Who are we trying to kid?: Empowering learners through workplace English Language Skills

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Abstract

Adult ESL programs in the Australian context are heavily influenced by neo-liberal notions of functional literacy and numeracy. This paper argues that such notions, designed to enable the learner to function within the workplace or community can fail to acknowledge the complexity of ESL program participation for adult learners. This paper reports on a project which explored such complexity. It points to the need to position the learning of literacy and numeracy in the ESL context as a social and educational journey made meaningful by a learner's sense of (emerging) identity and that a holistic, socially orientated understanding of their learning and their progress is preferable to an approach which views and evaluates learners against preconceived functional literacy skills. The participants in this study were people of refugee background from Africa who had minimal literacy skills in their own vernacular

Key words: adult literacy, refugees, identity, ESL, gender, literacy programs

Introduction

This paper reports on a masters level research project which explored the meaningfulness for learners of their participation in an adult ESL literacy course. A framework based on social learning theory was utilised in order to theorise such meaningfulness. Data elicitation, primarily through focus groups and written narratives uncovered a complexity to ESL literacy and numeracy engagement. This was contextualised by an individual's

sense of integration and belonging within the broader society, a sense of ongoing negotiation of roles within this society as well as their own identified community.

It is contended that the manner in which literacy is presented can act as a space for learners to examine their realities and explore and express their own identity constructions. Likewise it can also potentially impact negatively on learners' emerging sense of self through reproducing the dominant social discourse and denying difference. Rather than viewing and evaluating learners against preconceived functional literacy skills we would be better off taking a holistic, socially orientated understanding to their learning and their progress.

Literature Review

Perspectives on delivering literacy instruction in the adult ESL context are highly diverse. Such perspectives are impacted by differing discourses concerning the nature, purpose and meaning of literacy which can range from those with a narrow economic and functionalist focus to ones which are more social and humanist in nature (Papen, 2005).

In the Australian context, government funded adult ESL programs follow the worldwide trend towards functionalist notions of literacy (Hamilton and Pitt, 2011). Such notions are based upon the perspective that literacy is a functional skill framed by the need to assist learners to acquire the skills necessary to function within the workplace or the broader community. As a consequence ESL teaching has been redefined by directly linking low literacy with economic marginality pursued through tightly controlled funding criteria.

An important example in this regard and a focus in this study are the Certificates of Spoken and Written English (CSWE). The CSWE is an adult English language course delivered through the Australian Federal Government's Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). The CSWE is designed to guide teachers to create and deliver a syllabus that enables students to achieve specified competency outcomes against which a student's progress is measured. The course is not only designed to standardise English language

instruction for new migrants but also to ensure a level of accountability to funding authorities and responsiveness to labour markets.

This 'reductionist', government induced model of literacy has come under theoretical and practical criticism however in the teaching of ESL to learners from refugee backgrounds, particularly from those who advocate a more socially orientated approach to literacy instruction. It is argued that for refugee learners, who frequently have only minimal literacy skills in their own vernacular, such a narrow orientation allows little recognition of the social context for the learning, the use and even the construction of literacy (Auerbach, 1992; Black 2002).

By way of theoretical and practical contrast, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton, 2001; Street, 2003), centred on the social practices and bodies of knowledge with which one's world and culture are interpreted, views literacy not so much as a functional skill but a social practice derived from the social context in which it is used. Such an approach shuns idealized versions of literacy to foreground and validate the learner's current use of literacy in terms of their contemporary social situation rather than possible future economic roles.

A debate on the merits of the functional versus the social is beyond the scope of this paper. Ultimately different perspectives have both merits and shortcomings and, as Robinson-Pant (2000) notes, can exist side by side in the one classroom. The important point in the context of this paper is not that one approach is necessarily better than the other but rather that a reliance on a functionalist understanding of literacy is always going to be partial in terms of recognising the literate identity, whether imagined or real, of adult ESL learners of refugee backgrounds.

This latter statement follows the lead of Gomez (2004) and others (Kanno, 2003; Warriner, 2008) who argue that one might profitably view literacy as a vehicle for facilitating the construction of one's identity and as a social and educational journey made meaningful by a learner's sense of (emerging) identity. This focus on identity may be

considered especially important for pre-literate adult learners from refugee backgrounds who have low or minimal levels of literacy in their own language and are hence negotiating a new skill set, a new culture and arguably a new sense of self. ESL Literacy learning, from the view of such learners dramatically encapsulates a complexity of social issues including an individual sense of integration and belonging within the broader society, the negotiation of gender roles within a community and an ongoing expression of cultural and religious based identity within a multicultural Australia. As Warriner (2008) notes issues of language, ethnicity, class, gender, and culture are salient and consequential for pre-literate refugee learners who find themselves in a dynamic and vulnerable position with regards to their sense of self-identity.

