FURTHER EDUCATION AND THE LITERACY DEBATE – A SCOTTISH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The attainment of literacy has been positioned as a key to achieving the Scottish Executive's social inclusion and widening participation agendas. This paper explores the argument that the social practices discourse around literacy has been written into policy documents but has yet to be drawn upon within practice in the Scottish Further Education context. To achieve this, it will provide a brief overview of Scottish Further Education and the most recent policies which were intended to impact on its literacy provision. It will argue that in both national policy documents and national reports commissioned by the Adult Literacies in Scotland (now Learning Connections) Literacy Team, two discourses of literacy are drawn upon. These are the discourse of 'deficit' and the discourse of 'social practices'. Finally, drawing on data emerging from 'Literacies for Learning in Further Education' (www.lancs. ac.uk/lflfe), a phase 3 Teaching Learning Research Project (TLRP), it will argue that since the introduction of a National Literacy Strategy in 2000, the social practices discourse has made little impact on practice within the FE sector.

INTRODUCTION

Since the election of a Labour government in 1997, Further Education (FE) has been viewed as a major player in helping the government achieve its social inclusion and widening participation agendas. This has continued in Scotland in the context of devolution. The FE sector has been provided with extra funding to encourage all 'citizens' in Scotland to become part of the 'Learning Society' (Scottish Executive, 2003b). Within Scottish Executive policy documents, the attainment of literacy has been positioned as one of the key factors which will help these citizens take an active role in this learning society. Furthermore, it is claimed that attainment of literacy positively influences retention, progression and achievement in courses within FE.

To illustrate the ways in which literacy in policy becomes the driver of a learning society, the first section of this paper will, outline within a Scottish context, the debate around the different views of literacy informing policy and how these views emerge within policy documents. The second section will examine a number of adult education reports commissioned by the Literacies Team of Adult Literacies in Scotland (now Learning Connections). Finally, the third section, drawing on initial data emerging from 'Literacies for Learning in Further Education' (www.lancs. ac.uk/lflfe), a phase 3 TLRP funded project, will argue that since the introduction of a National Literacy Strategy in 2000, there has been little impact on practice within the FE sector.

SCOTTISH FE POLICY CONTEXT

The Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) refers to FE as the 'Can Do sector'. After the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act of 1992, in 1993 of the 46 colleges in Scotland, 43 were incorporated and have placed employability at the centre of their activity. 'Opportunities for Everyone' (Scottish Office, 1999) set out the policy agenda as a strategic framework for Further Education in Scotland. Lifelong learning and social inclusion are two themes within the Scottish Executive's strategic framework which impact on the FE curriculum.

Firstly, in many Scottish (and UK) policy reports, it is taken for granted that

there is a link between increasing participation in life-long learning and improving the country's economic performance. Further mention is made of a skills and/or productivity gap. This claim is made despite there being no shared common understanding of what is meant by the concept of 'skills' (Welsh and Canning, 2003). Education in general and literacy development in particular, has been, and continues to be, perceived as a route to achieving success in the global economy. Jim Wallace (then the Deputy First Minister) in his introduction to 'Further Education in Scotland Annual Report for 2002' (Scottish Executive, 2003a) argued that FE colleges have an important role in helping the Executive achieve its priority of 'growing the economy' and that lifelong learning is the 'engine which drives our economic performance'(p1). The report: 'Life through Learning: Learning through Life' (Scottish Executive, 2003b) which was a response to the Executive's debate on education, also acknowledged the role FE has to play in promoting lifelong learning. This lifelong learning paper is part of a five year strategy which built on the earlier 'Opportunity Scotland' (Scottish Office, 1998).

The second theme of social inclusion is also closely aligned to the economic development and skills agenda because of the view that engagement (or re-engagement) with the labour market is a first critical step. 'Implementing Inclusiveness, Realising Potential: The Beattie Committee Report'(Scottish Office, 1999b) was a review of FE provision which led to each college developing and implementing an inclusion policy to enable participation and attainment in post-school learning and to improve employability of all young people, whatever their circumstances.

