Theory, research, and the indigenous discourse of literacy work[*]

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The genesis of this writing was in June 2002, when I seized an opportunity to say something about literacy work and research, in a panel organized by the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy) and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. To organize my thoughts for that, I made a couple of pages of notes, on the flight from Ottawa to Toronto, about theory and research and how they might fit with the questions of literacy workers on the ground. People's discussion and challenges after the panel were provocative. In particular, several people — particularly Guy Ewing — took up an expression I had used in the talk, "indigenous discourse of literacy work." I ended up scribbling another page of notes, sitting in an outdoor café one morning. This writing, done at my computer on the fringes of Ottawa, weaves together and revamps the pages from the airplane and those from the café.

I thought I needed to begin by explaining how I got there. As is common among people who work in adult literacy, I have a hybrid of experience and knowledge. I completed my formal academic training while teaching adult literacy and numeracy; I continued to teach with a Ph.D. (although I usually concealed that, assuming it would only create a sense of distance). I also wrote for students, planned professional development for practitioners, wrote for and edited literacy journals, and helped organize networks of literacy organizations. I was drawn to literacy work by the recognition that I had much to learn from students, and by the hopeful sense that I might contribute something, including some useful analysis, to shaping the field. I hadn't expected to be seduced into a 25-year relationship with literacy, but it has happened. I never wholly closed off academic interests, and opportunities have pulled me back into universities. About half of my current university teaching deals with adult literacy and language learning. All this history (as anyone's history does) has shaped my interests and convictions.

<div align="center">I</div>

"Discourse" (a useful piece of jargon) is ways of talking and writing about something — in this case, adult literacy — in more or less recurrent forms, and in more or less stable social relations among those involved. The idea of discourse suggests that whatever we say isn't just the name of the thing we're talking about, but that the thing can be named in different ways. So discourse isn't only like the window-glass through which we see, but is also like the frame around the glass, blocking out parts of the world while bringing other parts into view. Different discourses, differently framed, connecting different people, construct different views.

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[*] These notes are based on remarks delivered in a panel on Adult Literacy and Research: How Can Research Help Us?, Metropolitan Toronto Movement for Literacy and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Adult Literacy Working Group, June 2002.

There are various kinds of discourse in the adult literacy field. With the notion of an indigenous discourse of literacy work, my concern is talk, and more rarely writing, among literacy workers (leaving that term undefined for now) about what we do. Some of that of course takes the form of stories. We relate specific occurrences, representing the moving things that learners do, crowing over our successes, displaying our blunders as problems to be reflected on .... But this discourse also sometimes takes on a different cast. It does not simply tell what specifically happened somewhere, as a story. Rather it tells what happens, how things work, the patterns. In ways grounded in experience, we tell (to pick some random examples) how people come into programs and how they drop out, how people learn or don't, how a teaching process works well or ill, how different kinds of life experiences support or restrict literacy learning, how we get better over time at what we do, and so on.

Let me emphasize that indigenous discourse as I think of it is indeed about patterns, about the way things work, but it isn't "in general" -- from no place in particular. Rather, in this discourse, *literacy workers* exchange views, talking within a program, or across programs and situations, about the ways things work. So indigenous discourse is defined not so much in terms of content, what is said, as in terms of who is speaking and to whom — the literacy workers who participate in this conversation. This kind of talk brings forward problems and puzzles, successes and methods, (re)formulations of objectives, and so on. It starts out in particular situations, but eventually at least it aims to reach across from situation to situation, to connect. The animus is to find ways of speaking that "bring forward" the problems and puzzles and the rest, into a language that connects -- for a discussion going on among us.

There are of course other discourses. There is talking and writing between teachers and learners, concerning "how you do it" (spell, punctuate, compose, decode, interpret, chair a meeting, take minutes, etc.), and how particular individuals do it, well or with difficulty. This is obviously closely connected to the "discussion among us," but the participants are different, and so the discourse is, I think, usually somewhat different. There are advertisements to a public audience. There are reports to funders and governments. There are forms of academic theorizing connect aspects of literacy up to theories in adult education, psychology, anthropology, or other disciplines.

It is important to be clear about differences and boundaries between an indigenous discourse and these other forms, or else it will be swallowed in them. This is not to imagine a sealed-off conversation, never mixing, somehow "pure." I don't want to rule things out, or to deny connections and penetrations between indigenous discourse, literacy promotion, accountability, academic explanations, and anything else. Influences and hybrids are inevitable, and there should be dialogue back and forth.

