

Jennifer Gibson, 1999

### **Empowerment and Creativity: Re-conceiving the Role of Adult Literacy**

Literacy is a complex and challenging issue. To propose what should form the basis of a literacy program for adults is, to say the least, a frightening task. There is much research being conducted around the world regarding the very nature of literacy, and its various implications. Here, I shall endeavor to outline the fundamental aspects of research which pertain to the development of RWTL ( reading and writing, and their teaching and learning), particularly, what teachers need to understand about RWTL, and what students should be encouraged to learn about RWTL.

If one looks up ‘literate’ in a current edition of Webster’s dictionary, a very concise, narrow definition is discovered. To be literate is defined to be “versed in learning and science; educated.” One who is literate is deemed to be “able to read and write.” This definition is unsatisfactory in reflecting current research; it is necessary to broaden popular perceptions, like those stated in Webster’s, to convey modern efforts and achievements. To quote Martha A. Lane, outdated means of defining literacy are one-dimensional, and do not successfully convey the truly dynamic features of this very human endeavor. Lane’s recently published article, “What in the World Has Been Going On? (November, 1999) elaborates on this idea, and begins “Before World War I, almost everyone knew the difference between literacy and non-literacy - you either could write your name or you had to sign an X.” Thankfully, present times have widely expanded and improved upon this perception of what exactly constitutes literacy. We now coin literacies in terms of subject: basic literacy, functional literacy, numeracy, cultural literacy, even

computer and information literacy. We also often relate a type of literacy to a specific place or group of people, for example workplace literacy or family literacy.<sup>1</sup>

With particular interest to RWTL, a broader, more inclusive definition of literacy is necessary. The best I have yet to see was brought to my attention in Lane's aforementioned article, where she brings forth a definition of literacy which "was crafted at a church-related conference held about two decades ago, in which basic education students numbered prominently among the international delegates."<sup>2</sup> Interesting to note is the attention accorded to the whole person, and the stress placed on "one's native language and communication skills." The NCCC outlines literacy as a tool for education which is:

- many-sided and of many kinds
- to be shared with others (not stored)
- a means for gaining decision-making power in one's community
- shaped by history and society, but also by personal experience and cultures
- strong enough to act upon forces blocking other life goals

The NCCC goes farther, and breaks down the outline into several carefully crafted points. It will be around these main points that I will revolve my argument, wherein I hope to indicate where and how these ideas connect to recent research regarding global RWTL research.

The first point addressed is "Reading and writing and math are central to literacy, but so are other skills. The ability to see connections, to imagine different ways of living, to tell of one's life in song and dance or story - this is part of becoming literate." In reading these words, I was struck by the immediate connection to those of David Barton, from his work, The Social

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, Martha A. "What in the World Has Been Going On?" November, 1999

<sup>2</sup>NCCC's Working Group on Literacy and Basic Education. Education for All: A Decade of National Literacy Efforts Around the World, 1978

Basis of Literacy.<sup>4</sup> “Literacy is based upon a system of symbols. It is a symbolic system used for communication and as such exists in relation to other systems of information exchange. It is a way of representing the world to others.” The importance of these words is that they recognize the learners’ invaluable input when taking on a new literacy. If we abide to Barton’s suggestions, than one would contend that being literate does not always have to imply the written word. “Literacy is part of communication, of reporting the world to others,”<sup>5</sup> therefore, traditional practices such as oral tradition (which, consequently, is often recognized and accepted on par to written documentation within the Canadian judicial system<sup>6</sup>) or ceremonial dance, for example, should not be ignored. Rather, they may form an invaluable foundation from which to make the transition to a second literacy, one which is considerably more than “speech which is written down.”<sup>7</sup>

This is where reading and writing become central to the contemporary notion of literacy, with implications reaching far beyond the selection of medium. As Barton describes, “Writing enables us to go much further than with spoken language; we are able to fix things in space and time. Writing results in texts.” Barton continues to state that “because it often is reproducible and open to inspection, written language can be a powerful form of language; we need to examine how writing extends the possibilities of language.”