There has been a growing focus on literacy and numeracy to achieve these two goals of lifelong learning and social inclusion within the strategic framework for FE. Literacy has become a key focus for policy and practice. Yet this itself is not straightforward given that literacy is a highly charged concept within a contested arena.

Using statistics from an International Adult Literacy Survey, and in a Report entitled: 'A Fresh Start' (DfEE, 1999) Sir Claus Moser suggested that 23% (or 800,000 adults) in Scotland had low literacy skills resulting in a skills gap. The author identified that this gap was due to the decline of traditional heavy industries, together with an increase of employment which relied on higher literacy skills. It highlighted the relationship between literacy and the labour market and that many people's skills would be inadequate to meet the demands of a 'knowledge society' in the 'information age'. People who had been made redundant from declining industries were predicted to not have the literacy skills required by new industries. Since this data was produced it has reappeared in many reports and policies as a reminder of the depth of the 'problem' in Scotland.

However, there had been very few literacy research projects focussing on the Scottish context. In 2000, Henry McLeish (Enterprise and Lifelong Minister at the time) argued that Scottish research and solutions were required for Scotland rather than continuing to rely on reports from elsewhere. He argued that existing statistics about literacy problems were not sufficiently robust. Consequently to redress the paucity of Scottish-based research, an Adult Literacies Survey in Scotland was commissioned and a consultation exercise was initiated. This included seven reports from a variety of sectors including schools, communities, workplaces and FE.

A significant aspect of the adult literacy initiative was the establishment of a Literacy Team. There was, and is now, no statutory obligation for Scotland's local authorities to provide adult literacy education. However, local authorities do have a remit to provide 'community learning'. Yet, there are no National Guidelines or Statements about how that provision should be organised, what it provides or for whom. This has resulted in provision which varies in quality and number across Scotland. Partly to redress this problem and partly as a response to the work carried out by the Literacy Team initiated in 2000, the Scottish Executive asked for Community Partnerships to be constructed within each local authority.

The role of these partnerships was to draw up community learning plans and consider funding projects which sought to find local solutions for local needs in a collaborative, integrated and systematic way. The partners vary slightly from local authority to local authority but generally include representatives from the local authority, Careers Scotland, Local Enterprise Company, FE, Community Education, the voluntary sector and the social work department. The Guidelines which were provided by the Executive expected priority to be given to disadvantaged communities and workplace learning.

Since the publication of the report 'Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland', (Scottish Executive 2001a), there have been a number of significant changes to the organisation of responsibilities for the implementation of its key aims. Before the 'bonfire of quangos' in Scotland, the National Training Project implemented the aims of the report. However, this was changed in April 2003 when Learning Connections took over this role. Within Learning Connections there is an Adult Literacies Team which provides a training framework for practitioners, delivers pilot training and provides a library of resources.

The Adult Literacies Team produced the report: 'Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland' (Scottish Executive 2001a) which noted that local authority and further education sectors developed programmes in isolation from each other and most importantly, on the basis of different approaches to literacy and numeracy. The Literacy Team recommended that a holistic lifelong learning approach should be adopted when dealing with Adult Literacies and that there should be a national strategy to meet policy agendas of social inclusion, lifelong learning and active citizenship. This team encouraged adult education campaigners, colleges and local authorities to move away from the use of remedial approaches connected to the use of basic skills, as they felt these carried a stigma for individuals. A significant point within the Report is that it identifies a lack of consistency in the use of the terms 'core skills/key skills/basic skills and employability'. They argue this has led to confusion in policy and practice. A confused picture becomes more muddled when 'soft skills' connected to personal development such as problem solving and working as a team are brought into the frame.

The use of the term 'basic skills' emerged from a wider social concern around the rights and responsibilities of the individual to be functionally literate in terms of the demands of society and the workplace. Its use has primarily been associated with community education schemes. Within Scotland, the term 'basic skills' is no longer part of the community education discourse and did not feature at all in the most recent advertising campaign 'the Big Plus.'

