

“He was learning to read, but he wasn’t learning to live”: Socially inclusive learning in a community setting

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Abstract

People with mental health problems, learning difficulties and poor literacy and numeracy are at risk of social exclusion, including homelessness. They are often disconnected from the formal education systems, with few opportunities for education and employment. Academic research has demonstrated a link between literacy and numeracy and social connectedness, however the pathways to enact this are not well understood. This paper presents insights into how a community based adult literacy program in Brisbane, Australia provides a successful model of socially inclusive learning. The paper is based on a 12-month action research project conducted by the Queensland University of Technology in conjunction with Anglicare Southern Queensland 2013-2014. The methodology for the project was qualitative in nature, involving participant observation of lessons, and semi-structured interviews with former and present students, volunteer tutors and the teacher. The central research focus was how literacy education can act as an instrument of social connection to the community.

Introduction

People with mental health problems, learning difficulties and poor literacy and numeracy are at risk of social exclusion, including homelessness. They are often disconnected from the mainstream educational system (Kliwer, Bicklen & Kasa-Hendrickson 2006), with few opportunities for employment. The options available for

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people in Australia from disadvantaged backgrounds and living with mental health issues and/or other disabilities who want to improve their literacy are limited. When people engage with mainstream education providers such as the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) network, they may be required to follow curricula that are inflexible and not adapted to their needs, or their capacity to handle stress. This article provides supporting evidence for the paradigm that community based literacy programs can improve social connections and engagement.

In 2009, Balatti, Black and Falk proposed a model for adult literacy based upon the concept of social capital, focussing on the relationships between literacy skills and engagement in society. They highlight that:

A social capital perspective necessitates conceptualizing adult literacy and numeracy education and training as an intervention embedded in wider spheres of activity, including the sociocultural and economic activity of the community in which the training is taking place. It also requires viewing the learner as a member of networks (Balatti et al 2009:7).

At the same time Balatti et al state that ‘to date, there has been no comprehensive “how to” guide on designing adult literacy and numeracy learning experiences within a social capital framework’ (2009: 10). There has also been limited research into the effectiveness of community based literacy programs.

In 2013-14 Anglicare Southern Queensland (ASQ) funded the School of Public Health and Social Work in the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), to explore the pedagogy and practice of a small community-based literacy group based in West End, an inner city suburb of Brisbane. Anecdotally, the program had been noted to have successfully helped people make big improvements in their social engagement. Anglicare were interested in finding out what characteristics of the program made it successful. What emerged from the study was the documentation of a model of that co-locates literacy learning with a community-based social service, promoting people’s independence and autonomy¹.

Discourses of literacy

The understanding that literacy and numeracy provides a background for engagement with the economy and inclusion in the community has underpinned literacy policy in Australia in one form

or the other since the 1970s, perhaps even since the arrival of displaced persons after World War II (see for example, Brock 2001, Lo Bianco & Wickert 2001, Castleton & McDonald 2002). For this reason, government policy around literacy and numeracy in Australia revolves about the policies of education of children, literacy for migrants and adult literacy for employment. However, many people with disabilities and mental health issues are effectively excluded from the employment market and from mainstream education. This then makes them vulnerable to becoming *invisible* to society. Community-based education can work against this risk.

There are two overarching directions in literacy theory that influence literacy learning practice. These reflect the dialectic in intellectual life between realist or positivist epistemologies and interpretivism or constructivism (Freebody & Luke 2003:54-56). The realist position can be described broadly as ‘functional’, and reflects a broad consensus of community views of why people need to be able to read and write. It runs parallel to a neo-liberal view of education as something that prepares you for a working life and a life of ‘self-reliance’. The alternative direction tries to unsettle the assumptions that underlie this discourse, and to open up the discussion to consider the marginalised aspects of literacy itself and of the marginalised people who are affected by a lack of socially valued literacy skills.

