LITERACY, EQUALITY, AND CREATIVITY: INSIGHTS FROM A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines links between adult literacy practices and equality theory and the ways in which tutors can use creative non-text methods to promote an understanding of equality issues in learners' lives. The potential range of equality issues is vast and might include examining issues such as unemployment, gender, culture, and identity, and how these issues affect the lives of learners.

INTRODUCTION

Adult literacy is not a static concept, and history has shown that definitions of what it means to be literate are always changing. Crowther, Hamilton, and Tett (2001) note that "definitions of what it means to be literacy are always shifting" (p. 1). Street (1984) defined two models for understanding literacy which he referred to as "autonomous" and "ideological". Each of these discourses generates very different ways of thinking about literacy. The autonomous model postulates that literacy is a set of normative, unproblematic technical skills that are neutral and detached from the social context in which they are used. The "correct" skills are defined or fixed (by the powerful group), and learning becomes focused on a mechanical reproduction of these skills being learned in the classroom and which, it is assumed, can be easily transferred to real life situations. The alternative ideological model, sometimes called the social practices model or discourse, recognises the socio-cultural and diverse nature of literacy. Arguing for a social practices model, Hamilton (2000) notes, "Literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skills, but are relational concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life and world" (p. 1). Here, power to determine content and curriculum lies primarily with the learner rather than the educational organization. This approach responds to issues that are derived from people's own interests and knowledge of the world. A critical approach to literacy adds a further dimension to our understanding by linking it to social and political issues in society. Shor (1991) notes, "Critical literacy … points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices" (p. 15).

THE LEIS PROJECT AND LIFELONG LEARNING

This paper examines findings from a development project known as the Literacy & Equality in Irish Society (LEIS) project (2004-6), which set out to examine relationships between literacy, equality, and creativity. The LEIS project adopted a social-practices model of literacy development, which acknowledges the social, emotional, and linguistic contexts that give literacy learning meaning, and included a critical approach to literacy learning. It is based on a view that there is a need to recognise that programs should be grounded in the everyday life situations of learners and communities and should embrace issues of equality, social inclusion, and social justice. A key objective of the LEIS project was to explore links between adult literacy and equality and how creative learning methodologies could be used to enhance learners' understanding of the equality issues which they identified. In the case of the LEIS project, a framework for examining equality issues developed by the Equality Studies Centre, University College Dublin was adopted and is discussed later. As the project developed a need emerged for courses to help tutors understand the links between literacy, equality, and creativity. A resource guide consisting of text-free, creative teaching methods was designed to support tutors and learners in exploring equality issues in adult literacy education. While using non-text methods in adult-literacy practice may not be a new idea, the linking of literacy practices to equality issues was new to tutors in Ireland. The project was also innovative in that it brought together people with expertise from different backgrounds and fields of practice across a learning region to promote dialogue about

equality as an issue in learners' lives. The project worked with learners and tutors to explore equality issues using text-free methods. More than one hundred tutors and learners were involved in the project, which was funded by the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The project lasted for eighteen months between 2004 and 2006. The project brought together researchers, policy makers, tutors, and learners with the aim of finding out how equality issues might be included in literacy learning, with a particular emphasis on using non-text, creative methodologies.

The key partners in the project were the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast and the Equality Studies Centre at University College Dublin. Queen's University, the lead partner, is the main provider of tutor education for adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland and provides a range of undergraduate and post-graduate programs including initial and continuous professional development programs. The Equality Studies Centre, University College Dublin is an inter-faculty research and teaching centre involved in outreach to community and local development organizations, and is providing expertise in equality studies. The project also involved the National Adult Literacy Agency, an umbrella agency for adult literacy in the Republic of Ireland – which focuses on national coordination and training and policy development in adult literacy work, and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Northern Ireland, a guidance agency which connects adults with learning, and provides support services to those concerned with improving access to learning. A number of other voluntary and community organizations also contributed to the development of the project. The LEIS project employed two full-time development workers and two part-time project coordinators based on each side of the Irish border.