Key skills (England) and core skills (Scotland) are a range of essential skills which the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (England) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) argue underpin success in education, employment, lifelong learning and personal development. The need for generic, transferable skills as a part of education and training has been a part of the Labour Government's agenda since the late 1980s in both Scotland and England. These skills can be measured and assessed at various levels of ability. The Higher Still programme (Scotland) was intended to enable students to gain core skills for a continually changing job market. They are described by SQA in their NQ catalogue as: 'broad transferable skills that people need, to be full, active and responsible members of society' (SQA 2005). The Core Skills framework extends progressively through the Scottish curriculum, starting during the 5–14 age range, continuing through Standard Grade courses and National Qualifications, and carrying on into degrees, HNCs and HNDs, and Scottish Vocational Qualifications. Within FE, core skills can be embedded within the units of work or be can studied as discrete units. There are 5 certificated core skills. These are: Problem Solving, Communication, Numeracy, Information Technology and Working with Others. Since the introduction of Higher

Still in 1999, everyone who achieves an NQ course or unit automatically receives a 'core skills profile'.

Within all three terms: core, key or basic skills, there are a number of underlying assumptions which fall within a deficit model of literacy. Firstly, that there is a link between literacy acquisition, cognitive development, employability and long-term economic prosperity. Secondly, that once learned, these skills are transferable across and between domains of the workplace, educational institutions and home life. These assumptions are examined later in this paper. It can be seen that all three terms lie within a functional explanation of literacy and rest on the autonomous model described by Brian Street (1984). This model promotes the idea that literacy is a neutral and uncontested concept representing the technical skills of reading and writing which themselves can be measured and tested at levels of individual competence. Within this model, to be literate is to develop the psychological skills of encoding and decoding text and these can be measured. Within Scottish Further Education, this goal is being addressed primarily through the assessment of core skills where the focus is on measurement.

Many writers have challenged a skills-based approach for understanding literacy. The Literacies Strategy Team developed their view of literacy from the New Literacies Studies (NLS). The latter offer a social practices approach promoting a socially situated and socially constructed view of literacies as 'multiple, emergent and situated in particular social contexts' (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton, *et al.*, 2000; Gee, 2003). Barton *et al.* (2000) have demonstrated that people engage in a rich variety of literacy practices as part of their daily lives which are not recognised, acknowledged, valued or mobilised by the formal education system. This view questions the assumption that skills can be transferred unproblematically from one context or another. The notion of transfer has been further problematised by Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom (2003) who argue that both cognitive and situated explanations of transfer are not sufficiently robust to explain the complexity of transfer, especially across contexts. This suggests the notion of transferable core skills' is unsound.

Since 2000, Scottish Executive documents have adopted the social practices view of literacy but simultaneously they also use aspects of the deficit model. To illustrate these two discourses, I will focus on the three reports commissioned by the Literacies Team and the 'Literacies in the Community resources for practitioners and managers' (Adult Literacies in Scotland, 2000b).

TWO DISCOURSES

A number of aspects from a social practices approach emerge within reports commissioned by the Literacies Team. Like the earlier 'Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland' (Scottish Executive, 2001a) report, 'Listening to Learners: Consultation with Learners about Adult Literacy Education in Scotland' (Merrifield, 2001) advocated dropping the use of 'essential skills' (ES), 'core skills' or 'basic skills' and concluded that any new system used to support Adult Literacy and Numeracy learning must involve 'listening to learners' (Merrifield, 2001:35). The main concern to emerge from 'Recognising Progress Research Report' (Scottish Executive, 2001c) was a question of whether learners could transfer learning from educational settings to real life contexts. This reflects the NLS concern that transfer across domains is problematic. A third report 'Adult Literacy Household Survey' (Scottish Executive, 2001b) asked 1890 adults about their literacy use in the home. In this report the authors both acknowledge and recognise that adults engage with a variety of literacy practices. Listening to learners, questions about transferability and acknowledging existing skills are issues which are an inherent part of a 'social practices' discourse of literacy.