Both functionalist and interpretivist perspectives are relevant to community-based literacy learning, and create a dialectic that can be valuable in determining future directions. Both perspectives however, have to be subjected to critique. While the functional approach lays too heavy an emphasis on employability, the alternative interpretivist perspective can disappear into the mists of vagueness and appear non-pragmatic. What is common to both, however, is the view that literacy has a liberating potential in a highly technological society, although the view of what that means may be different:

‘Functional literacy...relates more to levels of skills that individuals or populations need in order to complete some specified real-life reading task. For example, in the area of human welfare, reading skills are variously required to realise outcomes with respect to job, transportation, and economic necessities. Similarly, these skills are also used to obtain food, shelter, clothing, health care, etc. Thus, functional literacy is defined here as reading (comprehending printed materials) to

obtain, retain, or maximize an end or goal which has “survival” value’ (Kirsch & Guthrie 1977-78:490).

Reading and writing underpins not just the sophisticated task of reading our culture, but of the functional tasks of taking a bus, knowing how much something costs and finding it in the supermarket, getting a driving license, reading a tenancy lease, looking at apartment advertisements and keeping meeting times. It is obvious that exclusion from literacy skills is in itself exclusion from society.

However, as early as the 1970s Kirsch and Guthrie reviewed the measurement tools around functional literacy, and found significant issues with the functional approach. The emphasis on verbal and written skills overlooks the importance of other practical competencies, to the extent that societies change, people who may be classified as literate at one time and in one society may not be so at another time or in another society (Kirsch & Guthrie 1977-78:492).

In this context, a critical approach to functional literacy is required. If people are disadvantaged in finding and keeping work, then people without literacy are doubly disadvantaged. As the number of jobs decline, especially low-skilled work, and the reading and writing requirements of simple jobs increase, people without literacy find themselves increasingly isolated (for discussions on the changing labour market see Gorz 1999, Deacon 2002, Peel 2003:114-140, and for the impact of this on people without good literacy see Motakef 2007). It will be important to reframe literacy in a way that respects the positive direction of social inclusiveness while guarding against the further cultural wounding of people who have learning impairments and other disadvantages by over-emphasising the social status of work and self-sufficiency. In short, there are other reasons to be literate than to get a paid job.

While functional literacy reflects positive engagement and inclusion in the community, it is ‘outer-directed’ and insensitive to the literacies that people create and require to develop satisfying inner lives. One of the most significant reasons to be literate is to gain a greater degree of autonomy and control over one’s life, and this is especially significant if the events of one’s life, such as mental health crises, have robbed them of self-esteem and robust self-image. It is important to recognise the forms of literacy practice that people develop to help them cope with and relate to the world. In pedagogical terms this means to recognise multi-literacies that incorporate multimodal aspects of communication and the changing

context of language use (Kress 2003). In the multi-literacy approach, informed by interpretivism and constructivism, people are not merely users of language, but also its creators (Kress 2003). This implies that people create ways to express themselves that are unique or certainly individual, and that literacy can be a dialogue, sometimes radical, between the person and that person's community. True inclusion in this sense requires a two-way understanding, and not simply an individual's compliance with dominant societal norms.

Methodology

The literacy group that was the focus of the study is known as the Reading and Writing Group (RAW). It is a program within the structure of the community agency A Place to Belong, located in West End, Brisbane, which helps people with mental health issues and other disabilities to connect or reconnect to their communities. A Place to Belong was born out of the de-institutionalisation movement and was a response to the needs of people who were relocated from mental hospitals to the community in the 1990s (Barringham & Barringham 2002).

The methodology for the research project was qualitative, involving participant observation of lessons, and semi-structured interviews with former and present students, volunteer tutors and the lead teacher. The core research practice was a series of observation sessions of lessons in two sites carried out from July to September 2013. In these sessions each week, participant observer researchers sat in on the introduction to the class, one-on-one teaching sessions and the group based learning sessions. The key focus of the observations was on interactions between students, teacher and tutors, and implementation of the learning goals that were articulated at the beginning of each class. In-depth written notes and observer reflections were also recorded.

Through the months of observation in 2013 (July to September), 15 classes were observed. The total number of students who engaged in classes was 17, however, no students attended all classes. Two students attended six classes and two students only one. The median attendance figure was two classes. The largest class had seven students and the smallest only one. The average number of students was four. People had been students for a variety of periods. The longest enrolment period was over three years, and two students enrolled for the first time during the course of observation.

