Title of Case Study

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy and Numeracy

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Research-Practice Dialogue

This case study shows how networks of researchers, policy makers and practitioners came together to engage in dialogue through a series of seminars about a specific approach to developing adults' literacy and numeracy skills called the 'social practices approach'. This approach shows that literacy and numeracy (ALN) are more than a set of skills or techniques, but are shaped by the social and cultural context within which practice is embedded, the meanings it has for its users and the purposes it serves. Research (e.g. Barton, 2007) has shown that this is a more effective way of addressing ALN but this view was not well understood by many policy makers and practitioners. The seminars, the web-site and the book combined insights from research and practice that led to knowledge exchange that impacted on policy, practice and research. At the policy level the opportunity for researchers, practitioners and policy makers to discuss ALN in a shared space and to continue these discussions led to the development in Scotland of a new curriculum framework for ALN that used the 'social practices' approach (Scottish Executive, 2005) as well as increasing awareness throughout the UK of the value of this approach through the website. At the practice level participants were enabled to explore different ways of teaching and learning through encouraging learners to become aware of their own practices and those around them that also helped to shift the paradigm of deficits. At the research level the issues raised by policy and practice in implementing the social practices approach enabled a more nuanced understanding of the issues it raised. Overall the dialogue helped researchers, practitioners and policy makers to see how their different perspectives have interacted to produce insights that are greater than the sum of the parts.

General background

 In all European countries there are a number of adults that do not have sufficient literacy or numeracy (ALN) skills to enable them to fully participate in everyday life. This means that they are not easily able to access education or make progress in lifelong learning. There are a number of reasons why adults do not have the ALN skills that they require including specific learning difficulties, language difficulties, and poor schooling as a result of living in poverty in disadvantaged areas. Lifelong learning policies throughout Europe advocate for the importance of including adults with literacy or numeracy difficulties in education and

training programmes but many adults are reluctant to participate because they have had negative experiences of schooling and so have little desire to engage in programmes that they assume will be like school. This means that practitioners need to provide programmes that are attractive to adults and build on their strengths rather than emphasising their deficits.

In addition to the difficulty of involving adults in programmes there has been much debate about what are the most effective policy and pedagogical approaches. This debate is based on a number of assumptions about the purpose of involving adults in literacy education. One important policy purpose is how best to support and encourage diversity, social inclusion and equality of access to literacy and numeracy education. The debate about the focus of practice tends to be centred on providing education that is only concerned about remedying what are perceived to be learners' deficits or alternatively working from an acknowledgement that participants have strengths that can be built on. These different types of approach also apply to the curriculum that can be externally imposed or can be created with the participants around what motivates them to learn.

Another aspect of the debate about the purpose and practice of ALN is that researchers, policy makers and practitioners rarely come together to discuss these issues. These three groups have each developed their own ways of talking about adult literacy and numeracy and sharing insights from these different communities of practice across the spectrum of work is beneficial to all actors in the field.

Objectives and Purpose

This case study was the result of the action of three university researchers (Lyn Tett, Edinburgh University; Mary Hamilton, Lancaster University; and Yvonne Hillier, City University) who had also been involved in promoting practice and influencing policy in ALN in previous employments. We had all worked together on previous projects that involved conducting research around problems that had been identified by practitioners and findings ways in which research and practice can be fully integrated. We were also all members of *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy* (RaPAL) (http://www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/aims.htm) an organisation that encourages a broad range of collaborative and reflective research involving all participants in literacy work as partners including students, teachers and researchers.

We were concerned that recent policy developments in ALN might privilege the argument that literacy and numeracy are simply skills and so worked together and with colleagues from policy and practice in order to address the debate about ALN in two ways:

- First to present an argument that literacy and numeracy are more than a set of skills or techniques, but are shaped by the social and cultural context within which

practice is embedded, the meanings it has for its users and the purposes it serves. This 'social practices' approach shifts the focus from a narrow functional and externally imposed definition of literacy and numeracy learning to more open and numerous definitions that focus on what people do with their ALN skills, with whom, when and how. This view of ALN demands that connections are made: with the community in which learners lead their lives outside the classroom; with a notion of situated learning; between learning and institutional power; between print literacy and other media; between the literacies used by teachers and researchers, users and the 'social practices' theory.

- The second aspect was to enable people to come together in a shared space to discuss and debate the implications of the 'social practice' approach to ALN across the research, policy and practitioner communities of practice.