In recent years, lifelong learning policies in Ireland, North and South, have emphasised the importance of literacy and basic skills as part of their lifelong learning strategies, with somewhat different emphasis. In Northern Ireland, the lifelong learning strategy emphasised "the continuous development of skills, knowledge and understanding that are essential for employability and fulfilment" (Department of Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland, 1999, p. 1). In contrast, the first White Paper on Adult Education for the Republic of Ireland (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 26) emphasised the need for social cohesion and equity as well as the skills requirement emphasised by a rapidly changing workforce in an emerging inclusive civil society. McGill and Morgan (2001, p. 57) noted the importance of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in Ireland which showed close to one quarter of the adults in each jurisdiction (North and South) as having problems with the simplest literacy task, which they noted as having "implications for the equality agenda" (p. 54). The policy agenda was therefore significantly different between North and South, with a greater focus on meeting the needs of the economy in Northern Ireland, and a greater emphasis on an equality and social cohesion agenda in the Republic of Ireland. (Lambe, Mark, Murphy, and Soroke, 2006, p. 18).

Different policies inevitably give rise to different practices. In Northern Ireland, the tutors' experience has been shaped by a skill-focused curriculum which does not actively promote tutors or learner involvement in shaping the curriculum. The "Essential Skills for Living" strategy (Department of Employment and Training in Northern Ireland, 2002) sets out a framework and actions for improving the essential skills of literacy and numeracy and with tuition provided largely through accredited college courses. Tutors are also required to undergo formal, accredited training. By contrast, in the Republic of Ireland, literacy learning takes place largely through informal learning groups in the community where the curriculum is developed between tutor and students – the majority of tutors being volunteers. Initial tutor training is organized largely within local literacy schemes.

Working with these two very different policy and practice frameworks inevitably posed challenges for the LEIS project. The emergence of a Peace and Reconciliation process in Ireland, not tied to existing funding structures, provided a new opportunity to work with tutors and learners on both sides of the Irish border. Border Action,[1] the funding body for the project, notes the twin objectives of the EU Special Support Programme are to promote the social inclusion of those who are at the margins of social and economic life, and to boost economic growth and advance social and economic regeneration. These twin aims provided a rationale for the project

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[1] The Border Action consortium has responsibility for the implementation of the Peace & Reconciliation Projects in Ireland; see, http://www.adm-cpa.com/aboutus.php

experimenting with new ideas in both jurisdictions. But, at the same time, the project had to recruit participants working within existing structures, and the project workers had to be mindful of the need to develop practices which could later be incorporated into existing practices. Theses constraints influenced the development of the project and might be considered a weakness in the project methodology described below.

Working within two very different systems also provided new opportunities for the LEIS project team. Work with tutors and learners took place on both sides of the border, sometimes with learners or tutors attending meetings and workshops together from the other side of the border. These gatherings enabled tutors to share experiences of working in very different contexts, and learners were also able to share their experiences of inequalities from very different sides of the political and religious spectrum.

EQUALITY, CREATIVITY, AND LITERACY PRACTICE

Baker, Lynch, and Cantillon (2004, p. 47) note that equality has a complex range of meanings. In simplistic terms, they note that equality is a relationship of some kind or other between two people or more regarding some aspect of their lives. (Baker et al., 2004, p. 21). Like literacy, equality is difficult to define. The LEIS project was based on the view that poor literacy skills can be viewed as a manifestation or symptom of inequality. It also acknowledges the complexity of the task of helping tutors and learners understand the concept of equality. The project set out to develop links between the theoretical concept of equality and practical approaches to literacy practice. It did this through the development of creative and non-text methodologies that literacy tutors could use in their practice – using the equality-based theoretical framework adopted. The project sought to demonstrate how the methodologies could create spaces for the exploration of equality issues within adult-literary practice. The methodologies were also intended to empower both tutors and learners to engage with equality issues relevant to the lives of literacy learners. For example, it was hoped that the methodologies could enable tutors and learners to explore inequalities arising out of the experience of conflict in Ireland.

The theoretical model adopted is underpinned by the belief that there are clear patterns that

structure the level of inequality experienced by individuals and groups. The framework has five interrelated dimensions of equality: respect and recognition; resources; love, care, and solidarity; power relations; and working and learning (Baker et al., 2004). These dimensions of equality provided an opportunity to look at economic, political, and cultural dimensions of equality and how the affective or emotional realm impacts on learning. The theoretical framework and its connections with the methodological approaches is discussed in greater detail in the project's resource guide (Literacy & Equality in Irish Society, 2004)[2] .