Alongside the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher, with two teaching support staff, a number of tutors and 20 present and past students. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the text of these conversations drawing out the principal themes, which were then explored using the recorded observational data. Reflecting the participant methodology, the researchers recorded their observations and thoughts as they went, and reflected on them as part of the analysis. They then took the preliminary findings back to the teachers, tutors and students to test the validity of the analysis, which is a technique often used in social action research to ensure that the findings are relevant and can be usefully incorporated into practice (Selener 1997).

Each of the students observed have a disability or disadvantage, although there was no consistency in these disabilities; for example, one person had cerebral palsy and travelled in a wheelchair, and also had facility with technology; another person had held down social work positions before succumbing to a mental illness, and technology of any kind caused her anxiety; four people had some kind of intellectual disability. The only common denominator is that they have aspects of literacy and numeracy that they want to work through and they should also be registered with the state department of disability services.

To allow the strengths of the person to determine the goals of learning, students in RAW are not classified according to diagnostic criteria around mental health or intellectual ability. The strategy adopted is to allow the intended literacies of the person to emerge over a period of time (in the first case, usually over the first four weeks of the class (classes continue for as long as the student wishes to attend), and it may therefore take a number of weeks before a clear program of learning emerges.

In the following section a typical class is described. The class is typical because it contained an average number of students, four, with a diversity of needs, and had the regular teacher and tutors present. The description incorporates the stories of four RAW students, Alvin, Gabriel, Gavin (an ex-student) and Grace, chosen because they clearly illustrate the interrelationships of literacy and social connectedness. In the stories that follow pseudonyms have been adopted unless students have expressed the desire to use their own names.

A description of a typical RAW class in Brisbane

The class is held in a community house in West End, Brisbane, frequented by a number of community groups and also occupied by the agency A Place to Belong. The main meeting room is in the centre of the house, and initial meetings of all students, tutors and the principal teacher happen there. The structure of the morning begins with a 45 minute group introduction facilitated by the principal teacher, which is attended by tutors and students. In this introduction the class participates in warm-up exercises and discusses individually what each student will be working on. In this session, students are also paired with tutors. Attendance by students and tutors is not mandated, and so can be uncertain, in which case learning pairs sometimes need to be adjusted. Wherever possible, tutors and students stay in the same learning pair for the learning semester.

After the initial session students then separate out with their tutors and find other places in the building or adjoining garden to meet and continue one-on-one learning sessions, which last also for 45 minutes. These are broken by morning tea, which is held together. Students and tutors then return to their second learning session. The first session concentrates on the learning of specific literacy skills. The second is focused on the identified goals and interests of the person, for example in telling and writing their story.

The mid-July morning is cold by Brisbane standards and there is a slow start to the 9am session with people drifting in and out. The class starts with three students and three tutors who are volunteers. The teacher begins a warm-up exercise that consists of clapping hands together. In this game the first person claps in a certain pattern and the next person has to repeat that and add their own pattern, and so on. It is a memory exercise that the teacher describes as being about working as a large group. He follows this up with an exercise in pairs which he demonstrates using Bill; one person makes a motion and the other has to mirror them as they do it. The first try is a bit awkward as Bill is clearly embarrassed, but Alvin gets the class going with the exercise. It takes only a few minutes and then the teacher debriefs the exercise. He explains that the origin of reading and writing is copying. There is a high level of attention from the class at this stage.

At this point John arrives. He is an ex-student who continues to turn up each week. Today he is dressed as a punk, and stamps his feet

to get attention. He is a big man and it is hard to ignore him but the teacher continues. He tells students and tutors that in this period of learning (this is the second week of the four week class cycle) we should expect to see an improvement even if we cannot expect to be able to read. He goes around the class setting tasks but tells the tutors that they are free to change the goals and tasks as they see fit. Before breaking up into learning teams of tutor and student they play another game, which is a simple game of *'What season do you like?'*. John comes in again and starts dancing and saying that he likes the boy group *One Direction*. This gets a chuckle from some of the other students.