We felt that the best way to address these issues was to find an interesting way to bring these three communities together that would enable them to take a step back from their everyday concerns and interact with people that they would not normally come across. After consulting with a range of colleagues we thought that day long seminars where people would have the chance to hear from interesting speakers and discuss their inputs across the three communities would be the most effective starting point. Having decided this we then had to find funding that would enable us to offer the seminars free. We applied for and received a grant from the Economic and Social Sciences Council's seminar series fund and this enabled us to give a series of six seminars in the cities of Edinburgh (2), Lancaster (2) and London (2). We also got additional funding from the Scottish Executive and the National Research and Development Centre for Literacy and Numeracy that enabled us to involve more people and provide travel costs for a few people that would otherwise have been unable to participate.

The first stage of the process was to provide extensive publicity to attract a range of people involved in ALN from across the UK. Overall 130 people from the research, policy making and practitioner communities participated and had the opportunity to engage in debates about the nature and purpose of adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) education. The seminar participants, who comprised the leading researchers (34 participants including 6 PhD students), practitioners (34 participants) and policy makers (20) from across the UK, met together and continued their discussions over a two-year period that resulted in a rich dialogue that contributed to an understanding of how the ALN field is operating.

By the end of the seminars participants had thought about how to avoid the taken-for-granted in articulating and critiquing their own practices. They had considered how academic theories can be translated into effective teaching and learning and vice versa and been encouraged to listen to a range of views and to speak their own views. This was, however, just the beginning as the people that had come together continued to meet in person or virtually and were able to draw on each other's knowledge and understanding across the three communities. By forming collegial relationships it was possible to raise issues with policy makers about how theoretically informed practice might be implemented

and this has had a lasting effect particularly in Scotland where there is a continuing commitment to implementing a social practices view of ALN.

These were to:

- Create a challenging combination of presenters including researchers, practitioners and policy makers/implementers in order to generate significant debate across these communities of practice about the nature and purpose of ALN education.
- Facilitate discussion and comparison of policy developments across Scotland and England and beyond in order to inform contemporary policy developments.
- Co-ordinate a sharing of research findings and policy initiatives in a way that highlights the need for inclusive practices and joint working in a variety of contexts.
- Disseminate the discussion and conclusions from each seminar in ways that are accessible to a range of people interested in ALN education with an emphasis on the practical benefits to be derived from applying the research findings, including publications in the practitioner and academic press.

As stated earlier the purpose of the seminar series was to combine the perspectives of practitioners, researchers and policy makers in ways that would enable all three groups to listen and learn effectively from each other. To this end each seminar comprised inputs from speakers representing the practice, policy and research communities on a specific topic that was followed by discussions in small groups that were a mix of practitioners, policy makers and researchers. The papers from the speakers were posted on the web-site (www.education.ed.ac.uk.hce/ABE-seminars) before the seminar so that participants could read them in advance. After the seminars notes of the discussions were posted and participants were invited to comment. At the end of the series the speakers rewrote their papers in the light of the comments and discussions and they were then published in a book aimed at all three communities (Tett et al, 2006).

Five different aspects of ALN were covered as follows:
Literacies as Situated Social Practice - this session highlighted and explained the differences between the social practice and functional skills approaches to literacies provision.

Literacy, Language & Multi-lingualism - this session explored literacy events and practices in the lives of bilingual learners, bilingualism and biliteracy in a literacy-dominated western urban culture and society and the separation of race/ethnicity issues, cultural processes and language.

The Politics of Numbers - this session applied the social practice perspective to numeracy. The social context in which people's actions, including their mathematical actions and

interpretations of information involving mathematics, have meaning, were considered based on a view of the human being as a social being and of mathematics as human activity.

Measuring and assessing adult literacy, numeracy and language examined the impact of how we measure basic skills, and the methodological issues this raises, through a focus on the distortions caused by 'high-stakes' testing and showed how the strong link between tests, qualifications and funding can exclude particular learners and particular provision.

Crossing boundaries: facilitating interactions, explored the tensions inherent in applying a social practice of ALN by interrogating the strengths and weaknesses of the theory with a focus on ensuring that learning opportunities are widely available and showing how they will make a difference to people's lives in ways that are positive and empowering.

We found at the first seminar the conversations were slightly dominated by researchers who were more confident and experienced at expressing their views in public. In order to encourage more equal participation facilitators were placed in each discussion group and their task was to ensure that everybody had an opportunity to express their view. In addition we had key questions for discussion so that people stuck to the topic. We also left plenty of spaces for informal conversations and networking so that people could develop relationships with each other outside the discussion topic.