Additionally, a social practices approach can be seen in the resource handbook developed for use amongst literacy practitioners: 'Literacies in the Community

Resources for Practitioners and Managers' (Adult Literacies in Scotland, 2000b). It provides case study material to exemplify how teaching literacy using a social practices approach can be accomplished. It promotes the idea that it is not unproblematic to transfer literacy from one context to another. It notes that learners' existing practices have not only to be used but clearly and explicitly understood by the learners themselves. Further, these practices come to be named and valued and enable learners to adapt and use their existing learning strategies and assumptions about literacy into a 'critical literacy' framework. It emphasises a holistic approach from all involved with the learner: tutors, guidance and management all putting Literacy and Numeracy at the centre of their concerns, policies and curriculum. The resource handbook also stresses that all levels of the hierarchy need to be aware of up-to-date research findings which should inform practice and policy. It puts at the centre the individual who must negotiate her/his personal learning plans; these must be regularly monitored for progress to ensure the goals of the learning plan remain explicit. This practitioners' handbook illustrates a desire to adopt a social practices discourse and practice around literacy, moving away from a model of individual deficit.

However, despite the inclusion of aspects from the social practices discourse, all of the above documents are evidenced by a number of assumptions from the autonomous model which go unchallenged. Two of these assumptions are that developing learning opportunities will lead automatically to more and better employment opportunities and that certain groups of people have deficits which need to be 'fixed'.

It appears, therefore, that the link between literacy and employability is not as simple as this argument would suggest (Taylor, 2005). An approach which assumes that helping people develop literacy skills will help them find employment does not take into account the complexity of how people get jobs, keep them and move on. This assumption also implies that a more skilled workforce will bring economic and social benefits. Rather than discussing the possibility that structural barriers have a role to play in unemployment and skills shortages, the use of a deficit model puts the blame back on the individual for her/his own lack of success. Livingstone (2002) questions the assumption that in western societies there is any need to substantially up-skill the workforce. He talks of 'underemployment' (2002:59) and argues that current employment practices do not take advantage of the workforce's existing skills and knowledge.

A second problem is that the reports rest on an assumption that certain groups of people can be discussed in terms of their deficits in what they know and that these need to be identified, measured and addressed. These groups of people are:

- People who live in disadvantaged areas

- Workers in low skill jobs

- People on low incomes

- People with health problems and disabilities.

Furthermore the paper argues there are three types of need:

- Expressed need – people who are actually dissatisfied with their skills.

- Latent need – people who recognise that their skills are low but still say that they are satisfied with them.

- Invisible need – people who appear to rate their skills as stronger than they actually are.

Once these needs have been addressed, it is suggested that individuals will be able to become active contributors to the economic and social well-being of their country.

The Literacies Team (Scottish Executive, 2001a) argues that part of the reason why there is a low up-take of literacy programmes from within these cohorts is that literacy has a low status within the education sector and the community at large. One of the strategies advocated to change the status of literacy is to develop advice, support, training, and quality of learning opportunities. In 2003 as part of that process, a training award for adult literacy and numeracy tutor assistants was established. This was the first stage of a national training framework of qualifications in Adult Literacies. By 2004 a national strategy for training of specialist adult literacy and numeracy practitioners was in place. It is unclear how literacy can achieve a higher status when literacy learning is aimed only at those believed to have low levels of literacy. Indeed measuring literacy and identifying different levels is part of the discourse of a deficit explanation of literacy. Herein lies a fundamental tension for Adult literacies strategy. To help achieve the social inclusion agenda, they focus their attention on those who are perceived to be excluded. Whereas, a social practices approach would encourage everyone to examine their literacy practices.

It would therefore appear that despite the Literacy Team clearly stating that deficit approaches have not worked in the past, the development of the literacy strategy focuses upon those groups judged to have low levels of literacy. The adult education papers discussed above all explicitly profess to challenge the deficit model of literacy and claim to promote a social practices approach while simultaneously accepting unquestioningly many of the assumptions within a deficit model of literacy.

PRACTICE WITHIN FURTHER EDUCATION

This article has described the adult education reports and the practitioners' handbook which explicitly encourages a social practices approach but rests on unquestioned assumptions from within the deficit model. The discourse within these texts is one of a complex hybrid of social practices and deficit models. Before going on to look at whether, since 2000, FE literacy provision has been affected by the 'social practices' discourse around literacy, this article will examine the support provided by SFEU to college practitioners.