The paired-up students and tutors find spaces to work, some inside, others outside, to work in the sunshine at tables dotted around the front yard. One learning pair is set an assisted reading task around bodybuilding including different types of lifts. The student, Marty, is quite well-built and is keen on bodybuilding, which is why this reading topic is chosen. Another two tutors are assigned to Bill to do spelling and maybe later some maths. Alvin is working in the computer room with a tutor. While this allocation of lessons is going on John keeps dancing through the class and talking to himself. Gabriel arrives at this stage, having come from the north side of Brisbane by train. He is sometimes delayed by the nurses who give him his injections for his diabetes. Gabriel begins a spontaneous conversation with the teacher, as the other students are going off to their groups. *'What makes a great house?'* he asks and then answers himself: *'Where people don't treat you like you are handicapped, where you can do what you want. Any house should allow you to make choices'*. The teacher gives the tutor a new word *'residential'* to teach to Gabriel. His learning team consists of his tutor and a volunteer who acts as Gabriel's ally to help him do various things in the community, such as use public transport. They retire outside under the tree.

Gabriel lives in a supported accommodation group home. He has been attending RAW for two and a half years. He doesn't like his accommodation. It's like a prison in your own home, he says. *'The gates are always locked! You've got to ask somebody to open them and then wait for them.'*

Although he is not physically confined, he *feels* confined by this process. He also wants to keep a pet bird and do his own cooking and shopping. Gabriel has some serious health conditions and has

trouble understanding how to care for those conditions. Because of this his support workers in the group home have indicated that they do not believe he would be able to live independently. However, it remains his consistently repeated desire. He is now also working with the teacher to express his desire to live independently. The following is a quote from his story, written by himself as part of his learning program:

Nobody Owns People

By Gabriel

Nobody owns people.
 Some people have got to be reminded.
 You can't own a person.
 We are free.
 We're free as birds,
 just no wings
 and no feathers.
 There's nothing stopping us from
 walking. Not a thing.
 That's why we've got legs.
 We've got to walk
 somewhere.
 I walk anywhere.
 I hope
 I make it home.

Gabriel says, *'They baby you. Treat you like you're handicapped. I want to do my own washing. Shopping. Don't talk to me like a baby'*. The teacher then explains why he is suggesting that Gabriel write letters – it will help him stand up for his rights by expressing his needs clearly and demonstrating that he knows what he is talking about to the accommodation support workers who right now are not listening to him. Gabriel's emerging literacy has a political use, to aid him to take back the power that his writing demonstrates he feels he has lost, or perhaps never had. The teacher

gives the tutor a task, to determine a list of things for the student to do himself, and list of words to describe a good place.

In another learning group inside the house the teacher and Alvin are doing some role-plays, firstly about a ticket inspector telling a passenger to get their feet off the seat. Alvin plays the inspector and has to tell the teacher, the passenger, to get his feet off the seat. Alvin then suggests a second activity, where he plays a drunken person being approached by a policeman. The policeman asks the drunk person for their address, but the drunken person isn't able to say it. Once the teacher and Alvin are out of the role-play they talk about the need for him to have his address handy and to be able to say what it is. Alvin has difficulty in framing his spoken words, so he tries singing his address on the teacher's suggestion, which makes it come more fluently. Both role-plays have relevance for the real world, as the first one was used to reflect on a time when the student didn't have a train ticket and got in trouble. The other objective is for the student to practice forming whole sentences. Alvin clearly enjoys role-play. He is very animated and plays his part convincingly. After the role-play Alvin and the teacher go to make Alvin a laminated ID card on the computer, with his address that he can keep in his wallet.

'*Free coffee*' and '*Meet good people*' is what Alvin says when asked by the researchers why he comes to RAW. This certainly reflects things Alvin values in life, being an extremely social person, well-known to many in his community. If you dig a little deeper, however, it is clear that Alvin is committed to improving his literacy skills. Talking to people is definitely one of his strengths, and communication is a priority area Alvin has wanted to work on. His speech is dyspraxic (Edwards 1973), meaning that things he says regularly (like '*you're the best worker*') are very clear, whereas if he wants to communicate something novel he may experience difficulty with forming the words clearly.

Using hand signals, body movements and role-play has significantly helped to guide and prompt Alvin's speech. This has been a useful way of encouraging him to speak in sentences and participate more fully in communicating with others. For Alvin, employment is a goal, but equally importantly, his success at learning to write his own name after a long struggle has contributed to his self-esteem. His pursuit of literacy has been as much about competency in social communication as instrumental goals like employment.