After each seminar participants filled in an evaluation form that assessed their satisfaction with the individual seminar. At the end of the series everyone filled in a more detailed evaluation where they reflected on the overall changes that participation had had on them as individuals and on their wider communities. These evaluations generated a lot of information and showed the value of bringing together the three communities of practice.

The seminars and the book combined insights from research and experience at the macro, mezzo and micro levels. At the macro level the opportunity for researchers, practitioners and policy makers in Scotland to discuss ALN in a shared space and to continue these discussions led to the development of the curriculum for ALN in Scotland adopting a social practices approach (Scottish Executive, 2005). At the mezzo level a participant that combined the roles of manager and practitioner in an adult literacy centre reported that:

In the life of the seminar series both personally in my own work and politically in the developments facing the practitioners on ALN courses, the context has been one in which there is an enormous appetite for debate – and for a critical vocabulary. The papers and the discussions have fed that appetite. How is social inclusion different from participation? Is teaching to transmit or to enable? How can meaning be made in the learning of maths? What are the effects of high stakes targets? With questioning like this, we shift the paradigm of deficits and keep open the possibility of dissent: this series has helped fertilise and nourish that process.

At the micro level practitioners reported that the insights they had gained from reading the papers, participating in the discussions and then trying out new ideas in their teaching 'led to the exploration of different ways of teaching and learning through encouraging learners to become aware of their own practices and those around them. This meant, for example, that a small number of formal letters were collected before deciding on content and layout of our own letters'.

The papers from the speakers were kept on the web-site that was maintained until 2008 and widely used by staff and students that participated in continuing professional development courses for ALN teachers. The book is also widely used for these courses. Feedback from staff and students has been that is has been particularly helpful (and very unusual) to be able to access the views of researchers, practitioners and policy makers and to see how their different perspectives have interacted to produce insights that are greater than the sum of the parts.

Personally I found the series useful as a way of getting to know a wide range of people from these three communities who challenged my assumptions and enabled me to think in a different way that focused on other perspectives from those I normally came across in a research focused environment. This was especially useful in helping my teaching of university students on community education programmes and also in my research and evaluation of projects that were trying to implement new ways of thinking about and delivering ALN.

The book (Tett et al, 2006) and the *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Curriculum Framework for Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2005) are both available.

Results:

The evaluations by the people that took part in the seminar series demonstrated the impact of participation in the three aspects of the seminars: reading the papers from the policy makers, researchers and practitioners around specific themes; participating in the discussions; reflecting on how theory and practice influence each other. For example people said:

- 'The seminars successfully created a working space and appear to have influenced how practitioners and academics can interact in the future';

- 'Participants from different sectors, different perspectives and different countries have exchanged and discussed issues within the seminars and continued the support/relationships between them. A wonderful opportunity that would not otherwise have materialised'.
- 'I have been able to discuss prison education with a researcher that has a lot of experience in this area and we are continuing to work together on these issues so that I can implement changes in how education is delivered'.

Barriers:

The chief barrier was the comparative absence of policy makers participating in the seminars. The main reason for this was their lack of time to make the space but those that did participate were very positive about its usefulness. More effective participation would have had a bigger impact at the level of policy but this did not diminish the impact of the research and practice interactions.

Before the series started Lyn, Mary and Yvonne met together to plan the whole series. We also established a small group comprising two researchers and two practitioners at each university who planned the specific seminars that were located there. After each seminar this group met to discuss the day and to see how the next seminar might need to be adjusted in the light of feedback. In between seminars the planning group communicated through email and telephone conversations.

The whole group of participants also communicated directly during the seminars and through the web-site posts and these initial introductions led to continuing relationships between the two groups. These have continued for a number of years and led to very productive collaborations.

Recommendations for Dissemination

1) Bringing together practitioners, researchers and policy makers together to discuss common issues and problems is an effective way of finding mutual solutions provided that the issue is clear and not so controversial that reaching consensus is impossible.

2) It is important to plan carefully in advance so that the issues to be discussed are clear and a broad range of participants drawn from the research and practice communities are available.

3) Choosing speakers who are well regarded by the lifelong learning community is crucial as they must be seen as credible experts in the area.

4) Make sure that competent facilitators are involved in ensuring that real dialogue takes

place between all parties otherwise some voices will dominate and there will no longer be true participation by all partners.

Resource developed:

Book based on the seminar presentations: Tett, L, Hamilton, M. and Hillier, Y. (2006) *Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Language: Policy, Practice and Research*, Open University Press

References

Barton, D. (2007) *Literacy: an Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language 2nd edition*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Scottish Executive (2005) *An adult literacy and numeracy curriculum framework for Scotland*. Edinburgh: Stationery Office.