Open Research Online

Jude Fransman

This article aims to show how a lack of conceptual consensus weakens and confuses the adult literacy lobby with grave implications for policy and practice. By charting the different understandings of literacy and reorganising them into a pragmatic framework, a new coherence may be brought to the literacy lobby, which accommodates different approaches but shows how these approaches interact and overlap. The article concludes by critically examining the conceptualisation of literacy proposed by the benchmarks in light of the framework and suggests how it might be expanded in a more meaningful way. The author is a doctoral researcher at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Conceptualising Literacy for Policy and Practice

The Fragmented Literacy Lobby

However the term *"literacy"* is interpreted, the fact now remains that at least a quarter of the world's adult population are denied access to many of the institutions, services and processes necessary to secure basic needs and the capabilities to pursue a *"good quality of life"*, because of their inability to engage with the required texts, signs and discourses. Literacy has been internationally recognised both as a human right in itself and a crucial instrument for the pursuit of other rights (Persepolis Declaration 1975, Vienna Declaration 1993, Ham burg Declaration 1997) as well as for countless other human, cultural, social, political and economic benefits (see GMR 2006). The signifi cance of adult literacy has been emphasised in policy documents, such as the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, which stressed not only formal education, but also basic education for young people and adults through non-formal and informal means. More recently, the EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) 2006, *Literacy for Life*, emphasised literacy as the *"core of EFA"* while recognising that to date there is insufficient data to reveal the true extent and nature of the literacy challenge; likely to be several times greater than imagined. The GMR heralded the start of a new policy era in which the importance of adult literacy to broader education and development objectives has been widely recognised. Yet despite this renewed recognition, actual investment in adult literacy remains minimal. This has been partly a result of the policies of funding agencies that considered non-formal programmes to be less cost-effective than formal education,[1] and a responsibility of service-providing civil society organisations (CSOs) rather than the state. Claims have also been made that programmes have commonly failed to provide people with adequate literacy skills (Abadzi 2003).

These claims have been exacerbated by a lack of clarity about what is meant by literacy for different actors. The adoption of different and, at times, conflicting understandings of literacy has led to unclear programmes, which are ultimately unsustainable. Even where people are *"made literate"* there is evidence to show that over time many lose their skills (GMR 2006). This in turn reinforces the perception that adult literacy is an unwise investment. However, as the findings of the survey which informed the ActionAid/GCE Benchmarks revealed (2005), literacy programmes can and do work. Greater investment is imperative and rather than deriding the programmes which fail, it is instead important to re-assess the assumptions and understandings that underpin different approaches.

Autonomous and Ideological Perspectives

Although the GMR acknowledged diverse understandings of literacy, it ultimately resorted to the dominant dichotomous definition of lit eracy to serve its monitoring function. This definition (which labels people as either literate or illiterate depending on whether they can demonstrate a few basic reading, writing and number-use skills) is widely acknowledged to be fundamentally unhelpful for policy and practice. It paints an artificial portrait of the literacy challenge and results in an unsustainable acquisition of competencies, which fail to respond to the demands of daily life. At the same time, accommodat ing too much diversity in a renewed conceptualisation of adult literacy can limit the strength of the lobby and result in wishy-washy recom mendations while conflicts of interest remain unresolved. Therefore, a common position is needed to target policy and practice with coher ence and precision.

A pragmatic conceptualisation of adult literacy is not aided by the fact that adult literacy has long since been seen as a *"magic bullet"* for development. Within the global political economy, conflicting ideolo gies have claimed literacy rates as a key indicator, illustrative of the strength of their particular model of development (see, for example, the mass campaigns of the former Soviet bloc which saw literacy as a tool for political mobilisation versus the functional model of the West in which literacy was seen as instrumental for economic modernisation; Kirkendall, 2004; Jones 1997). This has reinforced the dichotomisa tion of literacy whereby one is simply literate or illiterate regardless of the scale of ability, or even the languages spoken.

