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AUTHOR Fagan, William T.
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ABSTRACT

The trait-state model, a framework for understanding adult literacy, draws heavily on the social psychological literature. Allport (1961) first proposed the notion of trait. The overriding characteristics of focus on trait is the individual's possession of language control. Cattell (1950, 1979) emphasized the notion of state in relation to trait and indicated that one should never try to predict behavior from traits without considering the state of the individual. Focus on literacy as state concentrates on the actual functions and uses of literacy in the environment. A trait-state model helps one to understand the relationship between an individual's needs, which involve literacy and the pressure of the situation, as well as contexts that may appear to be literacy-based but in which meeting literacy needs is peripheral to other values. Research shows that competency in trait aspects of literacy does not always transfer to various states. Under the assumptions of a trait-state model of literacy, (1) learners should develop more realistic concepts as to what constitutes reading, writing, and literacy; (2) assessment must consider the individual as a person and take into account trait and state; (3) interpersonal relations are important; and (4) the overlap of the concepts of adaptation and empowerment must be addressed. (31 references) (YLB)

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A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION
OF ADULT LITERACY

William T. Fagan
Director
The Reading and Language Center
The University of Alberta
EDMONTON, Alberta
T6G 2G5

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

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A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ADULT LITERACY

There is no question that adult literacy has been established as a viable component within the educational context. Adult literacy has a long history, and in spite of government constraints, the future appears optimistic. However, considerable confusion still exists over what adult literacy is. Venezky, Wagner and Ciliberti (1990) express the problem this way. They state:

Social concepts such as literacy and poverty are integrally tied to their labels. Like jelly and sand, they are without intrinsic shape, defined and redefined by the vessels that hold them. Who is literate depends upon how we define literacy - whether it is a minimal ability, evidenced by the oral pronunciation of a few simple lines from a primer, or a more advanced complex of skills, requiring numeracy, writing and reading together (p. ix).

Park (1981) describes "the field of adult literacy (as) large in scope, ill defined and draws from a variety of disciplines" (p. 279). Adult literacy has been defined as a social issue (the ability to function in society, the process of empowerment), and as an emotional issue (lack of freedom, loss of hope, the anger and resentment). Adult literacy has been defined in terms of levels (basic, functional, levels 1, 2, 3), and from a multiple or plural

dimension (cultural literacy, visual literacy, religious literacy, xerox literacy, etc.). Clark (1984) proposes four categories of definition (traditional, statistical, functional, contextual); Scribner (1986) provides an explanation through three metaphors, and Street (1984) examines literacy in terms of autonomous or ideological models.

The effect on readers of the literature on adult literacy is like that of understanding the elephant for the blind men. While each part is a valid description, the totality or unity of the construct is lost.

In this paper I shall attempt to provide an integral framework for understanding adult literacy. For this purpose I have drawn heavily on the social psychological literature; I have labelled my conceptual framework, the trait-state model.

A Trait-State Model

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

Allport was the first to propose the notion of trait (Hergenhahn, 1990). Allport (1961) defined a trait as

a broad system of similar action tendencies existing in the person we are studying. 'Similar action tendencies' are those that an observer, looking at them from the actor's point of view, can categorize together under one rubric of meaning (337).

In order to infer a trait from behavior, Allport (1961) proposed three criteria: the frequency of its enactment, the range of situations in which it occurs, and the individual's intensity of his/her reactions in striving toward a preferred pattern of behavior (p. 340).

When the focus is on trait, as often happens in schools and in some adult literacy programs, literacy includes notions of skill, task, knowledge, language conventions, and language processes. The overriding characteristic is that the individual possesses language control - control over language analysis, construction, generation, meaning, evaluation and extension through manipulating various linguistic structures (word, sentence, letter, argument, thesis, clause, paragraph, connective, etc.). An individual possesses this ability to a certain degree, keeping in mind that measuring this ability is not an easy task.

The trait aspect of literacy is inherent or internal to the person possessing it and tends to develop in a chronic fashion. However, it may be interrupted and reduced which may happen through brain injury, substance abuse, or with the onset of various mental disorders. While Cattell does not include literacy as one of his traits (Hergenhahn, 1990) some of his defining features of traits may be applied to literacy. One of the most important distinctions in Cattell's theory according to Hergenhahn (1990) is that of surface versus source traits. A surface trait is defined as a characteristic that correlates with other characteristics.