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<sup>4</sup>Barton, David. “The Social Basis of Literacy,” in Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language, 1994.

<sup>5</sup>Barton, David (1994)

<sup>6</sup>Fortin, Jacques. Preuve Penale, 1994

<sup>7</sup>Barton, David (1994)

This brings us to the second NCCC distinction of literacy, which reads “Literacy is to be understood within the given social, economic, political and psychological conditions in which one lives. What literacy is for one society is not literacy for another; literacy needs to be measured and judged according to the needs of each society.” In addition, literacy is said to be “a collective, on-going process, one whose roots are in the actual situation and needs of people.” To clearly understand the reality and relevance of this statement in connection to RWTL, it is vital to consider the learner’s individuality, as well as the particular conditions and source of motivation from which this person originates. Just as important, and relevant, is the need for literacy to be based concurrently in the needs of the group of which the individual is a part. Consider this excerpt from “Why Should We Become Literate? Testament to the Wisdom of Learners.”<sup>8</sup>

“What kind of people are we? We are poor, very poor, but we are not stupid. That is why, despite our illiteracy, we still exist. But we have to know why we should become literate.” Also consider the importance of “What they taught us was useless. To sign one’s name means nothing. We agree to join the classes if you teach us how not to depend on others anymore.”

The main goal of any literacy program should be to address the real and present needs of the learner, to set a series of goals whose benefits are immediately recognizable and reinforce one’s self-esteem. This is why learner-relevant materials are critical; considering the varied backgrounds and situations of learners, it is not difficult to imagine how easily discouraged one may become if an already daunting task proves to be fruitless and mundane. Therefore, a ‘statement of expectations’ is key in successfully designing and implementing any curriculum.

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<sup>8</sup>“Why Should We Become Literate? Testament to the Wisdom of Learners.”

Such an approach will often present difficult situations for both learner and instructor, for individual circumstance may often give rise to political issues. Barbara Bee<sup>9</sup> recounts a rather fascinating account of what transpired when she set out to teach an immigrant women's group in Australia. From the outset, the women stated that "they wanted to speak and read English more fluently and understand it more easily." Although previously involved in teaching Freire's philosophy, the "importance of beginning from the social context of the learner,"<sup>10</sup> Bee, in her own words, "failed to do this initially" within the group. Instead, she turned her attention to "formal language schemes, which, because they did not relate to the realities of her students' lives"<sup>11</sup> served only to alienate and frustrate them.

Bee's personal example relates how at the time she was unaware of her treatment of the group as "passive learners." In essence, she was "effectively isolating them from the educational process" and had consequently "divorced the act of learning from meaning and context."<sup>12</sup> The lessons, though based on "living English" situations, had little to do with the women's own experience, therefore making an already difficult task nearly impossible to comprehend. Because the material did not reflect any fragment of their particular realities, the students were, as Bee described, "forced to respond in stilted and unreal ways." Instead of encouraging an open dialogue, discussion, analysis and interchange (essential in gaining critical insight and personal

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<sup>9</sup>Bee, Barbara. "Critical Literacy and the Politics of Gender," 1993.

<sup>10</sup>Freire, Paulo. "Towards a Pedagogy of the Question," 1985.

<sup>11</sup>Bee, Barbara (1993)

<sup>12</sup>Bee, Barbara (1993)

confidence in one's abilities), Bee's one-sided approach served only to confuse, and to remove the possibility of voice and expression,<sup>13</sup> the exact opposite of that which she had intended.