This dichotomisation reinforces the *"autonomous model"* of adult literacy in which literacy is understood as a constant skill set which remains the same regardless of the means of acquisition, type of use or contextual relevance to the users (elaborated by Street 1984). Since literacy skills can quite easily be proxied by learning outcomes and assessed in much the same way as *"achievement"* in formal school ing, the autonomous model makes monitoring in a standardised and quantitative way relatively easy and is consequently attractive to donors and policy-makers. This in turn gives credence to the under standing of adult literacy as *"second chance schooling"* rather than as initiatives tailored to the demands of adults in particular contexts. It also suggests the goal of creating literate individuals rather than liter ate societies, while failing to recognise that literacy skills are neither relevant nor sustainable without a supportive environment in which to use and develop them.

Barton, amongst others, critiques this approach and the assumption that there are clear and discrete stages in learning, with the separate skills learned in a linear order. Underlying this is the implicit idea that there is only one real way to learn to read, write or use numbers (Barton, 1994; 2007). As Street points out, many of these theories rest on deeper assumptions about the *"cognitive consequences"* of learning to read and write. Anthropologists (e.g. Goody, 1977) and psychologists (e.g. Olson, 1994) have linked the cognitive argument to broader patterns of development, regarding the importance of the acquisition of literacy for a society's *"progress"* , thus implying a *"technology"* of literacy (Ong, 1982). However, as recognised through the work of social psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole in the 70s, many of the assumptions about literacy in general are *"tied up with school-based writing"* which leads to serious limitations in the accounts of literacy more generally:

Computer course in Kabul, Source: Jenny Matthews/ActionAid

Street also argues that this model disguises the cultural and ideo logical assumptions that underpin it, presenting them as though they were neutral and universal. He claims that in practice, dominant approaches based on the autonomous model are often simply imposing Western (or urban or male etc.) conceptions of literacy on to other cultures (Street, 2001).

The alternative, *"ideological"* or *"social practices model"* of literacy offers a more culturally sensitive view of uses and ways of acquiring literacy as they vary according to context. This model suggests that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical skill, and that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles (Street 2005). Literacy, in this sense, has different meanings according to context and the different versions of it are always *"ideological"* , they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and marginalise others (Gee 1990). Literacy is also inherently social. The ways in which facilitators and participants interact is already a social practice entangled in power relations that affect the nature of the literacy being learned. This contrasts with the autonomous model, which suggests that *"literacy"* can be *"given"* neutrally with its *"social"* effects only experienced or *"added on"* afterwards.

Finally, literacy is not a singular entity but rather there are *"multiple literacies"* that every person engages with to differing extents. Being able to read the Koran but not an Urdu newspaper, keeping a price list and clientele notes but not being able to read, or being able to write a text message but not a letter constitute *"real literacies"* even though many surveys would consider these skills to be illiterate sur vival strategies. Street organises literacies into three core categories: commercial literacies, religious literacies and schooled literacies (1984). Others such as academic or bureaucratic literacies might be added. What is important is the different values given to different lit eracies in society. In this, schooled literacy tends to dominate. Though UNESCO has made some progress in recognising the *"plurality of literacy"* (UNESCO, 2004) it nonetheless falls back upon the concept of schooled literacy in its educational statistics and many of its policy recommendations.

For these reasons, as well as because of the failure of many traditional literacy programmes, academics, researchers and practitioners work ing in literacy in different parts of the world are coming to the conclu sion that the autonomous model of literacy is not an appropriate tool, either for understanding literacy or for designing programmes and policy which may be better suited to an ideological model (Aikman, 1999; Heath, 1983; Doronilla, 1996; Hornberger, 2003; Robinson-Pant 1997; Street 2005). It should be noted, however, that the relationship between the two models is not a simple dichotomy. Street's position is that literacy is always ideological, even when developed and used in allegedly context-independent ways, since it is always essentially social and enacted in social contexts (Street 1984, 2001). Nonethe less, the autonomous perspective continues to dominant Western and consequently international approaches to literacy (Collins and Blot 2003).