What I do want to do is to "valorize" (jargon again) a discourse anchored in practice. It should go on, it should be respected, it shouldn't have to be subordinate to or disappeared into any of the other discourses. It should be valued — if for no other reason — because it is central in the ways that people doing literacy work get more astute, planful, circumspect, flexible, incisive, visionary, and authoritative, about what they do.

II

Then there is the question of how theory and research might relate to indigenous discourse of literacy work. Of course what's called practitioner research should be in the thick of that relation, unless the practitioner has been hornswoggled. But also, at least *some* more "formal" or "official" theory and research (designed, written up, aimed at broad circulation), whether done by academics or by other researchers, ought to aim at such an engagement. I don't mean that it should aim to "be applied," as if theorists and researchers think but don't do, and literacy workers do but don't think. I mean: to engage in dialogue.

I want to identify two lines of theory and research that I think suited for such engagement.

One is a frankly theoretical take on adult literacy in general, and on what Freire called "the adult literacy process" — the learning of literacy within the transformation of lives of which literacy is part. I'm thinking of a particular kind of theory, a sociocultural theory, one that deals with individuals' literacy activities in conjunction with social practices and social relations. This kind of theory lets us see the big picture, come to terms with all of what we're dealing with in literacy work. Of course we need to see and deal with cognitive elements of literacy, with "skills," and the development of those skills — everything from phonological awareness to genre know-how. But a purely psychological theory won't do. The development of skills doesn't happen to cognitively isolated individuals. Neither is it a transmission of a package of literacy knowledge from one person to another. Rather it is a discovery or fabrication of ways of using words, that occurs in interaction or dialogue between people, including between teachers and learners. That's how it is — this theoretical take recognizes — and how we must deal with it. So a theory of the literacy learning process should encompass those developmental interactions (just as a theory of literacy in general has to include the complex interactions that go on around reading and writing). Finally, also, we need — in a clear theory that can connect to circumspect practice — to understand how the development of literacy happens (or doesn't) as an aspect of the social relations in people's lives. By social relations, I mean particularly people's literacy-mediated connections to governments, jobs, churches, unions, etc. After all, the point of having skills is to engage in these relations, and what looks like trouble with skills is often more fundamentally trouble in the relations.

So to pull the skills out and look at them alone is to see only a part of the big picture. To get the whole thing requires a sociocultural theory. This is more than an academic interest. It is an interest in dialogue. One reason for pursuing a sociocultural theory is that it can operate in dialogue with the actual conduct of literacy work. More precisely, it can enter into dialogue with the indigenous discourse in which literacy workers bring forward their successes, their cunning, their puzzlements, and their understandings of situations in which they work. The dialogue will likely never be an easy mixing, like water with water, but there is the basis for a conversation.

The second line of work that I want to identify connects especially to the distinction between indigenous discourse and administrative terms, terms of accountability to institutions or government. Sometimes literacy workers' discourse takes up where they leave off —

figuring out how to fit actual individuals and particular events into general administrative categories. At other times, there a distinction or even a clash between the indigenous and the administrative (for example, why is there not funding for the mother tongue literacy teaching that is obviously useful, why is it so hard to do the community development that would create the relevance of literacy in people's lives, is it possible to work with learners who because of age or disability aren't headed for the labour market, and so on?).

Theory and research aligned with the experiences of a distinction or clash between practice and terms of accountability has to have a distinctive character. Much research focuses a spotlight "down" on literacy workers, learners and people with limited literacy. But here the spotlight must be shifted around to look "up" to the ways that literacy work is both enabled and constrained by its circumstances. These circumstances are what I've called the literacy policy process, or the literacy régime — the organized ways and delimited ways that literacy and literacy work are promoted in society. This includes how the literacy "issue" is shaped up in public and policy discourse — in media narratives, in politicians' speeches, in the International Adult Literacy Survey and other policy-oriented research, and so on. It also includes the ways that literacy work is organized and regulated through institutional structures including school boards and colleges, and through forms of accountability like testing or learning outcomes reporting. This policy process is itself part of the literacy-mediated social relations in people's lives — within which they learn, or don't. To understand literacy, this too needs investigation.

III

These notes are not trying to legislate either literacy workers' talk and writing, or theory and research. They only mean to claim some space for a certain hybrid of experience and knowledge, a certain kind of engagement between indigenous discourse of literacy work and forms of theory and research that aspire to conversation with it.   If these thoughts are useful in defining a space where you would like to work, a dialogue you would like to be part of, they have served their purpose.