Paulo Freire<sup>14</sup> addresses this problem as the "pedagogy of the answer" wherein instructors impose answers upon students "without listening to their questions." Freire claims that such an approach "reduces learners to mere receptacles for prepackaged knowledge." In his view, this "cannot stimulate and challenge learners to question, to doubt, and to reject "that which is part of one's reality." It may, however, serve in the learners' rejection of learning itself.<sup>15</sup> Herb Kohl has written extensively of individuals who "choose to 'not-learn' what is expected of them rather than to learn that which denies them their sense of who they are." Lisa Delpit has contributed much supporting research in her documentation of her work with African American students and the concepts of mainstream America's 'dominant discourse' in relation to Kohl's theories.<sup>16</sup>

Freire proposes an alternative, a "pedagogy of the question," which "forces and challenges the learners to break the chains ... imposed upon them." He elaborates that the notion of literacy as "simply a mechanical process" that is "still the basis of many literacy programs, especially competency-based programs which overemphasize the technical acquisition of reading and writing skills" should be avoided. Instead, we should focus on a pedagogy which is "both empowering and humanistic," one which enables learners "to think critically, and to adopt a critical attitude towards the world."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Atwood, Margaret. Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1982

<sup>14</sup>Freire, Paulo (1985)

<sup>15</sup>Delpit, Lisa. "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse," 1995

<sup>16</sup>Delpit, Lisa (1995)

<sup>17</sup>Freire, Paulo (1985)

A recent exploratory session on the Internet revealed a web site<sup>18</sup> in which tutors and learners may both share successes and problems on-line. Features included a question and answer forum, as well as a story board written by learners for learners. Two comments posted by instructors offered their suggestions for sustaining motivation in their learners.

The first submission detailed the success of one tutor who collaborated with his student to produce real-life materials to supplement those available at the resource centre. The tutor, identified only as R. Day wrote, "I have used the most unusual things to promote interest in reading. My student has brought in his cable bill, the registration slip and instruction booklet for a new rifle he purchased, and a piece of 'junk mail' asking him to join a music club. We have discussed the various aspects of each and made decisions accordingly. I always let him fill out the necessary forms. I was surprised to learn that he does not know when to use a period, a question mark, etc. at the end of a sentence." He adds "when you explore various areas, you learn what they need. I've found the resource material provided by the literacy program to be only mildly helpful because it really doesn't interest my student. You have to give them real-life applications to hold their interest at that age (he is 38)."

My current research has revealed that relevant learning materials for adults are often extremely hard to find, and often the best option for both instructor and student is to produce their own materials, as previously detailed. My discoveries on the Internet also unveiled many additional learning opportunities - for student and teacher alike - as there exists multitudinous sites which allow both parties to post and discuss work, as well as interactive learning sites.

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<sup>18</sup>Exploring Adult Literacy, eduweb.com

One location which seemed particularly advanced was a CNN site from San Francisco.<sup>19</sup> Here, adult learners of various skill levels may access current news items in both the original and plain English forms. There are several comprehension exercises relating to each piece, which may be submitted electronically for review, and instantaneously returned to the sender. I will note that the responses are processed by a software program, and as yet, I have not seen the results of a return. Therefore, I am hesitant to remark on the effectiveness of this particular aspect of the site. However, one can imagine that it would be well-served in absence of the availability of an instructor. Additionally, one feature of the site which I found to be exceptional was the audio capabilities offered. If a student encounters difficulty with the text, an audio link may be highlighted, and in turn, a fully narrated account of the work is played back. Full streaming video segments of the news story are also available.

Returning to the EAL<sup>20</sup> learner - tutor discussion board, I found a second submission suggested additional teaching and learning possibilities. The speaker, an instructor who unfortunately remained anonymous, relayed her difficulties in inspiring a learner who had become disenchanted with the course of his studies. To remedy this, she suggested that the two of them write a play. They “described and then assumed the role of the characters and worked out a situation and dialogue.” The play “was a short, humorous skit about a wily man, two women, and a cop. Professional actors (friends of the tutor) gave a dramatic reading of the play at an in-house program, and again at a public program.” The student “loved watching his work performed,” and as his tutor surmised, he “definitely improved his language. It also captured and held his interest.”

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<sup>19</sup>[www.cnn.sf](http://www.cnn.sf) (1999)

<sup>20</sup>EAL, [eduweb.com](http://eduweb.com)

This one account singlehandedly demonstrates the level of success which is possible when one takes a personal interest in, and makes a commitment to developing students' individual strengths and interests. This is necessary on both the part of student, as well as instructor. The collective efforts of the student and teacher who developed the play not only resulted in the personal enrichment of the learner, but also created public awareness and an expansion of presently scarce learning materials for other adult learners.

