

Literacy: a toolkit for life or a continuum of life practices?

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Since the election of a Labour government in 1997, Further Education (FE) has increasingly been viewed as a major player in helping the government achieve its social inclusion policies. The FE sector has been provided with extra funding to encourage all 'citizens' in Scotland to become part of the 'Learning Society' (Scottish Executive 2003). The aim is to encourage many more individuals to see themselves as life long learners rather than education ending after the compulsory school leaving age. In widening access and education participation levels, large numbers of people who would have traditionally eschewed education in favour of low-skilled work have entered FE (Scottish Executive 2000).

In addition to the traditional role of providing vocational training and qualifications, FE colleges today have partnerships and collaborative working relationships with many other organizations including the voluntary sector, schools, universities and employers. This growth has resulted in horizontal diversification of provision (along the academic-vocational continuum) and on a vertical differentiation of provision from basic skills to under and postgraduate studies.

The growth and breadth of studies available within FE has resulted in increased literacy demands upon learners (and staff) with not only an increased diversification of text types but also the media through which these can be read and written. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the focus of attention from both media and government policy makers has been on the development of basic skills in Further Education (Scottish Office 1998). Within the Scottish FE context these are discussed as Core Skills (comprising of three 'harder' skills of Literacy, Numeracy and IT and the 'softer' skills of Problem Solving and Working in Teams). This paper will focus only on the Literacy element of core skills.

The core skills approach assumes that literacy acquisition can be described as a set of competencies to be achieved through practicing skills, which are deemed appropriate at a particular level, in this case by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Students can progress through the levels. If the student has no prior qualification, then to establish their base level of competence, they undertake a variety of diagnostic tests. The focus of these tests is on what the student can or cannot encode or decode and rests on a deficit model of literacy that Street (1984) identifies as the autonomous model. Within this model he argues there is an assumed link between literacy acquisition, cognitive development, employability and long-term economic prosperity. This assumption can be seen in government policy documents. The Scottish Executive report (2001 p.1) states in its opening paragraph that:

The raising of adult literacy and numeracy levels is acutely important to the wide variety of Scottish Executive policies that promote social justice, health, economic development and life long learning.

The New Literacy Studies approach (NLS) locates literacy practices – different forms of reading, writing and representation in the context of those social relations within which they are developed and expressed. Literacies develop out of and interact with

the spoken language within communities and needs to be seen as a communal resource, not one located within the individual at a cognitive level (Barton and Hamilton 1998). NLS have spawned a wide range of research aimed at examining the pluralizing of literacy practices through new settings and the increased interconnectedness of educational institutions to other domains such the home and the workplace. Barton and Hamilton (1998) have identified six codes of such practices: organizing life, personal communication, leisure, documenting life, sense-making and social participation.

This report will concentrate on the data collected about the student experience from the findings of my small-scale research project within one Scottish F.E. College, which I will identify as Butterfield. Using an ethnographic approach, derived from applied linguistics and social anthropology, my research is designed to explore:

1. What literacy practices students engage in across a variety of domains
2. How aware academic staff (from across the college) are of the variety of practices students engage in
3. Which literacy practices are supported and which are marginalized within present curricular arrangements
4. Staff understandings of literacy

Silverman (2000) argues that an ethnographic approach means immersing oneself in a culture over a period of years. As an FE teacher for over 23 years, I would like to suggest that I qualify as being immersed, if not submerged, within the FE culture. Being thus submerged may have its advantages, as I will see what lies beneath the surface. Of course it also has its dangers as I may well take too much for granted and a role of an ethnographer is to make an aspect of society visible that was previously perhaps taken for granted or completely invisible (Martin-Jones and Jones 2000). To overcome this problem I will simultaneously adopt the mantle of 'stranger' (Schutz, cited in Holliday 2002), which will mean asking my interviewees questions to which they may think the answer is obvious. My role as researcher then is to move with the ebb and flow of college life, rather to be a fixture in its structure.