Towards a Framework: Competences, Critique and Design

Though the distinction between autonomous and ideological per spectives helps to identify the dominant approach to literacy and to explain its prevalence against the evidence, a third approach might also be identified that does not fit into either camp. This approach is also intrinsically ideological in nature, but while Street's ideological model represents a socially situated practices approach to literacy, this third might be deemed a *"transformative model"* . Similar conclu sions have been reached over the course of other attempts to classify approaches to literacy (see Fransman 2005, GMR 2006, LWG 2007, Rogers Forthcoming).

To understand the interrelationships between these three approaches a distinction made by Kress (2005) may prove helpful. Kress differenti ates between three *"meanings of reading"*:

- **Competences** *"expresses a common acceptance and imple mentation of rules; all those who share the same competence are (naturally and) socially the same"* (p.17)
- **Critique** *"attempts to unsettle the acceptance of competence by showing the workings of power, however, works on what is already established, and looks back on the agendas of others. It challenges the existing configurations of power and expects that in exposing inequities more equitable social arrangements could be devel oped"* (ibid)
- **Design** *"through which, out of material presented on a page, the reader designs a coherent complex sign that corresponds to the needs that she or he has"* (ibid)

Though Kress uses these concepts to discuss the semiotic effects of reading, it also has relevance for a typology of approaches to literacy (see Table 1).

Approach	Political Agenda	Focus	Methods
Autonomous	Competition/ development/equity	Competences	Usually quantitative or at least quantifiable
Transformative	Social transformation	Critique	Action Research/ Participatory Rural Appraisal
Social-practices / ideological	Local knowledge/ contextual relevance	Design	Ethnographic research

Table 1:
 Three conceptual approaches to literacy

Competences in the Autonomous Approach (AP)

The standardisation of competences in the autonomous approach usually promotes competition by establishing hierarchies. However, it can also serve an equity agenda, as lack of competences tends to correlate with low socio-economic status and can thus provide an im petus for reallocation of resources. Since literacy skills can quite easily be proxied by learning outcomes and assessed in much the same way as "achievement" in schooling, the autonomous model makes meas uring literacy in a standardised and quantitative way relatively easy and is consequently attractive to donors and policy-makers. Interest ingly, the anti-literacy lobby which draws attention to "the dark side of literacy"[2] shares the autonomous perspective of literacy as well as the assumption that literacy is always externally (and involuntarily) intro duced into local communities rather than practised and appropriated locally, as the ideological perspective might suggest.

Critique in the Transformative Approach (TP)

The second approach is intrinsically political and founded on a cri tique of neo-liberal models of education and elements of the autono mous approach. As Paulo Freire (1995) suggested, it is not a matter of speaking first, then developing reading skills, and then learning to write. Rather, speaking, reading and writing are interconnected parts of an active learning process and of social transformation. In this ap proach, literacy acquisition encompasses exploration of the social and political dimensions of learners' experience. The objective here is "conscientization" or becoming critically aware of social, political, economic, and historical forces that shape oppression and, ultimately, action with the purpose of transformative action. Crucial to Freire's pedagogy is the notion of *"critical literacy"* , in part through engag ing with books and other written texts, but more profoundly, through "reading" (i.e. interpreting, reflecting on, interrogating, theorizing, investigating, exploring, probing, questioning etc.) and writing (acting on and dialogically transforming) the social world (Roberts, 2000).

The transformative approach is interesting because it can adopt both an autonomous and an ideological perspective of literacy. In its vision of an oppressive world, literacy (in terms of autonomous com petences) is seen as being denied to the masses and a key objective is therefore to deliver "it" with praxis as essentially a pedagogic add on. At the same time, the approach is extremely power-conscious. In his later years, Freire responded to his (largely feminist) critics [3] by reflecting honestly and critically on the power relations inherent in his own work. Power-conscious research methods that put the design, implementation and analysis of research largely into the hands of the research participants (such as Action Research) derive from this approach.

Design in the Social Practices Approach (SPA)

The third approach derives from ethnographic research referred to as *"New Literacy Studies"* (Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000; Collins, 1995) where literacy is perceived as a social prac tice embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles.