It has been the case that since the introduction of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (ALNS) a number of initiatives have been established within the FE sector. In 2002, the Scottish Further Education Unit developed a Literacy and Numeracy Website which exhibits examples of good practice and teaching materials. In addition, SFEU has produced an Adult Literacy and Numeracy (ALN) Curriculum for Scotland (draft guidelines 2003). Both of these resources are largely aimed at and used by core skills practitioners.

The guidelines document from SFEU has adopted much of the discourse of 'situated practice'. The definition of literacy provided includes statements of context and purpose, recognising different domains and values and that informal learning (which they call 'incidental learning' SFEU, 2003:3) needs to be acknowledged. It explicitly states that students need to value their informal literacy practices and that there is a need for people to actively articulate what they know –actively name and analyse existing pre-conceptions to help learn to develop new ones. It notes that learners need to develop critical thinking and meta-cognitive strategies. All of these ideas are within a social practices model of literacy. However the practical example in principle number 2: 'teaching is to be focussed on application of skills and knowledge, not simply their acquisition' focuses on a process-based view of literacy which encourages teachers to help students develop the ability to apply literacy particularly in relation to jobs. The process approach to literacy still rests on functional underpinning of literacy rather than as a set of social practices. It still separates the cognitive psychological process (literacy as a skill) from social use

and knowledge (literacy practices). Here is evidence again of ideas from within the deficit model of literacy. Within this document from SFEU there is evidence of both the discourses of deficit and social practices.

The practitioners' handbook used by the partnership projects and the SFEU guidelines both incorporate elements of a social practices approach and a deficit approach to literacy. This article will now explore the extent to which literacy provision within FE colleges is built on a deficit model, a social practices one or a hybrid of them both.

I will now draw from data emerging from 'The Literacies for Learning in Further Education' (LfLFE) project funded by the TLRP ESRC. The project is based upon a partnership between two universities (Stirling and Lancaster) and four further education colleges: two in England and two in Scotland. This project began in January 2004 and will continue until January 2007. Within each of the four colleges there are four members of the college staff working within the project as practitioner-based researchers. As far as is practicable, both FE practitioners and students have been encouraged to engage with the project as researchers and not simply as respondents. As part of that process, they keep reflective diaries of their participation. Their position as 'insiders' has been invaluable in gathering 'thick' data (Geertz, cited in Holliday, 2002). Ethnography is a process, not a set of discrete stages, so, as a team, the members of LfLFE have been involved in an iterative process of planning, data gathering and analysis. As part of this process, staff have collected data around their own vocational areas but have also been involved in individual interviews and observations of class sessions.

One of the main aims of this project is for staff to study the students' home-based literacy practices and literacy practices in relation to their vocational areas. Within the two Scottish colleges these vocational areas are: child care, multi-media, construction, audio, accounts, social sciences and hospitality and catering and span a range of SCQF levels from 4 to 7. Prior to the project, none of these College Based Researchers (CBRs) were familiar with a social practices approach to literacy. From interviews, questionnaires and observations across phase 1 and 2, it has been demonstrated that they, and their colleagues within these colleges, operate from an autonomous view of literacy. Staff who have contributed to the project usually discuss literacy as a set of techniques that can be acquired independently of a specific context. They argue that when students face difficulties in their vocational areas, they can be 'fixed' by a core skills or support teacher. They view their role as imparting the content and knowledge of their subject area and not as developing the literacy practices required of learning or demonstrating that learning.

After one observation a lecturer explained: 'We looked at who maybe would be … you know… possibly have problems with essays and they identified themselves and they automatically get referred to support for learning for essay writing workshops'. Later in the same interview she said:

> 'Ah wouldn't say we teach them but I would certainly say that we do our best effort to explain what we're looking for. We don't certainly… we don't set time aside. I say this because to be honest with you ah would say that that's probably why we have support for learning. We would access that if students had a difficulty maybe… you know maybe constructing a folio that really is what support for learning are there for so in terms of our professional role we would be best to refer students if they were having difficulty with that to support for learning 'cos it could be an underlying issue there could be an understanding issue it could be that just for their own development that it would be best for them to go to support for learning and do that.'