Creative methodologies can enable learners to develop an understanding of equality issues through involvement in a participatory process which involves critical thinking and problem-solving capacities. Fegan (2003, p. 2) notes that creative learning methodologies can provide a sense of identity and purpose and can be used to promote greater equality, social justice, and mutual understanding; and to transform individuals, neighbourhoods, communities, and regions.

As a key aim of the project was to provide a way of understanding equality issues, using non-text methods of learning, five creative methodologies were piloted. These were image theatre (a non-verbal technique where the human body can be shaped into images representing feelings and experiences of oppression), storytelling, drama, visual arts, and gamelan (a musical instrument from South East Asia which can be used to develop skills through equality relationships). Through engagement with groups of literacy learners and tutors, the project examined how equality issues might be better understood in learner's lives.

METHODOLOGY

A participatory approach, in which tutors and learners engaged as equal partners with the development team throughout the project, was embedded in the approach from the outset. Through engaging in stakeholder dialogue, the project has examined equality issues seen as important to tutors and learners. The learning methodologies piloted in the project were developed alongside an equality framework which is described later.

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[2] The LEIS Project Resource Guide (2004) is included on the project website www.leis.ac.uk

Focus and pilot groups, consisting of adult literacy learners and tutors drawn from various community organizations, explored issues of equality and inequality in learners' and tutors' lives. The focus groups looked at what motivated adults to learn about inequalities, what kind of issues they want to know about, and what would be the best ways of involving adults in this kind of learning. Non-text, creative methodologies (which included the use of collage, image theatre, storytelling, and popular theatre) were also piloted, and this provided a useful source of information on how effective tutors and learners considered these methods to be. The consultation involved three pilot groups of 19 people, and four focus groups of 99 people in total.

A series of short courses for tutors of literacy were also organized around the themes of the project. The courses involved tutors and creative learning methodologists working together in dialogue with each other, reflecting on the various dimensions of equality through a range of activities, and examining ways in which learners might be engaged in equality issues. The courses included an examination of the links between equality, creativity, and literacy using the equality framework described below. For tutors, it was important to have an understanding of how inequalities adversely impact on individual lives, and to known how to use models and tools to explore equality issues with learners. Another module of study, "equality and literacy", was developed and piloted on existing part-time, professional, under-graduate and post-graduate tutor-training courses for literacy tutors. A total of 125 people attended these courses that were organized in seven different locations. The program included seven short, continuing, professional-development courses lasting ten hours, and a further five courses where training was part of an initial and ongoing professional-development course for adult literacy tutors and managers. Some of the courses included community activists and literacy tutors lacking formal education and training. Most of the courses were offered as accredited courses, and approximately 107 individuals submitted assignments and received accreditation. The focus groups and seminars emphasised the need for support materials and resources for tutors and learners. A resource guide, which includes a rationale and discussions of the theories and methodologies employed – as well as practical examples of how to use them, was developed

alongside the research process. (Lambe et al., 2006).

An ongoing evaluation process was also set in place, and an independent evaluator appointed to the project. A management group of eight experts working in the field of adult literacy was also set up. This group provided support and advice on an ongoing basis and met every three months. The evaluator met with groups of tutors and learners, and a final report is in preparation. The evaluation process provided constructive advice, support, and feedback for the project team, and provided an instrumental role in achieving the project objectives.

The focus and pilot groups also included an evaluation process; with feedback from participants gathered by way of three statements that were put to them: "What I learned", "What I liked", and "What could be better". Participants were given three different colour cards to record their comments regarding these statements, and all the comments were grouped together and discussed on a large triangle on a board. The findings from the focus and pilot group evaluations are discussed below.

DISCUSSION

The methodologies used in the project were well received by those who participated in both the focus and pilots groups. The LEIS project Resource Guide (2006) shows how the evaluation process enabled learners to become aware of, and talk about, equality issues affecting their lives. An example of this is Luke, who, through the use of sculpture, was able to talk about his personal experience of the lack of respect and recognition he felt as a male with low literacy skills, and the intimidation he felt from his involvement with the court system.

