

LITERACY & NUMERACY
STUDIES

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(Editors)

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EDITORIAL

ROSIE WICKERT

Readers of *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* will be familiar with the editorial policy which aims ‘to promote scholarship and critical analysis of policy and practices concerning the many complex ways that adult literacy and numeracy are implicated in adult life’.

Normally this is achieved through the publication of papers which have been blind reviewed in the usual way. However, *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* is not just a refereed journal (one of the very few dedicated to adult literacy and numeracy), its eighteen volumes also chronicle the development of this important area of work over the last twenty years of its presence in Australia and elsewhere.

This documentary capacity of the journal takes priority on occasion over the adherence to its strict referencing practices. This special issue of the journal is an example of the editors’ concern to enable this documentary role to occur. The writer of the main paper published here is Dr. Leslie Limage, well known to many readers as the key driver of UNESCO’s stance on literacy and basic education. Her widely known identification with this program means that independent blind refereeing of her paper is impossible – as she has indeed discovered elsewhere.

A snapshot of Leslie Limage’s career provides an important context for her concerns. Her doctorate in 1975 on adult literacy policies and programs probably made her the first person in the world to have earned a doctorate focused on this topic. Prior to joining UNESCO in 1983 she worked on language and literacy policy for OECD-CERI (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation). From 1983 to 2006 she held positions at various levels of UNESCO’s Education Sector in Paris as a Program Specialist in all aspects of basic education from early childhood to adult literacy, including, importantly, Coordinator for the 1990 UN International Literacy Year. As she says in her paper in this edition, she has been involved at a policy and program level, worldwide, in children’s and adult literacy at all levels throughout her adult life.

Limage’s account is an important addition to the relatively small number of what I have referred to as ‘stories of actors involved in policy struggles’ (Wickert 2001) or what various contributors to Yeatman’s 1998 volume *Activism and the Policy Process* term ‘insider policy activism’. This is generally interpreted to mean activism ‘inside’ government policy machinery. The role of UNESCO in public policy processes is an interesting

question that beckons further debate. For now, I am assuming that the insider role in the bureaucracy of the United Nations is not unlike that of state agencies.

Paul Dugdale, a contributor to Yeatman's collection, is interested in the 'ethics of policy activism inside government' and of what Yeatman interprets as the 'the peculiar ethical discipline and passion of insider activism' (p.14). Dugdale notes that there are 'constraints on the activities of employees of government agencies which have implications for what aspects of policy activism they can pursue' (p.111). Ignoring these constraints can lead to exclusion in various ways. Notwithstanding, again as pointed out by Dugdale, insider policy activists have two important 'technologies' or 'power tools' inaccessible to outsider activists: 'the discernment of opportunities or 'issues' in contemporary debates, and the practical mapping of a path through the policy process ... knowing how to frame policy statements so they actually make a positive difference' (p.115). Limage's account provides a case study of both the ethical dimensions and constraints, as well as the pragmatic practical possibilities of insider activism. Dugdale conceptualises this as: the turning of 'lofty remits' to 'practical action', as Lo Bianco observes in his commentary piece later in this volume.

Although we see ample evidence in Limage's account of her use of the 'technologies' available to insider activists, it is the ethical dimension that dominates her concerns. Some may argue that Limage's conflicts are driven by an ethical commitment to her profession (Education) and clearly this is an important motivator for her. However, what comes across so strongly is her sense of deep disappointment at what she perceives to be the loss of the organisation's commitment to the traditional ethics and professionalism of bureaucratic responsibility and accountability.

Inevitably, as with any personal account of historical events, particularly those subject to the micro-politics of large organisations, there will be other, contesting, narratives of what happened during the period in UNESCO covered in Limage's paper. Her analysis does not necessarily reflect the views of the editors; rather, it reflects our concern to ensure that her account is available for interested readers and further analysis.

If there is to be debate about these events, then the editors welcome contribution to such debate – which we will publish in the Refractions section of our regular editions. We developed the Refractions section in recognition that adult literacy and numeracy are deeply enmeshed with politics, and this section offers the opportunity for contributors who may not seek independent refereeing of their work, to publish more rhetorical and controversial pieces likely to interest our readers.

Knowing that controversy can undermine the capacity of the actors involved in controversy to be heard, we invited Professor Joseph Lo Bianco to write a piece to provide a commentary on Leslie's paper. Many of our

readers will be aware, not only of Professor Lo Bianco's activism in getting adult literacy recognised as an important policy issue in Australia, but also his work with UNESCO. He is, therefore, a well informed commentator whose observation that, 'in a complex multilateral and linguistic agency like UNESCO, politicisation runs deep, the consequences are profound and the work of committed individuals ultimately crucial' (p35), is particularly pertinent to Limage's story.

References

- Dugdale, Paul (1998) The Art of Insider Activism, in Yeatman, Anna, ed (1998) *Activism and the Policy Process*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney. pp.104-121.
- Wickert, Rosie (2001) Politics, Activism and the Process of Policy Production: Adult literacy in Australia, in Lo Bianco, Joseph and Wickert, Rosie, eds, *Australian Policy Activism for Language and Literacy*, Language Australia Publications, Melbourne. pp.75-91.
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