"Many people labelled illiterate within the autonomous model of literacy may, from a more culturally sensitive viewpoint, be seen to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts". (Doronilla, 1996)

As such, this approach focuses on design over and above competence and critique and is built on the notions of literacy events, practices and domains. Heath characterises a *"literacy event"* as *"any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes"* (Heath, 1983: 50). De veloping the concept, Street employed the phrase *"literacy practices"* (Street, 1984:1) as a means of focusing on the knowledges and power relations surrounding a literacy event. Merrifield defines domains as *"the broad contexts of life in which we operate"* such as the fam ily, the workplace, the mosque, school, the market, the social club, etc. These are *"shaped in turn by the broader culture and by class, gender, ethnicity and regional variation"* (Merrifield, 1998: 31 cited in Demetrion, 2005:16). Together, events, practices and domains illus trate the concept of *"multiple-literacies"* which may not necessarily correspond to the dominant literacy acquired conventionally through schooling. However, this approach is not without its critics, who claim that it overemphasises local exigencies and insufficiently recognises how external forces (e.g. colonial administrations, missionaries, eco nomic globalisation etc.) have impinged upon the *"local"* experiences of specific communities (Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Collins and Blot, 2003). Maddox (2001) and Stromquist (2004) have also questioned the reluctance of advocates to examine the potential of literacy to help people move out of "local" positions into fuller economic, social and political participation.

In fact, most literacy initiatives fuse elements from more than one of these approaches, while overlaps between the three mean that it is difficult to pin a programme to just one. One example is the Reflect approach, which is usually described as transformative but has been used in both functional and socially situated ways by different imple menting organisations. Nevertheless, this comparison of approaches and their underpinning assumptions is helpful when it comes to un packing the agendas of governments, CSOs, international organisa tions, donors and even academics.

Society and the Individual: the Literacy Environment

These three approaches all grapple with the links between the indi vidual and society. The AP tends to assume that aggregate acquisition of competences by individuals will inevitably lead to social (or even economic) development. Likewise, the TP presupposes that individ ual acquisition will result in social transformation – and perhaps even a renegotiation of the meaning of literacy itself. Both assumptions are flawed – as Collins and Blot point out

"this joining of the social and individual has grown increasingly problematic. Indeed, in our current late modern or post-modern era it often seems that social developments and individual growth proceed along different vectors..." (2003: 7)

Identity politics are multiple and diverse, however, if a goal of literacy scholars as public intellectuals is not just recognition of ongoing design by individuals but also geared towards the redesign of public policies, then some association between the individual and society must be made. In focusing exclusively on the individual or groups within society and obscuring visions of broader social development or social transformation, the SPA also limits its own relevance for policy.

Responding to this challenge, all three approaches have to greater or lesser degrees engaged with the concept of the *"literacy environ ment"* as a means of linking literacy in individuals or groups to literacy in broader society. In the case of the AP, this is represented by a textual environment consisting of textual artefacts and institutions. Certain competences are needed to navigate this environment, and thus a key objective is to impart these competences to a given citizenry.[4] Conversely, the TP position is that the textual environment is laden with power relations linked to issues of access and exclusivity. The role of literacy programmes is therefore to expose and challenge these power relations with a view to transforming them while developing critical skills in people. Finally, the SPA perceives the literacy envi ronment not as the availability/accessibility of textual artefacts within textual institutions but rather as the ways in which people design their own contextualised textual strategies to manage their lives. Accord ing to this approach, programmes should respond to and strengthen these pre-existing strategies.

At the same time, each of these approaches has clear limitations. The AP ignores the fact that the problem may not be with so-called illiterate people and their lack of competences but rather with the way societies value and are structured around certain types of lit eracy. The TP, with its focus on power, presents itself in opposition to the competences position of the AP and in doing so can focus too much on the political/institutional and not enough on the personal/ cultural. And the SPA can ignore the fact that sometimes people do want basic competences (either for symbolic or instrumental pur poses – see Rogers 2004) and sometimes they do want to transform or even move away from their local context – not merely to continue to function within it.