The responses of learners to the evaluation questions showed that many had learned new skills in communicating and felt more confident talking about the issues affecting their lives. Comments showed that adults with low levels of reading or writing literacy were able to actively participate in learning, thus contributing to the broader goals of social inclusion and citizenship in lifelong learning, as earlier discussed.

Tutors who used the creative learning methodologies in their practices spoke about the fullness and meaning evident in the level of engagement of learners. As well as encouraging learners to think about equality issues affecting their lives (e.g., access to jobs, race, religion, and gender inequalities), many also spoke about

the methods as being inclusive, encouraging imagination, improving self-esteem, creating a bond between groups, and leading to improved listening skills. Through the use of non-text methods, tutors began to see how they might open up spaces for learners to question previously-held assumptions on a range of equality issues affecting their lives become of their low literacy skills.

Some of the tutors were also critical of the methodologies. Some felt the activities might require a high level of preparation, or be perceived as childish by learners; while others questioned the value of activities that were so much fun. For some tutors and learners, education may be perceived as a serious activity, where it is not always easy to equate learning with a high level of enjoyment. While tutors were very enthusiastic about the use of creative methods for exploring equality issues, they also indicated that ongoing advice and support might be needed to enable tutors to introduce creative methodologies into their practices. They felt that this advice and support would help build tutors' confidence in their abilities to use the methodologies. They also spoke of the need for a clear rationale to validate the learning in the eyes of managers and funding bodies. These comments showed that while tutors were enthusiastic about the new methodologies, they were also aware of the limitations of these methodologies. Many of the limitations were related to practical issues, but could, nevertheless, be important in determining success.

The training seminars were a way of providing support and advice to tutors who wanted to enhance their teaching practices, – as was the resources guide. The seminars provided tutors with an opportunity to generate new ideas and ways of working using creative methodologies appropriate to different situations and environments. Many of the ideas generated by tutors are included in the resources guide. For example, an exercise was put together to help tutors select a range of learning outcomes for a particular course that they wanted to develop. The resource guide can also serve as a useful tool for inducting new tutors.

The project also helped tutors develop an understanding of how theories of equality can engage learners in a debate about literacy and it relationships with equality. By challenging a skills approach to developing literacy, the theoretical framework helped tutors understand and articulate a non-deficit perspective on adult literacy which engages learners in understanding everyday life situations – including the inequalities which affect their lives. It shifted participants' perspectives on literacy from one of "people with low literacy skills" to a perspective of "people with unmet literacy needs." Through the project's advocacy of the use of creative methodologies, participants' understanding of notions of literacy were widened to include visual literacy, oral literacy, and situated learning within creative processes (storytelling, drama/theatre, music, and visual arts).

The equality framework was used as a tool to initiate discussion about inequalities. In the discussions that followed, tutors raised a number of equality issues arising from their practices. Some examples of these were structural and institutional inequalities that create barriers to using creative approaches, the difficulties in working within rigid curricula, and the privilege of learning through text-based work.

The project also explored the potential to examine and discuss power relationships through the use of non-text methodologies within adult literacy education. Issues such as health, housing, welfare, discrimination, family, and issues arising from low levels of literacy were all raised. Each method used in the project started with what people already knew. Each activity involved drawing on the resources and knowledge within the group and, through creative activity, giving recognition to the issue raised.

The LEIS project has shown how working with partners from different sectors can integrate knowledge and ideas to improve practices. In this case, a teamwork approach enabled knowledge about inequalities in society to be translated into literacy practices; thus, ultimately changing the ways literacy learners think about inequalities in their lives. It also provided new opportunities to involve tutors and learners together in researching their own needs and, in so doing, influencing the development of practices.

CONCLUSION

By focusing on equality and creativity, the LEIS project has provided new opportunities for interpreting literacy within a lifelong learning agenda. However, finding ways of addressing inequalities is not an easy task. Our understanding of literacy in the modern world

needs to be challenged, and appropriate methods and approaches need to be developed to meet these challenges. Shor (1999) argues, "This kind of literacy … connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical…" (p. 1). The LEIS project has shown that a focus on equality can at least empower learners to examine issues affecting their lives. Perhaps the challenge for the future will be to find ways to align lifelong learning and literacy policies and practices to the broader goals of equity and social justice, and to look for new ways of solving the problems in these realms.

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