Utilising an identity focused theoretical framework which draws on the social learning theories of Wenger (1999) and Freire (1993), the project reported here foregrounds learner's aspirations and needs. Such a framework seeks to understand a learner's own sense of progress and motivation in an adult ESL course beyond ideological perspectives of literacy delimited by functional literacy skills..

A framework of 'meaningful participation' for teaching adult preliterate learners

The research framework is based on a perspective that investigates the social meaningfulness for learners of their engagement with their literacy learning in an adult ESL program inclusive of their sense of socio-cultural identity. Hitherto the construction of a framework to understand this broader relevance of literacy and literacy learning in the adult ESL context has not been well developed. Nonetheless, the social learning theory of Wenger (1999), the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1991) and understandings of socially aligned educators and sociologists (Courtenay, 1998; Freire and Macedo 1987) are pertinent.

Wenger elaborates upon three main premises that are particularly useful in the context of this research paper. Firstly, our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful is held to comprise the key purpose of learning. Secondly, the creation of

knowledge is a socially situated practice which is dependent upon our active engagement with the world. Thirdly, 'meaningful participation' evolves from people's aspirations to be part of, develop and negotiate their own sense of identity within learning communities. According to this framework personal and social meaningfulness lies at the heart of learning and involves an extension of people's feelings of identity and the power to participate in, negotiate and construct meanings of significance in a personally constructed world.

Mezirow (1991) adds to this understanding by elaborating on a mechanism in which meaningfulness itself may be constructed based upon a perspective of transformative learning. According to Mezirow, critical reflection on one's meanings can lead to emancipation from the barriers in one's life as people arrive at more 'enlightened' or critical perspectives on issues that influence their everyday reality (Courtenay, 1998). In line with this portrayal Freire and Macedo (1987), have coined the term, 'reading the word and the world' to explicitly connect literacy learning with a deeper understanding of the world based on personal liberation for the learner.

In this research project, the notion of 'meaningful participation' refers to a framework designed to encompass people's sense of connection with the society they live in, their own community and their own emerging sense of self with literacy. It is a notion based on a view that the use and the learning of literacy within the ESL context should be seen within a broad frame of reference based upon multiple perspectives of both literacy and the lived reality of learners themselves including new and emerging feelings of identity.

Introducing the Study

The study took place in a non-metropolitan region of Victoria. The participants of the project were people of refugee backgrounds from Togo and the Sudan who were studying English literacy and numeracy within an adult educational setting in Australia. Of the ten participants, eight were women reflecting the gender disparity within the classes themselves. These ten participants at best had minimal literacy skills in their own

vernacular alongside a history of minimal and disrupted schooling. All the participants were enrolled in a Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) at an intermediate level having been in Australia and enrolled in English language courses for some time.

The research was undertaken at the initiative of the researcher who was also the teacher of the class. As well as participant observation it also involved written narratives and focus group discussions. The study was undertaken within research ethics requirements. Participants were aware that their writings were being used for this research and agreed to be involved

Research design

The research design was a case study within a phenomenological perspective. In this research project the case was clearly bounded by the experiences of a group of humanitarian entrants participating in an AMEP program delivered in a tertiary educational campus in Australia. The research proceeded through a graduated process designed to 1) situate the learner, 2) to situate literacy in learner's lives and 3) identify the self-identified meaningfulness of their learning. The study occurred over the course of a semester. The length of time of the study was influenced by the time taken for students to develop the practical and the social confidence to express themselves both orally and in writing.

Data was collected via three different methods. These were (1) participant observation (2) written narratives and (3) focus groups. Participant observation involved the collection of data in the form of a reflective journal, through the researchers own position as a classroom teacher. Personal narrative was a further important factor of the research where participants voluntarily wrote about their contemporary educational and life experiences in Australia, the meaningfulness of their literacy learning and how their learning impacted upon their life and their aspirations. These written stories were shared in the form of a focus group and provided space for others to further discuss meanings of

significance. Asking students to write stories and take part in subsequent discussions was compatible with the expressed needs of students to build upon their writing and reading skills, and therefore comprised a research data collection tactic 'sanctioned' by the existing curriculum.

Data analysis was grounded in the identification of the recurring topics and themes that emerged from the data. These initial topics were further analysed to identify sub-topics which, once identified, informed further data analysis (Muthukrishna 2006). The next stage involved developing patterns of relationships between the categories identified through the coding leading to an understanding of the complex links between the beliefs, experiences, and perspectives of the participants. Validity was enhanced through asking participants to revisit their own constructions.