Grace's story is quite different. In her daily life she deals with formal thought disorder (Radanovic, de Sousa Valiengo, Gattaz & Forlenza 2012), which means that her thinking and speech can be tangential or fragmented and difficult to follow. She describes hearing voices and seeing things that other people do not hear or see, and this can be unsettling for people who don't realise or understand what is happening. Grace joined the RAW after identifying a personal learning goal of wanting to be able to log on to a computer. Her use of the computer resulted in a communication breakthrough because it allowed her to partially structure and communicate her thoughts. After a long process of discovery supported by teacher and tutors she was able to write up her story and express her goals for '*sustainability*' and '*well-being*'. This story formed the basis of a successful application for funding which has begun a process of her seeking to leave the hostel that she loathes, to live independently with support. So, while her literate practice can be viewed as a form of expression that possibly serves as a form of structuring a disordered universe, a literacy of great significance for her experience of mental health, it has had a functional outcome in attracting funding that may see her gain in independence and power.

Similarly, another former student with the West End group, Gavin, spent most of his early life living in a hostel. When Gavin joined the RAW he was being bullied at the hostel and controlled by an abusive hostel manager. However, he was under clinical care after a breakdown and his clinical manager was very concerned that any change of living arrangements would lead to serious problems. Every time that he experienced a bullying episode, the teacher encouraged him to write about it and to submit it to the clinical manager until she became convinced too that a change in living arrangements was necessary. Gavin organised a meeting of a number of stakeholders and conducted a meeting where he presented himself well. They reached a decision to refer him to an independent living program, and through his work with the program demonstrated his ability to support himself. Ultimately he was able to move to an independent unit.

Gavin expressed in interview that he has had a huge jump in his happiness through this move. One of the things that has happened is that he is now seeing much more of his aunt and brother who would not visit him in the hostel. He now has family, a sheltered job that he is happy to stay in, his independence and a network. These things

have increased his confidence. The teacher noted that his bodily posture has changed and he is now beginning to provide leadership, by advising friends who want to move out of institutional settings.

Gavin comes occasionally to classes always sporting a brand new T-shirt earned through his own work, and reflecting up-to-date fashion sense. If literacies are inherent in all forms of manmade objects, then Gavin's use of T-shirts is a literate practice (Barthes 1972, Barthes 1983, Eco 1986). When you speak to him about them it is clear that his T-shirts express a found sense of success and self-respect. The teacher reports that he has acquired a valued role as a consultant to others who are in the same position.

The individual morning sessions, as mentioned above, focus on spelling, comprehension and writing skills, and where it is appropriate, these specific functional skills will be linked to the people's life goals. As can be seen above, the teacher is trying to enhance Gabriel's written literacy to be able to frame letters that convincingly express his desire to live independently. These can be used to help him advocate for this outcome with his residential support agency, which is resistant to the idea. As in Gavin's case, this strategy aims to turn people's judgements of Gabriel's capacities around to begin the process of helping him find his own residence. The focus of the literate practice is to empower the individual, but also to change his environment.

After the morning break there is a second session, and in this session the focus moves specifically on building literacy for inclusion in the community, and has a broader focus on engaging the literacy practices of the person. So, for example, because Alvin spends a lot of time meeting and greeting people but lacks social skills such as understanding propriety, he is vulnerable. A lot of the work that is done with Alvin is about survival and understanding how to express himself appropriately through words, but also behaviours and conduct.

The teacher completes the morning work by bringing everyone back into a group session and reviewing the progress made, as well as making goals for the next week's learning. The class is over by about 12:30pm.

What does not appear directly in this depiction of the lesson is the work done outside of the class. This has been indicated in some of the background stories about students. Because there are volunteer tutors and paid support workers who can engage with students' projects for the achievement of their goals in community, the learning

work can be extended. While people are learning literacy skills they are also applying them: so, for example people's life-stories may become applications for grants (as in the case of Gabriel, Grace and Gavin), or people learn social skills that assist in helping them connect with others (Alvin). Some of the problems and issues encountered can be brought back to class where they become material to be worked on and developed.

