the High Level Expert Group on Literacy and we welcome the comprehensive coverage of relevant issues in the discussion paper.

Question 1:

From the perspective of your organisation and/or society as a whole, which do you see as the most important issues that are relevant in the area of literacy?

Diverse Needs of Learners

In recent years, and particularly since the current economic crisis began, policy has shifted much more towards vocationally-oriented literacy education. In this climate there is a risk that literacy education that is more focused on personal and community development and social justice issues can be squeezed out. However, we need a much broader vision of the purposes and contexts for literacy education. It is also essential for policy makers to recognise that vocationally oriented learning and learning for community and personal development are not mutually exclusive. In fact the latter kind of provision can contribute to economic goals in a number of ways. For example, it can play a vital role in enabling individuals and communities to develop the resilience needed to withstand harsh economic conditions. It can also be an

important first step back into education and training for long-term unemployed people, many of whom may find it difficult to move straight into vocational training.

In the past, through working in the field, adult literacy practitioners would quickly become aware that those who want to improve their literacy skills have specific purposes in terms of reading and writing – policies they have to read at work, mini daily reports or logs to write, encouraging their children with school work, writing to members of the family etc. They are also often anxious to improve their digital skills. But now, many of the tasks set in the qualifications which literacy learners are compelled to work towards are not relevant to the majority of learners in any one class. Nor do they permit learners to explore the new forms of literacy (as opposed to the technical IT skills) that are associated with digital technologies. (see *RaPAL* 2011 for discussion). Tailoring the learners' needs to the syllabus is becoming less encouraged and getting the learners through the qualifications is becoming paramount.

Some learners might think that a qualification is a passport to a job but by virtue of that very thinking they are contributing to what is becoming a myth – that there will be a reward at the end of the literacy course. Instead there is less and less chance of improvement in their status; there is ' - a "hollowing out" of the employment structure, with fewer routine "white collar" jobs available and a larger gap between knowledge-based occupations and manual jobs in the service sector.' (Discussion paper, HLG, July 2011; p3) The problem is that the learners themselves are becoming convinced into thinking the qualifications are the main benefits of the literacy class, rather than the literacy class addressing their diverse needs in the sense of the development of their cultural identity, family identity and work identity.

Updating Our Understanding of Literacy

There is a strong coherent basis in the grammar, punctuation and organisation of our written systems. There is no need to abandon these aspects of our culture. However this solid literacy base is now being radically affected in many ways by digital technology. The use of e-mail and text has increasingly abbreviated our communication means. In workplaces, while paperwork still abounds, there is a significant shift from the letter or memo to e-mails, bulletins and text message. We need to amend our Skills for Life National Curriculum in the UK to reflect these changes. By teaching out of last century's primers we are keeping our learners out of date.

The Recession

The HLG report notes that ‘despite constant policy efforts over the last half century, few disadvantaged groups benefit significantly more from education than they did in the mid-20th-century.’ Apart from the fact that the qualifications which literacy classes offer will not necessarily help learners economically, there is also a need for learners to become better able to cope with the situations that the long recession is forcing them into. Many are experiencing increasingly limited resources financially, lack of adequate social care, health facilities, childcare facilities etc. Our literacy classes should be geared to helping people to become less dependent on the systems that supported them previously and more resourceful in finding ways to help themselves. We need to bond literacy provision with self-help, not with the false hope of jobs which are less and less likely to materialise.

Sustainability

This is a buzz word in many big organisations. It has been applied to our environment, our councils, our foodstuffs and so on. But while children at school are made aware of their responsibility to the environment, their parents and other adult literacy students are not systematically introduced to the literacy of why and how to live more sustainably. Many learners are practical, good at budgeting for low incomes and they could contribute a great deal to literacy classes that worked on practical ways to encourage sustainability. In all rights we must start a comprehensive programme of literacy classes for Sustainability.

Question 2:

How can current policies, programmes and practices in the area of literacy be improved?

We believe that policies need to stop focusing only on how to improve our standing in the world of literacy statistics and instead consider how to immerse our learners in some of the most desperately urgent social and environmental issues at stake. It is highly likely that they will enrich our understanding of these issues if we can assist them to have a voice in speaking, in visual documentation or in writing.