In this sense, literacy may be considered a surface trait; other characteristics with which it correlates include "empathy, abstract context free thought, rationality, critical thought, post-operative thought (in Piaget's usage), detachment and the kinds of logical processes exemplified by syllogisms, formal language, elaborated code, etc." (Street, 1984, p. 2). Unfortunately, it is common for literacy to be viewed as a source trait, or cause of behavior; literacy (or illiteracy) is seen to be the cause of poverty, crime, unemployment, physical abuse (Fagan, 1990), and even ill-health (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 1990).

When the focus is on literacy as trait, little attention is given to the uses or functions of literacy. The context of literacy use is very constrained, usually focussed on "school-type tasks", such as reading texts to answer questions, completing worksheets, discussing stylistic components of various authors, or writing journals as a school activity.

According to Allport (1961) traits interact with situations and vary according to the nature of the behavior evoked by a particular situation. He stated that "we should think of traits as ranges of possible behavior to be activated at varying points within the range according to the demands of the situation" (p. 181). Allport insisted that the whole individual - the possessing, and the doing, should never be lost sight of. Cattell (1950, 1979)

emphasized the notion of state in relation to trait and indicated that one should never try to predict behavior from traits without considering the state of the individual - the mood, disposition, emotional status, etc..

Focus on literacy as state concentrates on the actual functions and uses, interpersonal behaviors, reactions, and circumstances or situations. This is especially so for adults whose lives involve much greater complexity than characterized their lives as children. Furthermore, adults tend to spend more of their time in the "community" - in work and social relationships, as opposed to school-type environments. Ironically, one of the failings of adult literacy programs is that they become extensions of school which the adults experienced as children rather than as integral to the adults' present life circumstances. Kirsch (1990) maintains that "It is the difficulties individuals have with employing skills and strategies that characterize the literacy problem for much of the young adult population, not illiteracy or the inability to decode print or comprehend simple textual material" (p. 46). Focus on literacy as state is directed to providing for survival skills such as locating street names, reading medicine labels, ordering from a menu, or applying for a loan. The context or occasion becomes the controlling factor; often very little attention is given to the cognitive processes and linguistic skills which are needed to encode print integral to such situations. In fact focus on the state

aspects of literacy when carried to the extreme may concentrate on individuals' rights through tenants' organizations, churches, or neighbourhood activist organizations where attention to language processing is minimal and incidental (Brookfield, 1984). The goal in such instances is that of "empowerment", defined as obtaining power over some sociopolitical economic aspect of one's life as opposed to control over a knowledge, understanding, and manipulation of language structures.

Advocates of this emphasis frequently cite Freire's notions of critical awareness and reflective thinking (Freire, 1970); what they often are unaware of, or ignore, is that Freire has also detailed a fairly elaborate syllabic method for helping learners know words which then become the building blocks for language competency (trait).

The Trait-State Connection

The relationships between literacy as trait and state may be best understood through drawing on constructs from the psychiatric literature. In 1938, Murray proposed the needs-pressure construct. Applied to the trait-state model of literacy this would mean that an individual has certain needs which involve literacy (writing a resume for a job application, understanding a memo from one's work supervisor, shopping at a supermarket, writing a thank-you note, reading a daily paper, or writing an exam). The context or situation may be kind or hostile depending on the degree of literacy competency one has in executing a

particular need. One's reactions will be determined by and will vary, depending on the participation and outcome.

The extent to which the press of the situation is favorable or otherwise will describe the individual's state with respect to literacy functioning at that particular time. Millon (1986) provides one of the best definitions of functioning and while he coined this definition as an understanding of personality disorders, it provides a most suitable definition for literacy functioning if one substitutes adequate literacy for healthy personality.

When an individual displays an ability to cope with the environment in a flexible manner, and when his or her typical perceptions and behaviors foster increments in personal satisfaction, then the person may be said to possess ... (adequate literacy) Conversely, when average or everyday responsibilities are responded to inflexibly or defectively, or when the individual's perceptions and behaviors result in increments in personal discomfort or curtail opportunities to learn and grow, then we may speak of a ... maladaptive pattern (p. 647).

Four types of functioning, including maladaptive patterns and resulting reactions may characterize the state aspect of literacy.

