INVITED PAPER (NON-REFERREED)

What we do with words, and what they do with us

Ralf St. Clair*

University of Victoria, Canada

***Corresponding author:** Ralf St. Clair rstclair@uvic.ca

In the thirty years during which I have been involved in literacy work, I have observed a phenomenon that has caused me some concern. There has been an increasing tendency to consider literacy, and therefore the field of literacy education in which we are engaged, in an increasingly restricted form. I do not want to suggest that the late 20th century was a golden age for anything (the haircuts were pretty awful). However, it was the period when Paulo Freire was arguing convincingly that literacy was one of the most essential and human ways in which we shaped the world, Marshall McLuhan was suggesting that the medium is the message and Harvey Graff was developing incisive historical insights into the effects of reading and writing. There was not just optimism about the potential of literacy education, there was an expansive imagination about what it could all mean. There was a feeling that literacy education really, really mattered. My key message in this presentation is that it still does, perhaps even more.

Yet the start of the 21st century has been less motivating and less exciting, in some ways. I've been thinking about why. My tentative conclusion is that we have accepted limitations on our field that perhaps we did not have to accept.

Restriction and elaboration

As educators, one of the aspects of our work that attracts a fair amount of attention is curriculum, and there are many ways of looking at it. Language is a key aspect of many of these approaches. Basil Bernstein (1977), a professor at the Institute of Education in London, brought curriculum and language together explicitly in the idea of codes. He suggested that there are restricted and elaborated codes governing language and knowledge. The *restricted* codes are used locally, like Glaswegian dialect, and work efficiently for everyday life. They

did not, however, easily permit bridging of contexts and engagement with 'big' questions. *Elaborated* codes are more universal and tend to bridge contexts rather than define them. For Bernstein access to these codes was related to the class position of the speaker; working-class people had access to restricted codes, whereas middle-class people also had access to elaborated codes.

The example Bernstein (1977) used to illustrate these ideas was pictures of food. When shown pictures of several foods, all the children in the study grouped them according to what might be eaten together: fish, peas, chips and chicken, carrots, potatoes. However, middle-class kids could group them in a way the working-class kids were far less likely to do: they recognised that peas, carrots and potatoes were vegetables, and fish and chicken were meats. The elaborated code gave these children access to another level of categorisation.

While Bernstein's work has been open to considerable criticism for a sort of language determinism, not to mention the idea that restrictive codes represent an incomplete working-class semantic system (Barbour 1987), I believe that the idea of restricted versus elaborated conceptions of the world is a useful one.

Restricted literacy

If we examine literacy education over the last few years, I believe that there has been a tendency towards a more restricted model. There has been some really excellent work going on around the world, such as the series of practitioner research projects supported by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy and University of Technology Sydney a few years ago (cf. Cameron 2010). However, the overall trend, I suggest, has been towards a narrower understanding of what language generally, and literacy in particular, means.

Part of this has been an increased emphasis on vocational ends for literacy, and the idea that only learning contributing to work has value. In the UK this is especially clear in England, while Scotland has retained a broader approach. It would be silly to say that work does not matter, but it would be equally silly to say it's the only thing that does. One clear indication of this trend is the 2016 incorporation of the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (with a storied history back to 1946) into the Learning and Work Institute.

Contemporary approaches to human capital also tend to reflect very simplistic assumptions about the relationship between people's abilities and productivity. The key assumption, that increased literacy and numeracy skill levels in the population increase GDP, is unproven and problematic. For example, we don't know if it is better to have a few highly skilled people or lots of medium skilled people (at least in economic terms). Yet this simple human capital model underpins many of the initiatives we see.

One of the most interesting, in my view, is the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). This huge international operation is an evolution of the International Adult Literacy Study of the 1990s. Over time definitions have changed, and the study describes itself in more sophisticated ways. But there are two aspects of restricted thinking here. The first is that the PIAAC allows people to say things like '16.4% of adults in England are at level 1' as if the meaning of that very complex statement were obvious. The second is that the model of literacy at the heart of PIAAC (and IALS) is remarkably un-nuanced. Basically it boils down to whether the respondent can spot a key piece of information in a distracting text, and higher literacy skill means being able to deal with more distractors, or spot more information. That's it. No writing, very little comprehension and no critical

thinking. Not the literacy we would necessarily hope for in a modern democracy (St. Clair 2013).