A Pragmatic Conceptualisation

While the assumptions of policy-makers and implementing organisa tions may be reasonably clear, more difficult to ascertain is the actual demand of literacy programme participants (or potential participants). There is some evidence that many believe strongly in the autonomous model of literacy as that is what the agencies have convinced them re sponds best to their needs. Through this many have internalised literacy as schooling. This is further reinforced by the stigmatisation of those who are "uneducated." It is therefore essential that any understanding of literacy begin with unpacking the understandings of literacy of potential participants: how they have been constructed and how they can be used to ensure respon siveness by programmes.

Literacy course in Nepal, Source: Jenny Matthews/ActionAid

Rather than proposing a consensus of position around one or another of the approaches discussed above, a pragmatic understanding of literacy should recognise important elements from each within a broader accept ance of the "plurality of literacy" (UNESCO 2004). These might be summarised as follows:

- **Demand:** The design of any literacy initiative should start by ascertaining demand. Both the agency's perception of learning needs and the actual "wants" and priorities of potential participants should be recognised. Of course, this in practice is difficult since in a community a whole host of conflicting priorities exist. Often the demand of the most excluded and vulnerable is buried under that of village councils or community leaders. Nevertheless, it is vital that as far as possible demand is recognised and the different agendas at play are exposed and discussed.
- **Design:** The different literacies already operating in different do mains must be acknowledged. How are people already design ing strategies to successfully navigate textual institutions and processes? What types of institutions remain inaccessible and is it a question of enabling people to

acquire the necessary compe tences to access them or rather a matter of tailoring policy so that they become more inclusive (promoting newspapers or books in local languages, for example). Literacy initiatives should build on pre-existing practices.

- **Competences:** The question of which competencies are deemed programmatic objectives and which are assessed must be con sidered. Is the numeracy component to be given the same priority as reading and writing? In which language(s) will programmes operate? Will other non-cognitive outcomes be considered? How will impact be assessed? Who will be involved in the processes of evaluation to ensure the programme is meeting its objectives?
- **Capabilities and critique:** Do people have the capabilities to choose which literacy practices to engage in and to prioritise programme objectives? Tools that facilitate critical reflection can be used to explore these capabilities: just because somebody can engage in a certain practice, it doesn't mean that they will choose to do so. Likewise, the reasons why people choose to withdraw from a programme or not to participate in the first place are sig nificant and existing explanations that focus on motivation alone may not be sufficient.
- **Critical engagement with the literacy environment:** People's priorities are heavily determined by the environment around them and any awareness of what that environment excludes. Ensuring an infrastructure with adequate resources and institutions that respond to multiple literacies is often seen as outside the remit of literacy programmes (since it relies on other policy areas as diverse as printing/publishing and language). As the GMR highlighted, developing a literate environment might be even more important than addressing individual skills.

Revisiting the Benchmarks

It is clear that the benchmarks have at their core a largely autono mous approach to literacy in which competences (reading, writing, number use) are implied as magic bullets for other developmental outcomes (health, livelihoods, citizenship, gender equality). More implicitly though, the benchmarks also contain elements of the other **transformative** and **social practices** approaches. An element of critique in Benchmark 2 challenges the traditional dichotomisation of the autonomous approach, stating that *"there are no magic lines to cross"* between literacy and illiteracy, and several of the other benchmarks promote relevance through locally designed materials and *"participatory"* learning strategies. The benchmarks as a package conceive literacy as being for the most part delivered to individuals through programmes and the *"cost of literacy"* (calculated per learner) reinforces this conceptualisation. Benchmark 10 does draw some at tention to the literacy environment; however, the focus is on reading materials rather than the accessibility / affordability / appropriateness of textual institutions and processes.

Nevertheless, it was never the intention that the benchmarks become a rigid set of conditions; rather that they serve to provoke debate and ongoing adaptation as they are recontextualised in different places. In this spirit, I will conclude by suggesting how the benchmarks may benefit from a renewed conceptualisation of literacy, which might facilitate their adaptation in different national contexts:

- start by identifying the literacy **competences** that inform national policy and the agendas of literacy programmes;
- critique the relevance of these competences by analysing power relations in the literacy environment and the types of literacies that are needed to access different textual institutions and processes;
- identify pre-existing literacy practices in local contexts and use them to **(re)design** the competences that inform national policy.