The Findings

What emerged in the research were multiple layers of meanings. Far from being mutually exclusive the social and the functional aspects of the manner in which learners viewed their literacy frequently impacted on each other. Above these constructions of literacy was an identification of literacy acquisition as an individual journey, tempered by cultural and social factors which often travelled in parallel with the learners' own sense of adjustment to Australian society and their emerging sense of self. These multiple meanings are explored here.

Functional English Language Skills

At a superficial level a particularly strong sense of meaning emerges in relation to the English language skills students strive to acquire, and in particular their confidence and ability to read and write. The two statements below typically express the understanding which many students held that English language and literacy skills are essential in order for them to have access to the opportunities afforded to members of Australian society within the context of employment, further study and social discourse.

English is necessary for speaking to neighbours, for reading things like letters, letters from Centrelink, bills many things, getting a job, talking with my child's teacher. These things we need English for

If we want to do another course, like me I want to do a childcare course. We need English for this (the childcare course). We need to learn how to write.

Similar statements made by other students supported educational rhetoric which emphasized reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar skills indicative of the functional approach of the AMEP program. It is interesting therefore to hear the following statements which indicate some of the challenges concerning this group of learners in the context of what they identify as their literacy practices outside of the school environment. The statements introduce a level of complexity to the aforementioned linear arrangement between functional literacy acquisition and social integration.

When I get home my bag I leave by the door and pick up the next day. I do not open.

Writing it is hard but I do not practice, I don't know why.

We do not read like you do for pleasure. The paper we do not read, it is not part of our culture.

The statements above indicate a common pattern amongst many who are learning literacy for the first time in terms of their express lack of English literacy use in their broader social and out of class activities. This is not uncommon for poorly educated people from developing countries. As alluded to above reading and writing may be viewed as socially constructed literacy events. To conclude however, that the statements made above signify a lack of effort or conscientiousness on the part of these participants, paints a too simplistic understanding of the complexity of cultural change being experienced by learners.

In order to understand the divide between what may be referred to as the broader engagement of class based literacy in the lives of students and their everyday literacy practices it is useful to go to a deeper level and to view literacy not simply as a skill, or a social practice but, as indicated in the theoretical section above, as a journey tied to constructs of meaning and identity.

Learning, literacy and journey

Within the context of a transforming cultural identity and the social vulnerability of students the following statements are especially poignant. They present specific examples of the wider meaningfulness of a literacy program in terms of developing a sense of identity applicable to the cultural world of the learner.

> We know we have a long way to go. A very long way to go. It is our dream to write English and get a good job. But that is very far in the future. You just teach us what we need to teach. Someday we will get there

> I came through to B. and the people I know are all in Melbourne and I am living in B. I don't know what can I do, it was too hard in my life… I couldn't speak English … now I keep myself busy learning more to get there very quickly [to speak and write competently]. It is very difficult to get there.

> Sometimes I get to class a little bit late. But the English is our future. From the other language English is the best. But it is very difficult to get there.

These statements reveal a sense of journey, a sense of progressing to some level of equilibrium marked through an understanding of English and English literacy and thereby the creation of a new life. They also reveal a sense of ownership and responsibility over that journey not as one of acquiring skills but one of acquiring a sense of meaning in the wider society.

In terms of meaning however the journey towards learning is frequently a contested one where the institutional discourse makes the rules regarding what is to be learnt, how it should be learnt and the value of that learning. These rules also extend to defining

literacy itself. If we return to the statements above concerning the out of school literacy practices of the students, what is collectively significant about these statements is not just what is being said but also what is not said.

My observations made through informally conversing with students indicate that the use of literacy out of school, although not extensive, does occur, predominantly in reference to the reading of religious texts such as the Bible. Students also read books to and with their young children and frequently text each other or members of their own community in English. In other words learners utilise their learning of English literacy in their social lives but do not view these uses as significant literacy practices. This was found to be a common discursive absence in the responses of the participants of this research project aligned with a frequent mismatch between insitutional priorities based on the acquisition of functional skills and the cultural lives of the students based on negotiating and navigating a cultural landscape very different from that espoused in class based literacy.

In other words in constructing literacy in ideological terms we are in danger of missing the relevancy of literacy for our learners in the context of their everyday activities and the broader relevancy of their participation in a literacy class. To overcome these insitutionally defined parameters the pre-literate learner's participation needs to be viewed from a perspective which views their participation in terms of a broader cultural journey.

The cultural context of learners

Contextualising learners participation in a literacy course as one aspect of a broader cultural journey reveals a complexity of cultural meanings, beyond the acquisition of literacy, that engages the lives of students and impacts upon their life. The following statements, of which variations were frequently produced and reproduced by the participants, show something of this complexity and the cultural challenges they face.

> I want my children to succeed in Australia and not forget who they are and where they have come from.

> I need to be quiet. I don't understand this country. If I do something I might do the wrong thing. First we must understand this country. This is why I don't say very much. I want to understand. Then we can know if we do the right thing.