It follows from the perspective laid out here that adult literacy education does not make a lot of economic sense. Put simply, from a societal level, investing in the education of somebody with 35 potential years in the workforce will be a better investment than putting the same amount of resource into somebody with 15 years of work ahead. Following the logic of a restricted view of literacy leads to a restricted view of human potential.

One of the reasons literacy education has ended up in this restricted space is our own willingness to make the restricted argument. By accepting the premise that the value of education, especially for adults, lies in the workplace, we have opened the door to an ever narrower conception of value. I must admit that, even in retrospect, it is hard to see how our field could have responded differently to external and global pressures, but I do think we have to acknowledge that our own actions have contributed to the dominance of restricted literacy.

Elaborated perspectives will not go away

In the world beyond adult literacy more restriction around language has not been the norm; in many ways the experience has been diametrically opposite to this, with increasing understanding and acknowledgement of the significance of words—both written and spoken— to the world. There has been an explosion of engagement with language, both spoken and written.

One great example of this is the internet. A few years ago, there was a prediction that the internet would kill off literacy in 'Reading at Risk' by the US National Endowment for the Arts. Subsequently this has proven to be unfounded. Literacy demands, which pre-figure literacy skills, have grown substantially as people read on the web, write on email, texts, blogs, twitter, and so on, and critically manage information. This could be considered as a golden age of literacy, with vast amounts of text being produced and consumed around the world in many languages and formats. Only part of it is vocational; a lot of it is people living text-mediated lives in ways they would not have before.

Another intriguing phenomenon has been the reclamation of words. One of the most significant examples has been the change in 'Queer' from a pejorative reference to non-binary people to the title of a respected and insightful body of research. There are many other examples where people have turned words that were historically markers of oppression into labels signalling positive aspects of their identity.

Some Canadians may find it embarrassing, but Jordan Peterson lives in Toronto. Over the last few years he has become a superstar of the alt-right, mainly by criticising 'political-correctness' (Murphy 2016). His celebrity status began when he refused to use gender-neutral language to address students in class despite Canadian Human Rights law forbidding discrimination by gender expression. In Peterson's case a very simple aspect of language use—the refusal to use 'they' in the singular—has led to very significant repercussions and a career as a right-wing you-tube ranter.

More positive examples include the reclamation of the original name for one of the most important and famous rocks in the world. The increasing importance given to Uluru as a name reflects an increasingly respectful acknowledgement of the importance of the original inhabitants of a place and their culture. We are going through a similar process in Canada, with the Victorian era names of places (usually based on a white male political figure or 'explorer') are being replaced with the original names. This is hugely significant to Indigenous

communities, but more than this, it is hugely significant to all of us. It values the history that made us in a way few other acts can.

The point of these examples, and there are many more, is that language and literacy have all sorts of meanings and all sorts of consequences. Restricted perspectives on literacy as a single continuum or a single set of skills don't just miss the point, they don't know which end of the pencil to find it at. Language and text are wildly complex and significant practices that cannot and should not be rendered uni-dimensional.

Another theoretical model

Organisational sociologist Mary Douglas spent many years considering how different forms of human society created and maintained order. Her ideas coalesced around two poles. The first she called purity. This refers to activities and artefacts that enhance the social order. Purity can be attached to attributes like punctuality, paying bills on time, or ensuring that everything adults learn increases their employability. For Douglas the opposite end of the spectrum is danger, the things that chip away at the certainties, the predictability of life, that challenge us to remember that life is not all order or cleanliness or peace. Some things do not fit the plan, and we need these aspects of life as much as we need the pure things (Douglas 1966).

I consider the ascension of restricted views of literacy, despite all the evidence that they are missing out huge chunks of our lives and experience, a victory for purity. It creates a tidy narrative that ties up loose ends, and explains a great deal about our lives and relationships. We don't need to wonder about the random and troubling aspects of our lives. It tells us that people are poor, or unemployed, or badly housed because they are lacking the literacy skills needed to be productive. Not only does it enshrine deficit thinking— the idea that people do badly in our society— it provides a mechanism to explain how it works. From there it is a short step to accepting the situation, and embracing the notion of pure capitalism.

The case for danger

In September 2019 we saw a lot of protests and other activity around the climate. The young people who were taking part had grasped something profound and fundamental about human society. This was simply that language changes everything. By calling for euphemisms like 'climate change' to be replaced with 'climate emergency' (Thunberg 2019) they were not calling only for a difference in language; they were calling for enormous shifts of perception and power. These young activists have understood something that the rest of us need to remember. Words are dangerous.