I decided that I was going adopt the practice advocated by Barton (2000) that analysis should develop 'during the study, alongside the data collection and the writing up.' (p169). My methodology then involved concurrent practices of reading relevant literature, collecting data, adapting the data collection techniques as required, analyzing data and writing up the findings of all of these activities in an on-going and dynamic basis. I will also use triangulation to allow 'multiple perceptions of the same phenomenon' (Holliday 2002). For this paper, I will outline one particular aspect arising from student interviews.

Student Questionnaire and Interview

The student questionnaire was more a mechanism for finding volunteers for interview than a genuine attempt to collect quantitative data about what students did with text. Using opportunistic sampling, 190 questionnaires from across all four Faculties were returned (see Figure 1 for age and gender breakdown). The questions were designed to see if there were gender or age based differences in the variety of texts students used. The questions asked were about use of texts using traditional print base (newspapers, magazines and manuals) and New Technology based text (mobile

phones, Internet and TV). There were no significant differences between gender responses. However, the picture was very different when comparing responses between age ranges. Both female/male students in the younger age bracket (16-19) reported being more actively involved in both print and media based text than any of the other age categories.

To investigate which literacy practices students across the college engage in, I chose to use informal unstructured interviews with four groups comprising of three students (Figure 2). I used friendship groups rather than individual interviews for two reasons. One was simply time, but the other was to relieve what might be perceived as pressure on the students in a one-to-one interview. To date I have met with these students twice (March 2003) and intend to speak with each group at least one more time. In contrast to the quantitative information provided by the questionnaires, I found that the older age groups participated heavily in activities, which involved literacy. However, in explaining what I wanted to 'chat' to them about, without exception the students maintained they never wrote anything and rarely read more than a magazine article. It was through talking of their lives in general rather than literacy in particular that literacy practices emerged. At interview a clear age and gender difference did emerge. The older women were the only group to report the use of writing for all six of the codes identified by Barton and Hamilton (1998). To date, the younger age groups have not reported using any form of writing for documenting life, social participation or leisure. For them, use of telephone and Internet texting was by far the most prevalent form of all writing.

An issue, which cropped up repeatedly and spontaneously was that of handwriting. Students perceived their handwriting as an important part of their literacy. In all cases the students remembered clearly that for their primary school teachers and their parents, handwriting was an indication of their abilities. For some the concentration on their handwriting has been a positive experience but for most it has had a negative effect on their progress and thus their confidence in learning across the curriculum and in their everyday lives. I will illustrate this by focusing on two of the students.

For one student, Amanda, her neat handwriting had been a source of revenue at school when she was paid by fellow classmates to do their lines. This practice is also used by the wider family, *'if there is a form to be filled in at any time, I'm the one they come to'*. She sees this as a direct result of her neat handwriting and not any other aspect of literacy. She also loves completing postal consumer questionnaires. She 'confesses' this habit to me as if it was a guilty secret and she apologises for her 'sad' life. Amanda's concern about handwriting is so deep that it emerged in our second interview that she is concerned about her son's learning at school because of his poor handwriting. "He loses marks for it" and as a result she has arranged with the school that he be given homework that concentrates on developing his handwriting. She sees his sloppiness as indicative of inattention, which will lead him to later academic failure. Every evening, she monitors his progress, signs his homework jotter and reads the teachers comments about his work. She said *'he is really proud now when his page is neat'*.

Her confidence with writing she feels springs partially from her neat writing and from her mother's love of making up stories. Amanda continues this practice with her own sons, writing stories/poems down, reworking them to find the right word or phrase,

often restructuring the order of verses. None of her teachers, including the communication teacher, knows of her home writing. When talking with me, Amanda did not volunteer the story telling; rather it emerged through discussion of her mother. Even then she belittled and reduced her practice as 'waffle'. She dismissed her 'vernacular literacy' practice as worthless. However, as the discussion progressed the other two women felt Amanda's ability to expand on ideas and describe feelings and situations was exactly what was helping her be successful in her assessments in Care. Louise described this as a need to be 'flowery', a skill she felt she did not possess. Although Amanda's home writing practices were being used in the college domain, she had not explicitly or consciously made this connection until Louise and Vera did through discussion. Eraut (2000) argues that if students are not aware of their own practices then they cannot transfer them to other domains.