This practitioner views content and form as separate. She is saying that as a subject teacher, it is her role to impart the knowledge students need to engage with her subject

area and it is the role of support or core skills staff to teach how to demonstrate that knowledge. Her discourse around literacy is one of problem and deficit within individual students, rather than around a set of practices which are part of the context of her classroom and the vocational area.

Another teacher when he was discussing the literacy practices and demands of his SQA Higher unit (SCQF 6) described that in many classes he wanted his students to take their own notes in addition to the ones he provided them with. To accompany his Power Point presentations, he provided them all with a copy of the note format from the Power Point software. He explained that very few of his SQA Higher level students took notes as he went through the presentation. When we discussed why this might be, he said he assumed they knew how to take notes because they were at Higher level but that they lacked motivation. We talked about the possibility that they might not be sure how to take notes in this class. His response was: 'I haven't got time to teach them. I thought they would get taught this in core skills'. He too believed that his role was to teach the subject content and that the literacy practices required within the class could be, and were being, taught by someone else. It is argued that like the others, he operates from a de-contextualised view of literacy.

From the data gathered within these two colleges there is no evidence that a social practices approach to literacy has permeated through to vocational staff. They understand their role in terms of the vocational content they have to teach the students and they do not consider the literacy practices students may have to engage with in their classrooms. Smith (2004) in her ethnographic study of another Scottish college also found that both core skills staff and vocational staff she interviewed held a view of literacy that was founded on an autonomous skills-based approach.

Some FE learners engage with a social practice approach. However, these students are to be found within projects that are peripheral to the mainstream teaching within FE colleges and are learners who are deemed to 'lack' the skills necessary to enter mainstream FE. These are usually to be found in outreach programmes within community-based FE provision. Full-time students are still faced with a core skills approach to literacy within their programmes at NC and HNC levels.

CONCLUSIONS

At policy level, there is a now a **national** focus on the development of Literacy and Numeracy across all the sectors including workplace learning, community, schools and FE. However, this national focus is implemented at a local level. With the adoption of Community partnerships there has been a move towards a more holistic inter-agency approach to literacy, but the programmes are based on short-term planning and short funding cycles. 'The National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Report' (2002) states that over £22 million had been committed to the development of Literacies over a three year period. However, one of the problems of adopting a local approach and short-term funding is that it leads to a lack of strategic overview without which questions arise around quality systems, development of infrastructure for training and development of staff involved in delivering literacy and numeracy.

Within national policy documents the predominant literacy discourse is that of 'social practices', but they rest on unquestioned assumptions from a deficit discourse. The picture is equally confusing when the documents directly focussed at practitioners are examined. Within these documents, the two discourses of 'deficit' and 'social practices' sit alongside one another. Within these documents, which are driven by the social inclusion agenda, there is an emphasis on the need for educators to provide strategies to encourage those within disadvantaged communities to develop their literacy skills. This is not to deny that these groups might benefit from any encouragement to participate in lifelong learning or to develop their Literacies, but when they are the only groups discussed and targeted, it is easy to forget the broader social view of literacy and, instead, revert to the narrow view of literacy as a 'deficit'

which lies only within certain groups and within certain individuals.

The case studies from within the LfLFE project illustrate that the social practices approach has not filtered down to practitioners in the FE context. The staff involved in the project largely operate from a decontextualised and deficit view of literacy where students who do not have the appropriate skills can be 'fixed' by support or core skills teachers. Literacy is seen as something which happens within the core skills framework. The core skills strategy is part of the SQA approach and formal qualifications and more aligned to an autonomous skills approach. Despite FE being one of the partners within the local authority's partnerships, none of the staff involved in the LfLFE project has seen the practitioners' handbook: 'Adult Literacies Scotland' (2000b). For a social practices approach to be adopted, it would require a radical shift of practitioners' models of literacy and discourse practices within the classroom as well as a more considered view of the role of literacy at a policy level.

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