We are concerned about the level of expectations from politicians regarding the benefits of literacy. Detailed analysis of the evidence of the impact of literacy support (See for example St Clair 2010) confirms that while there are correlations between literacy and unemployment,

poverty, health and other social issues, hard evidence of direct and immediate benefits of literacy programmes on such deprivation indicators is not easy to assemble. Furthermore, the short term nature of government programmes results in a the requirement for outcomes – such as passing inappropriate tests - which are incapable of addressing the real, long-term problems.

A key factor which influences current provision is the type of accreditation that has to be offered in order for any provider to gain funding. These qualifications are based on a skills-based approach to measuring literacy levels that is the dominant discourse within government and education contexts. Classroom practice is deeply influenced by the need for technical accuracy in terms of spelling or particular features of grammar in Standard English that current tests require. Professional training and development therefore needs to better equip teachers to explore literacy in ways that validate the practices and needs of their learners.

Literacy learning is a lifelong process that develops as we all acquire new roles and identities and so much literacy learning takes place outside formal classes. For this reason then, whilst some discrete provision will always be needed, the role of the tutor needs to be reconceptualised as they need to work differently in a range of contexts, for example alongside vocational tutors in a variety of embedded support models both in institutional and community settings. In a similar way tutors need to look for opportunities to work in original ways with employers to help transform workplaces in ways that support employees in learning new skills within their community of practice. Simply funding a provider to run a short contextualised course in the workplace will not bring about the changes in workplace learning that are needed.

Question 3:

Question 3 a):

Are there any gaps in the identified main social economic trends in Europe over the next 20 to 50 years and which are the implications for literacy?

What is lacking from the HLG remarks is the acknowledgment that literacy is not the be-all and end-all of a good society. It is essential to strike a balance between recognising that everyone has the right to support in developing their literacy, while being vigilant against literacy being seen as a requirement for more and more jobs and social interactions. Literacy will always be

challenging for some people but that does not mean that they do not have a huge amount to offer society.

Question 3 b):

There is a lot of knowledge about the importance of literacy and what needs to be done on e.g. reading motivation. Why do you feel literacy has not been seen as an issue of importance for the functioning of society?

There is some ambiguity in this question regarding exactly who does not see literacy as an issue of importance. The assumption seems to be that people with unmet literacy needs are not motivated to learn, whereas an alternative focus might be on access to relevant literacies in and out of education.

We note that the example chosen in this question relates to reading rather than writing and suggests that this is assumed to be the more important or 'foundational' aspect of literacy. This is a particular concern for adult literacy educators in England, where the National Literacy tests in fact only cover a narrow range of reading capabilities and neglect writing altogether. We view this as particularly troubling at a time when literacy researchers argue that writing is becoming increasingly prevalent in many jobs in the knowledge economy (Brandt 2009). Furthermore, writing has been seen as essential for democratic and civic participation (Brandt 2001) and therefore needs to be supported as part of the attempt to engage more citizens in the democratic process.

In the UK it is not the case that policy makers have failed to recognise the importance of literacy: the large sums of money spent by the New Labour government on its *Skills for Life* strategy in England, and by the Scottish government on its adult literacy strategy, demonstrate that they have. However, we contend that literacy is seen by policy makers as an issue of importance for the functioning of the *economy* rather than society in general, with 'employability' being seen as the sole justification for literacy education. Consequently the potential for literacy education to contribute towards social justice and community building has not been fully realised. We would argue for a more holistic vision of what literacy education can and should be.

Question 4:

What do you see as your role in meeting these challenges?

Because of its independence, RaPAL is able to bring a unique perspective to debates about literacy in adult life. At a time when much policy and practice is based on simplistic notions of literacy as a decontextualised technical skill, we aim to keep more holistic and democratic visions alive. We will continue to campaign for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives and for democratic practices in adult literacy. We will also encourage collaborative and reflective research, and provide professional development and networking opportunities for practitioners and researchers.

References

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Correspondence regarding this submission should be addressed to

Dr Amy Burgess, Chair of RaPAL

a.j.burgess@exeter.ac.uk