In contrast Marc explicitly puts his lack of academic success at the door of his handwriting. He describes it as '*it looks like a chicken ran through ink and scrapped across the paper*'. He strongly believes that his handwriting has held him back and that people assume from it that he is stupid and childlike. He is embarrassed by it. To confirm this view he tells me of a recent incident where he had an assessment returned to him to rewrite because the vocational teacher could not read it. At our interview, which was several days after this incident, he was still angry and smarting from this encounter especially as the tutor also implied that the content was wrong. After 'translating' the content to his tutor, s/he did accept that the answers were correct but that Marc would still have to rewrite it. Marc's indignation was made worse because he felt the tutor had a '*hard neck because her/his writing was just as messy*'. What Marc learned from this was a confirmation that handwriting is not only important in educational institutions, but that people's perceptions of intelligence and abilities are at least partially based on this aspect of literacy.

Marc is a motivated and keen student who wants to 'turn his life around', but despairs if ever he will because of his handwriting. In his everyday life, he avoids writing whenever he can to the extent that he has accumulated some debt because he hates writing letters. When applying for jobs, he telephones, rather than completing an application form.

For both these students handwriting was perceived as extremely important in literacy development. For Amanda the early experience of being praised for having neat handwriting had proved an incentive to write more. She gets a lot of pleasure from writing in her daily life. Despite this she did not perceive her story telling as a skill or of any real value and certainly didn't see any connection to what she did at home with what she was expected to do at college. For her the domains were distinct and separate. Although she was drawing from one to help with the other she was not consciously aware of it until Louise and Vera drew it to her attention. For Marc, poor handwriting had been the source of embarrassment and had been used by him as a reason for avoiding any kind of writing. For him the use of a personal computer has been a bonus and has given him confidence to write, but he still avoids it in his home life as much as possible.

Reflections so far.

Wilson (2000) argued that teachers need to challenge their 'routinised ways of thinking' and move away from an autonomous model of literacy based solely on psychological explanations of learning. To do this and to help students transfer their skills, teachers need to be aware of what students do with the texts in other domains and then they need to help them value their own practices. The students I interviewed clearly were not aware of, nor did they value their existing literacy practices. As the group interviews have progressed, it has become very clear to them all that literacy plays a much bigger part in their everyday lives than they first believed. As they and staff become aware of the wealth of practices students engage in so some of the myths may crumble (Gregory and Williams 2000).

Notes

1. This paper is part of a one year, full-time MSc by research project co-funded by the Institute of Education, University of Stirling and the Scottish Further Education Unit.

Figure 1 - Number of Student Questionnaires returned

Age Range	Male	Female
16-19	69	49
20-35	32	22
36-55	6	11
56 over	0	1

Figure 2

Students Interviewed

	16-19 yrs	25 over
Faculty of Information Technology and Computing	<p>Dave (16), left school at 15, never worked, lives with parents</p> <p>Coco (19), left school at 16, has had several manual jobs and periods of unemployment, lives with mother. Has started but not completed college course in Sports and Leisure</p> <p>Graeme (16), left at 15, lives with parents, works as carpet cutter part-time.</p>	<p>Mark (29), 1 child, lives alone, left school at 15, has had variety of manual jobs and periods of unemployment did a NC Catering course at 16.</p> <p>Neil (37), 6 children, 3 partners, lives alone, had variety of manual jobs, never unemployed, first time in FE.</p> <p>Chapman (34yrs) 1 child, lives alone, welding contract worker, not apprentice trained, first time in FE</p>
Faculty of Social, Health and Child Care	<p>Claire (17) left school at 15, baby-sits one evening a week, lives with foster parents.</p> <p>Ashley (16) left school at 15, hasn't worked, lives with parents.</p> <p>Stephanie (18) left school at 15, works part-time in hotel lives with parents.</p>	<p>Louise (44) living with partner, 3 children, left school at 15, has had a variety of manual jobs. First time in FE</p> <p>Amanda (30) married, left school at 15, has had a variety of manual jobs 2 children. Came to FE after short course at local community center.</p> <p>Vera (40) married second time, 3 children, 1 grandchild, left school at 15, worked mainly as care assistant, first time in FE</p>

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