LITERACY & NUMERACY STUDIES

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GUEST EDITORIAL

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Against the backdrop of the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression and years of irresponsible neoliberal policies, the debate over literacy continues to rage into the new millennium. This is partly because literacy and numeracy have long been seen as a 'silver bullet' solution for a myriad of economic problems (see Dennis this issue). Following from this, policy makers tend to use literacy and numeracy statistics to justify the development of policies and strategies that are focused on enhancing employability to meet their human capital agendas. Yet, the current crisis only heightens how important educational strategies are that develop global citizens who have the critical literacy, numeracy and language resources for problem-posing and social justice purposes (Luke and Freebody 1999). Given current ideological and material constraints, I suggest that activist educators who wish to intervene in debates about policy in order to create spaces for alternative futures will need to adopt Gramsci's (1992:172) call for a 'pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will'[1].

Clearly, the stereotypical traditional view of literacy and numeracy as simply reading, writing or doing sums to get 'the right answer' diverts attention away from more troubling and complex issues in society to relatively easy problems to solve to do with the nature of the labour force. This deficit perspective, which focuses on individual faults, weaknesses or pathologies as the origin of the problem, fails to locate illiteracy or innumeracy within wider interrelations of culture, power and exploitation (Gee 1991, Lankshear with Lawler 1987). Indeed, recent newspaper stories exploit government statistics and deeply touching personal stories to turn the spotlight of attention on the significant percentage of adults who are deemed in the dominant neo-liberal discourse to be 'functionally illiterate' and how this threatens long-term economic competitiveness. All of this ignores several decades of empirical research – from various theoretical perspectives and target populations – that highlights the value of recognising 'multiple literacies' (Gee 1990, Street 1995) and viewing any form of literacy as 'a social and cultural practice' (Comber and Cormack 1997) that has the potential for empowerment and social change (Luke and Freebody 1997). Importantly, it fails to acknowledge that the transmission belt of teaching basic and functional competencies does not provide sufficient resources for imagining and enacting alternative models and approaches to enduring interrelated economic, environmental and social challenges.

For Gramsci, 'pessimism of the intelligence' is the generative force of social change if it is not decoupled from an 'optimism of the will.' Gramsci's

'pessimism of the intelligence' is based in a critical and realistic understanding of relations of hegemonic governance, power and domination and the prospects for challenging them. However, the second part of his famous phrase offers something more hopeful and encourages us not to fall prey to fatalism. Unfortunately, the collapse of grand narratives that sustained collective political projects of emancipation and social justice has resulted in a loss of direction and political cynicism. In attempting to imagine and enact an alternative vision of the world, a critical literacy and numeracy does not narrowly privilege either the traditional postmodern domain of text or even the micropolitics of the body as a resisting site of desire or affect. This is not just an academic concern or critique of avant-guard high theory or postmodern individualism. All too often, as Black and Yasukawa point out in the last article of this issue, rhetorical claims of new 'paradigms' are not informed by specific and concrete contextualisations. The danger here is that such self-authored calls for resistance or transgression only grow to be materialised in scholarly journals. Rather, as a form of political interventionism, a political project of critical literacy and numeracy is one that is performed through collective and materialist frameworks with attention paid to the dialectical interplay between relations of signification and production (Ebert 1996).

The papers in this issue demonstrate that a re-engagement with collective politics is urgently required. The aim is to develop capacity for revitalised dialogue and interaction between teachers and their respective communities about issues applicable to the field of adult literacy and numeracy, including how best to counter the effects of corporate 'accountability' and the insidious diffusion of the 'audit culture' in education. Such measures are not imposed to improve teacher practice or student learning but rather to change the culture of education to fit a neoliberal agenda.

The relentless push of neoliberalism has diminished the capacity for critical literacies and numeracies to flourish under conditions that promote individualism and social contracts of self-care. As Black and Yasukawa point out, the common ground upon which to act has been hollowed out with the assault, over the past decade, on mechanisms that supported professional learning and research in adult literacy and numeracy. To compound this situation, the reification of accountability and audit regimes informed by neoliberal ideology has resulted in a hegemonic worldview that makes escaping or challenging these conditions extremely difficult. But as the contributors to this issue make clear, one should not fall prey to an over-determined reading of the situation. Activist-educators also hold the 'dangerous memory' of alternative knowledges and possibilities (Giroux 1989: 99).

