

Editorial

KEIKO YASUKAWA AND STEPHEN BLACK

The research articles in this issue examine literacy and numeracy practices in and for work. Each paper asks different questions and utilises different lenses for examining the interaction of literacy and numeracy with work and learning, but together they illustrate the significance of generating rich descriptions of literacy and numeracy activities through ethnographic style approaches.

In the first article, Zoe Nikolaidou investigates the literacy practices of a warehouse employee, Derry, who is concurrently working and studying to gain a vocational qualification. The author uses activity theory to describe Derry's workplace as one activity system, and his endeavours to obtain a qualification as another activity system. She identifies Derry's Portfolio as a 'boundary object' between the two activity systems, and this is where Derry's literacy learning takes place. The author shows that the creation of the Portfolio becomes a process of recontextualising the texts that Derry uses in the workplace into something that has new significance in his efforts to obtain the qualification. Thus the literacy practices afforded by the boundary object play a key role in building connections between two otherwise parallel activity systems.

Chris Holland's paper focuses on three trades course apprentices in glass and joinery factories in New Zealand. The author's interest is the influence of employers' and apprentices' perceptions of the significance of apprentices coming from a 'trades' family on the kinds of learning experienced by the apprentices. The author found that employers expected that having a trades family background was advantageous for apprentices; they found it easier to work with 'someone like us' compared with someone who initially did not know how to fit into the culture of the trades. However, succeeding in an apprenticeship also involves successful learning off the job in a formal vocational course, and in this learning the author found that having a trades family background was not necessarily an advantage. Some apprentices, however, enter an apprenticeship with neither the cultural capital of a trades background nor that needed in the formal learning environment. While not claiming to be conclusive, the author posits some possible approaches that could support apprentices who are navigating across the disconnect between workplace learning and formal learning.

The third article takes us to female micro-credit clients in Nicaragua. The author, Sonja Beeli-Zimmermann, bases her observations and descriptions of the numeracy practices of self-employed women in the informal sector. The women participate in short workshops delivered by the NGO which provides micro-finance to assist them in developing a small

business. These workshops focus on the learning of specific financial skills including strategies for bookkeeping and saving. The author provides descriptions of the numeracy practices of the street vendors that show a wide repertoire of mathematical skills, not only related to numbers and calculations, but also the use of patterns and in some cases data and chance. Some of the practices, the author finds, can be traced to what was taught in the workshops that the women participated in, but other skills taught in the workshops are forgotten or ignored. This is particularly the case where skills taught are not connected to the women's prior and existing practices in their work contexts and also in their family and other community contexts.

The three articles, studying literacy and numeracy practices in and for work in different contexts through different lenses, share the need to make connections between the formal learning and knowledge, and the informal learning and knowledge of the learners. Nikolaidou's study shows that the Portfolio required by the formal course was a boundary object that mediated the learner's workplace knowledge and the formal learning in the course. Holland discusses mentoring as a possible approach to support apprentices' efforts to integrate learning from the workplace with learning in the formal learning setting. Beeli-Zimmermann, while not making any specific suggestions, cautions against programs that are designed to improve numeracy and other skills without taking into account the rich informal knowledge already possessed by the learner groups.

This issue has a final Refractions article from Louise Dow. The author provides a critical reflection of the literacy aspects of educational change in Australia's far north Queensland after experiencing teaching in a 'SRA Direct Instruction' program in a Cape York school. In her paper, the author examines the discomfort she felt with the Direct Instruction method through a close examination of the writings of a leading advocate of changes to indigenous education and welfare, Noel Pearson, in which he raises questions about critical literacy and the kind of world this form of education prepares children for. While the author's experiences and reflections pertain to literacy teaching in school, and while Direct Instruction is a particular method of basic skills training, we suggest that the questions and concerns expressed by the author are not misplaced in relation to some of the ways in which adult literacy and numeracy teaching is approached. Although the socio-cultural view of literacy and numeracy that is foregrounded in this Journal has been developed in the research arena for more than two decades now, its penetration into policy discourses and classroom practice is arguably still limited. There are strong advocates for the Direct Instruction methods, both in the national media and in some formal education agencies, and Dow's article provides a powerful reminder of the potential limitations of this 'back to basics' discourse.