In this way, the redesign of competences can provide a renewed and contextually appropriate set of aims for literacy policy, which in turn add coherence to new national adaptations of the International Benchmarks.

Notes

1 A case refuted by the GMR 2006.

2 arguing that literacy legitimates and reproduces the capitalist economic order; that the social construction of text has implications for gender and other power relations; that the standardisa tion of human "rationality" undermines emotions and creativity; and that literacy has a negative impact on language/cultural diversity and preservation (see numerous "Southern" authors compiled in Shikshantar, 2003 – Anushka Meenakshi and Proteek Dey, 2002; Dana Stuchul, Gustavo Esteva, and Madhu Suri Prakash, 2002; Munir Fasheh, 2002; Leonard Shlain, 1998; Dayal Chand Soni, 1998).

3 See, for example, Elizabeth Ellsworth, K. Weiler, Bowers, Berger and Walker, all discussed in Roberts 2000.

4 See GMR 2008.

References

Abadzi, H. (2004). Strategies and *Policies for literacy Background Paper for the GMR 2006.*

ActionAid International and the Global Campaign for Education (2005). *Writing the Wrongs: International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy* , ActionAid: London.

Barton, D. (1994, 2007). Literacy: *An Introduction To The Ecology Of Written Language.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Brandt, D. and Clinton, K. (2002). *"Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as social practice."* Journal of Literacy Research 34 (3): 337-356.

Demetrion, G. (2005). *Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education: In Quest of a U.S Democratic Politics of Literacy ,* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers: Mahwah, New Jersey.

Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of Hope. Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed .* New York: Continuum.

Jones, P. (1997). The World Bank and the Literacy Question: Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Ideology. *International Review of Education* 43(4), 367-375.

Kirkendall, A.J. (2004). *"Paulo Freire, Eduardo Frei, Literacy Training and the Politics of Consciousness Raising in Chile, 1964 to 1970,"* Journal of Latin American Studies 36: 4 (November 2004): 687-717.

Merrifield, J. (1998). *Contested Ground: Performance accountability in adult basic education.* Cambridge, MA: National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

Olson, D. 1(994). *The World on Paper.* CUP: Cambridge. Esp. Ch 1 *"Demytholgising Literacy"*.

Rogers, A. (2003). *What is the Difference? A new critique of adult learning and teaching.* Leicester, NIACE.

Scribner,S and Cole,M. (197)8 *"Unpackaging Literacy"* in Social Science Information, Vol. 17 no. 1 pp. 19-39.

Shikshantar. (2003). *The People's Institute for Rethinking Education and Development.* Featuring Anushka Meenakshi, Catherine Odora Hoppers, Dana Stuchul, Dayal Chandra Soni, Devi Lal Samar, Frederique Apffel-Marglin, Gustavo Esteva, Ivan Illich, Jacques Ellul, KB Jinan, Leonard Shlain, Madhu Suri Prakash, Manish Jain, Munir Fasheh, Panna Lal Patel, Proteek Dey, Rosa Maria Torres. January 2003, The Dark Side of Literacy. Udaipur, Rajasthan: Shikshantar. Udaipur, Rajasthan.

Street, B. (2004). Understanding and defining literacy . Background Paper for EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006.

——. 2003. 'What's 'new' in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice'. Current Issues in Comparative Education. 5(2) May 12, 2003 ISSN: 1523-1615 www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/

——. 2001.'Literacy and development: challenges to the dominant paradigm' in *Rethinking Literacy: Dominant and Alternative Discourses* Aditi Mukherjee and Dug girala Vasanta Sage: London OR â€˜Introduction' to Literacy and development ed. 2001 Routledge: London.

——. 1984. Literacy in Theory and Practice. CUP: Cambridge. UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2006) *Literacy for Life,* Paris: UNESCO.