On this note, the first article by Black provides evidence that resistant identities, 'working the interstices', are indeed possible. Drawing upon previous and continuing research in Australia, Black argues that the resistance of adult basic education (ABE) teachers to a centrally imposed, performance driven audit culture in the vocational education and training (VET) sector is often based in a strategic decision on what rules and expectations to comply with. Picking up on the idea that ABE teachers are not empty vessels who slavishly follow policy, Black states that the interpretations and responses 'seemed to vary', depending upon a range of factors. Despite operating in an environment that emphasizes the deskilling and de-professionalisation of their work, Black provides a compelling account of how ABE teachers shape and re-shape their professional identity individually and collectively in their community of practice.

The second article, by Dennis, explores competing discourses and struggles around what she terms professionalism within a UK policy context – all this as the UK government wields it power by means of *Skills for Life*, a national literacy and numeracy strategy that provides a policy script for a preferred version of professionalism congruent with neoliberal ideals. Neoliberal governance structures that privilege measures of performativity to enhance measurable outcomes via the emergence of audit cultures 'demands a response' but not one she argues that 'has been pre-defined'. Grounded in a small-scale research project with sixteen Adult Language Literacy and Numeracy (ALLN) teachers and managers in ten different organisations, her findings complicate the prescribing and imagining of a shared professionalization. For Dennis, it is important to ask, 'whose interests does it serve'? What is also often overlooked, she argues, is the way in which practitioners contest the meaning of policy through embodied and situated processes of performative fluidity, negotiation, and resistance.

With this in mind, Yasukawa argues in her Refractions piece that qualities of resilience, robustness and imagination are required for the development of activist professionals who are able to publically engage in debates against neoliberal policies. As she points out, neo-liberalism has had significant effects in terms of industrial conditions, contestable funding and competency-based training in the Australian adult literacy and numeracy context. When it comes to politics, Yasukawa argues that teachers have the option of exercising professional agency through what Sachs (2001:157) calls an 'activist identity'. No doubt, this performative and generative act requires resilience to sustain it through periods of patient hard slog in order to build a broad solidarity. Here, I suggest that that resilience is key to maintaining Gramsci's 'optimism of the will.'

The fourth paper in this edition is a timely reminder that pedagogical struggles based in a critical conception of literacy still exist. Although many academics on the postmodern left have abandoned or downplay/dismiss the

liberatory or emancipatory potential of critical pedagogy/popular education, such ongoing praxis taps collective yearnings for alternative worlds based on justice. In particular, Boughton provides empirically grounded insights into a mass literacy campaign in Timor-Leste, which drew both resources and inspiration from Cuba. After the Revolution, the Cuban government embarked on an ambitious and successful national literacy campaign in 1961 and the model has since been exported to a number of countries including Angola, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. However, as Boughton states, literacy campaigns based in a revolutionary or decolonising agenda 'fell into disrepute in the 1990s'. Indeed, with the ideological tide running in favour of market forces, imagining and enacting collective politics is increasingly mocked and maligned, even in the enlightened space of the university (Martin 2007). However, Boughton's research demonstrates that a critical literacy project does not have to rely upon lofty rhetoric or ideals. Rather, it is the product of problem-posing dialogue and material struggle in specific cultural-historical and place-based contexts that must as Freire (1993) argued be constantly 'made and remade' (p. 25).

Under neoliberalism, policies must be justified primarily in terms of their contribution to the economy. To date, such policies in the sphere of education have left a trail of social debris in their wake in terms of degradation, fragmentation, isolation and commodification. As a result, Black and Yasukawa argue 'the field of adult literacy and numeracy in Australia stands at a crossroads'. It is always tempting to try and predict the future or resort to wishing thinking, but there are no crystal balls, silver bullets or magic wands. Rather than engage in speculation about the future direction of the field, Black and Yasukawa argue that the proposal of the Australian Federal government to develop a new National Foundation Skills Strategy offers activist professionals with a policy platform and potential support mechanism for broader socio-economic change. They argue for funding that is not driven solely by the human capital agenda, but which gives attention to the generation of social capital through cross-sectoral partnerships and integrated delivery in VET courses, and to ongoing renewal through continued professional learning of practitioners and partnerships with universities.

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[1] In Joseph Buttigieg's edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, it is stated that Gramsci attributed this phrase to Romain Rolland.