I shall now return attention to the work of Barbara Bee, whose women's learner group eventually made a dramatic change for the better. It was Bee's discovery of a piece of personal narrative experience, entitled I Want to Write it Down<sup>21</sup>, which she accredits for the women's sudden turnaround. The narrative was written by a group of women in a community literacy class in southeast London, and through the creative presentation of words and pictures, conveyed the women's experiences as mothers, workers, and as women of different cultures and foreign nations. The introduction of Write it Down proved to be very successful, as it challenged the women by appealing to them in a way which "included rather than excluded their interest and enthusiasm." The book also dealt with relative instances of women striving to improve the particular circumstances of their own existence, as well as their existence in relation to the rest of the world. Needless to say, the book was intellectually as well as politically stimulating. The women not only attained the skills which they had already set forth in their 'statements of intention,' but they were able to apply this knowledge to transform their own situations for the better. Many of the women continued their education, sought and obtained employment, and began to question the authority of many institutions which they had previously been reluctant to contest. Many of these women were able to give themselves the opportunity to begin to

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<sup>21</sup>Bee, Barbara (1993)

challenge the traditional roles which had kept them dependant, housebound, and often subordinate.

In a closely related work, Nawal El Saadawi writes of the importance of such literature in “Creative Women in Changing Societies.”<sup>22</sup> She begins, “Lucky is the woman who is able to read and write and is not fully taken up with constant striving for her livelihood and with endless household work in the service of family, husband, and children. She can at least give time and effort necessary to become aware of the manifestations of oppression and tyranny.” In writing and learning through relevance, “she begins to struggle to recover her self and her truthfulness, and recovers creative ability, side by side with those whose lives she is now partly sharing. Her creative work rings with the authenticity that comes with truth and has a greater impact on the minds and hearts of people.”

Recording and sharing one’s own personal experiences with literacy has proven to be very successful in many spheres of adult learning. The article “Creating Curriculum - a Learner Centered Approach,”<sup>23</sup> Sally McBeth writes of the significant impact such projects may have on a learner. In this contribution, she offers many practical examples in the implementation of learner directed approaches to literacy material, curriculum design, as well as curriculum planning.

I agree with McBeth’s summary that the greatest benefit of such work, that of making adult learners the creators of their own learning materials, is “the change it brings out in the way they see themselves.” Learners “become participants in a culture in which their ideas and experiences can be shared with others through the medium of print.” She concludes by

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<sup>22</sup>Saadawi, Nawal El. The Nawaal El Saadawi Reader, 1997.

<sup>23</sup>McBeth, Sally. “Creating Curriculum - A Learner-Centered Approach,” 1989

emphasizing that “Helping them to become a part of this culture is, to us, one of the great goals of literacy work.”

I will conclude my observations with a few more words from the NCCC’s<sup>24</sup> expanded definition of literacy which unites the many different approaches to literacy (theoretical and practical) under a collective purpose. It states “Literacy is a process by which women and men can learn to organize themselves and to help to change the lives and conditions which hinder their lives and quality of life.” Literacy is revolutionary “when it starts with the learner’s goal. That is, literacy can set people free from all kinds of oppression. Literacy brings power as well as understanding.”

These, above all, are the essential elements of RWTL which teachers should endeavor to strongly embrace and practice. It, too, is critical that learners be imparted with such a sense of their potential for empowerment, for they are the ones who will ultimately determine their own destiny.

“Everyday we slaughter our finest impulses...  
stifled because we lacked the faith to believe  
in our own powers, our own criterion of truth  
and beauty. Every man, when he gets quiet,  
when he becomes desperately honest with  
himself, is capable of uttering profound truths.  
We all derive from the same source. There is  
no mystery about the origin of things. We are  
all part of creation, all kings, all poets, all  
musicians; we have only to open up, only to  
discover what is already there.”

Henry Miller

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<sup>24</sup>Education For All: A Decade of National Literacy Efforts Around the World (1978)