As we think about the future of our field, I would like to invite all of those involved to think about ways in which they can move beyond views of literacy that limit it to a restricted code system. We should be deeply uncomfortable with the claim that literacy is a single set of skills that an individual possesses or does not possess. We should not be accepting the idea that literacy is a capability that can be implanted into marginalised folk to 'make them successful' in the labour market. We should be pushing back against the notion that it is up to individuals to compensate for forms of knowledge which systems have denied to them. It is essential to repeat and reinforce the value—and the values—of literacy learning as contributing deeply to the opportunity to critique our collective way of living.

This does not represent an aspiration to purity and restriction. Instead it is a claim of elaboration and danger. In order to understand why this matters as much as it does it is necessary to return to some work that is getting older now, Freire's (1972) analysis of the

importance of literacy to marginalised people around the world. While many aspects of this analysis have been rendered less pressing by the passing of time, the central idea that literacy is part of our development as humans is still important to remember. On the face of it, the centrality of literacy comes from the ability to understand and manipulate symbol systems, but I think we have to be careful about this argument. It can easily lead to the view that non-literate cultures and non-written languages are less significant. I believe that a more profound approach is to recognise that in Western society written language is our dominant symbolic system. Where some cultures learn through stories, dance or art we have come to use written squiggles. All the values of cultural continuity, critique and challenge that are richly represented in stories, dance or art are vested in literacy in our case.

That, I believe, is why literacy is authentically dangerous. Language is the way that ideas and perspectives change, and that the world transforms. Literacy is an especially powerful form of language, both in terms of the effects it brings about and the social power vested in it. If you want to change social relations you must start by changing linguistic relations. That's why acknowledging the name Uluru has such significance, and such danger. It raises questions about who is in charge and who has the right to name the land, and those are never restricted or pure questions.

Doing dangerous things

It is fair to ask what all of these arguments actually mean. There are three areas which are useful to consider in terms of what might change.

The first is perspectives, by which I mean the models and measures we bring to literacy. We know that the PIAAC approach is highly limited, and that any idea of a simple relation between literacy and productivity is not really supported. It would be incredibly useful to revisit some of the questions raised by the older theories I have referred to here in order to understand what the contemporary version of the problems looks like. Language and literacy remain sources of power allotted to some people and denied to others, and one implication of this understanding is that literacy is a social phenomenon and not an individual one. Measurement, therefore, becomes a way to examine patterns across society rather than an evaluation of individual worth. There is an opportunity to think about literacy not in terms of a quantity of some thing that people possess different amounts of, but in terms of what can be done, and not done, with the forms to which people have access.

The second area to consider is policy, which is inevitably linked to resources. The idea of a meaningful link between literacy education and employment could be abandoned as a rationale without actually losing anything. An alternative approach is to view access to literacy and language capabilities as human rights which any civilised society should be supporting in its citizens as a matter of course. It is not possible to know with any confidence what the outcomes of literacy learning will be, but it is possible to be confident that they will be maximised when there is commitment to inputs that make literacy provision viable and capable of development. Policy does not stand by when people in any modern society become ill due to poverty; neither should we permit alienation from literacy due to lack of resources.

In terms of practice, it seems to me that the exercise of danger manifests in two ways. The first is ensuring that the attainment of literacy comes through the exercise of the learners' stories, and the opportunity to exchange the contours of our lives with those of others through language. The second is focusing on the critical potential of literacy, by which I mean the ways it is possible to work within sign systems to understand the privilege they encode. The benefit

of approaching literacy as an elaborated code is the invitation it provides to understand the levels of benefit and cost to those who enter the system. A new word, a new idea, or a new story are never innocent, because they carry with them a place and a history. Practices that acknowledge and question that background are never restricted, but also they can never be pure.

Conclusion

In concluding I'll return to the title and the implied questions. What do we do with words? We encode our lives and our experiences. What do they do with us? They shape how we understand our lives and experiences. We can think of these in a shallow restricted way or in a deeper and more elaborate way. I hope that literacy educators choose the latter, but as I have suggested, it may carry danger with it. There is danger for programs, which may be seen as too political when they acknowledge the power of language and the language of power. It can be dangerous for us as practitioners, when we stray too far from the beaten path of employability. But it will not add to the danger of the learners' lives; they already understand the complexity of language and literacy. That's why they want to learn more, and that's what they deserve from us as educators. I hope our profession can be as willing to walk with danger as each of our learners is each time they dare to learn.

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