The statements above bring to focus aspects of intense significance for learners both in terms of their understanding and feelings of cultural difference and concurrently their role in a very new cultural environment. What is notable about these comments is the diversity of topics participants expressed in terms of the cultural challenges they experienced. These challenges range from the use of money to relationships with authoritarian structures such as the police. What connects these experiences is a strong focus of reflecting on and learning about oneself while engaging in a wider cultural landscape.

In the lives of the pre-literate refugees who were the participants of this study the literacy program potentially ameliorated the cultural challenges in their life through providing a safe environment to explore the meanings that mattered to them, inclusive of, but not confined to those associated with literacy. The statements below locate this wider significance of the adult ESL class for this group of learners in terms of facilitating this emerging sense of social identity. They serve to showcase this direct interface between identity and engagement with an ESL class.

> When that woman from human rights came and asked us about our experiences I felt very good because I know someone can help us. I pray someone can help us.

> You know, with that man when he taught us. I learn so much about Centrelink and money and about payments. I learn about forms. This was good. I need this information.

Indeed it appears to be this juxtaposition between a student's transforming sense of identity and their participation in the program which enhances the meaningfulness of their participation. It points to the need of tailoring classes to the emerging identities of

students inclusive, but not reduced to their emerging literate identities. It also points to the value of enabling students to claim ownership over their learning as part of a wider cultural journey of social belonging in mainstream soceity.

This sense of literacy program participation as an aspect of a broader cultural journey is an incredibly powerful one as the following two statements indicate.

> When I first learn I feel very small. Like I cannot do anything, I have no confidence so I cannot learn. But now, now I think better of myself. I can learn because I think myself better now. I have a place in this society.

> I need to be told that I can do things that people believe in me. Being told that my writing is no good. This does not help me. We know this already. We need more than this. We need to have confidence in ourselves.

These latter statements reveal that a literacy program can have a huge bearing, both in a positive and a negative sense, on the lives of learners. Although we, as teachers, administrators or managers, may think of our roles as one of providing literacy instruction within an English speaking context our learners possibly view it as far more than that. Unless we recognise this we potentially not only deprive learners of ownership over their own learning but fail to recognise the broader gains they make in the context of their cultural journey arguably at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

Discussion

In this paper literacy is contextualised through learner's emerging and transforming selves. Such a positioning offers a unique and different perspective to literacy teaching and learning in the adult ESL classroom aligned with the position of Gomez that human beings are diverse and multidimensional rather than linear and simplistic.

Aligned with the theoretical framework of meaningful participation it was contended that the manner in which literacy is presented can act as a space for learners to examine their realities and explore and express their own identity constructions. Likewise it can also potentially impact negatively on learners' emerging sense of self through reproducing the

dominant social discourse and denying difference (Cooke, 2008). It is contended that it is acknowledging and understanding this process of emerging identity, and reconciling this process with the multiple meanings of ESL literacy programs, which creates the space for participation to be made more engaging for learners.

Implications for the delivery of literacy programs in the pre-literate classroom.

The orientation of the AMEP program towards the acquisition of functional skills does not expressly acknowledge difference. Nor does it acknowledge the importance of connecting literacy with learners' lives (Kral and Schwab, 2003). Arguably the lack of recognition of the cultural challenges in the acquisition of literacy does little to enable learners to understand themselves, their experiences and their roles within a very different cultural landscape from their own homeland. Not including identity concepts within literacy programs is both a pedagogical and social silence which ignores the importance for learners to rethink and reflect upon their own sense of self within a safe and secure environment. This is particularly important given the emerging sense of identity of learners and the potentially fragile nature of their own sense of self. It is also a serious omission within the context that literacy programs are often a key gateway for students to understand the cultural landscape and the challenges they face. Reducing literacy to the acquisition of skills, such as in the AMEP English language curriculum, limits the participants' own sense of emerging literate identity to values concomitant with the institutional discourse itself rather than the values in their own lives.

Given the powerful and pervasive neo-liberal discourse which frames literacy delivery to preliterate refugee learners it may be asked however, what, if anything, can and should be done about this situation. After all the global trend towards greater economic transnationalism is likely to put greater pressure on governments to frame teaching in terms of measurable economic outcomes. Through understanding the prevailing ideology which we work under it becomes possible to understand its limitations and thereby create a shared space of alternative viewpoints. Through focusing on constructions of identity, and not simply constructions of workplace skills we can begin to ask much more

informed questions regarding the effectiveness of the programs we deliver, design or administer from the perspective of our students rather than government departments. In the present complex society it may be time to reframe literacy programs, particularly the AMEP English language program, in terms of multiple ideologies in order to acknowledge emerging identities and enable those on the margins to develop their own understanding of themselves in their new society.

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