Reflections on the RAW model

The model of RAW has a triple perspective: two arms of pedagogy and one of social connectedness.

The teacher of RAW expressed the view during one of the research interviews that RAW attempts a pedagogy that is consciously functionalist but also embraces a multi-literacy approach to learning, allowing flexibility in the literacies learned and in the modality of learning.

There is a clear tension in this; on the one hand the learning is designed for students to take on board literacy skills as a technology to help overcome obstacles for their inclusion in society. However, there is also a clear commitment to allowing people to 'tell their stories' and express themselves in ways that they relate to, even if this has no obvious measurable outcome. Certainly much of this work is about 'fitting' people into the community, rather than changing community around the person, but it is clear that the driver of the work is discovery and respect for what the person is identifying through their learning as what they want for a better life.

The research conducted at RAW revealed a perspective on social inclusiveness for people who are marginalised that is more meaningful than an integrationist discourse that equates inclusion with employment (Levitas 2005). The RAW version of inclusion and connection engages with Amartya Sen's and Nussbaum's extremely influential theory of capabilities (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 2011). In this version the person's ability to activate their own agency through resources, knowledge and proximity to useful services is critically important, as is having a broader conception of human capabilities beyond an economic value.

Observation over three months of classes suggested that on one level, what is happening is *not* unusual in teaching people to read and

write. Commonly available textbooks are used, and methods encompass the common pedagogy of literacy classes. Neither is it unusual for people to base their literacy learning on their needs. This after all is characteristic of all adult learning. However, what is unusual in this relationship is that once a person's needs related to their lives in community are determined, there can be a close connection with other workers in the agency who can support them achieve these goals. As an ironic example of this, John, who appears briefly in the description above, was a student of the RAW until it was decided that learning to read and write was actually less important than his need to achieve connection with what he values in community. He left the classes and was connected with support workers of the agency, attracted government funding and is now working on his social connectedness goals. It was said about him by the teacher that: *'He was learning to read, but he wasn't learning to live'*.

Conclusion

These stories and descriptions demonstrate, admittedly with a small group of people, the diverse impacts of literacy learning on the capacity of people to live full, engaged lives and to take back some of the autonomy that they have lost through mental health issues and other disadvantages. What emerges in the connection between literacy and the social world is a definition of social connection that includes: intrinsic motivation; gaining power over one's life (both big and small changes); gaining power and control over one's mental health; the acquisition of valued roles, respectful recognition, voice and self-advocacy; and connection with family and friends.

The opportunity to develop employment or education pathways is also there and was demonstrated by other students whose goal was to find paid work. However, the selected examples in this article have been chosen to demonstrate the aspects of life in community that get lost in a single-minded focus on productivity and employment. The commitment of this community-based learning group is to adjust to and reflect the students' needs, rather than to take them through a set curriculum. This does not mean, however, that there is no pedagogy or curriculum to follow. As the description illustrates the teacher uses conventional frameworks of literacy to teach functional skills. Where there is innovation, however, is in the creative use of literacies that

are already meaningful to students (teaching from what is already known) to assist the learning.

The embedded location of a reading and writing group in an agency that works to facilitate the connection of people with their communities of choice illustrates the point made by Balatti et al (2009), cited above, using the language of ‘social capital’, that there is a disconnect between these two activities in Australia that can be usefully avoided by forging strong partnerships. In this case, this partnership was facilitated by co-location of services. The connection between literacy and the processes of social connectedness, is one of the most interesting findings of this research. The co-location of a literacy program with a qualified teacher and volunteer and professionally trained community workers in the one agency enables a seamless series of interventions that can respond to learning and social needs as they arise. Looking at literacy through both lenses opens up a creative space of multiple connections and possibilities to promote socially inclusive learning.

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EndNote

¹The full report is published as “*He was learning to read, but he wasn’t learning to live*”, and is available on open access from the Queensland University of Technology eprints website, [http://eprints.qut.edu.au/79343/1/CSC3305_RAW_Report - A Place to belong web.pdf](http://eprints.qut.edu.au/79343/1/CSC3305_RAW_Report_-_A_Place_to_belong_web.pdf)

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