1. An individual may attempt to meet a certain literacy need (for example, reading the dosage on a medicine bottle) and becomes aware that he cannot do so; he may guess at the dosage resulting in his taking an overdose with unpleasant but not fatal complications. This individual becomes aware through internal and external sources that he needs to develop greater competency in language decoding. This relationship may be labelled (++) since the individual concurs with the press or unpleasant feedback resulting from his action that literacy skills are lacking.
2. A (+-) relationship occurs when an individual decides that she would feel better about herself if she could read and/or write better. This decision may not have come from a conflict situation as in the case of the medicine example, but through observation of others, and introspection and awareness of one's functioning in written language skills.
3. A third relationship (-+) exists when an individual is informed by an external agent that he does not have sufficient literacy skills to accomplish a particular task but the individual rejects this assessment. For example, a research assistant who is hired to do a literature review may not be able to provide a synthesis of the content of the various articles and comments.

4. The final relationship (--) occurs when an individual does not encounter situations where meeting literacy needs is perceived as a problem, either from personal perception or through feedback from others. A (--) relationship will not only characterize those individuals whose literacy ability is adequate for the tasks encountered but also those individuals whose literacy abilities, while low (or even minimal) do not encounter situations where manipulating print is a factor. Such a relationship may characterize older individuals living within a secure family unit, those in non-skilled or semi-skilled jobs and who live in a simplified environment (away from taking buses, using banks, shopping at supermarkets and department stores, etc.). Whether this latter group is literate, low-literate, or non-literate is not an issue; for this group literacy is simply irrelevant.

The trait-state model also helps us understand contexts which may appear to be literacy based but in which meeting literacy needs is peripheral to other values. The example of community organization activist groups has already been mentioned, where power is the overriding purpose and literacy may not be a factor in meeting a particular need. As another example, consider university students (who assumedly have acquired a fairly high level of literacy competency) who continue to cross the street AFTER the "WAIT" sign shows. Understanding and acting on this

linguistic command is subservient to another need - to be on time for class, to avoid standing in the cold. A third example is provided by Bergevin (1967) who points out that adults whose basic need is to find employment, frequently enroll in literacy programs because no jobs are available and financial support is provided for participating in the program. Their main goal is not literacy but income. Finally, there are adults who are fairly competent in literacy as trait, but who lack confidence in themselves and avoid contexts requiring literacy which they could easily handle.

The four state relationships discussed above are relative in the sense that they may vary across contexts for a single individual. For example, a teacher taking a graduate class on language development in which he/she is expected to analyze language protocols in terms of clausal units cannot function effectively if he/she does not know what clauses are. However, this teacher may have no difficulty reading curriculum materials, children's work, etc. and may function very well in the classroom. Another example, comes from a TV documentary on literacy several years ago where the program host interviewed a car mechanic with low literacy skills and from a car repair manual demonstrated that the mechanic lacked sufficient reading skills as he (the mechanic) read "bend down the rocket arm" for "bleed down the rocket arm". Two major points were overlooked which are important in understanding literacy as

state. First, it is likely that the mechanic with his knowledge of car engine parts and their relationships would realize that he was not to "bend down" the rocket arm; secondly, it would be unlikely the TV host with all his literacy skills, could read the manuals and repair cars.

Literacy Skill Transfer: Trait to State

There is a common belief among literacy instructors that competency in trait aspects of literacy is automatically available for use in particular states or contexts. Mikulecky (1990) doubts that "mastering a common core of basic literacy skills" does transfer across contexts. Two areas of research support Mikulecky's belief.

A study by the author (Fagan, 1989) with two groups of adults (prison inmates and non-institutional adults) showed correlations of .40 and .62, for both groups respectively, between tasks of an academic nature (emphasizing literacy as trait) and tasks of a state-like* nature. Similar size correlations between comparable tasks were found by Kirsch and Jungeblut (1986). These correlations are low, especially in terms of common variance.

The second area of research which supports this belief, comes from literacy in the workplace or job related literacy. Researchers in job related literacy have pointed out that literacy development in the school does not prepare

* These were state simulated tasks, for example, locating information in a TV guide. To truly assess literacy as state, performance must be noted on literacy tasks in natural contexts.

adults to participate in work related literacy. Harste and Mikulecky (1984) indicate that work type literacy differs from school type literacy in the nature of the literacy tasks and the continuity of involvement.

One reason why competency in trait aspects of literacy does not always transfer to various states is suggested by an analysis of how literacy is usually developed within a school context. Mitchell (1988) emphasizes that "Most school systems in most countries are founded upon a fundamental public interest imperative - the cultivation of a literate and educated citizenry" (p. 1) which has usually been defined as competency in trait aspects of literacy. Greenfield (cited in Street, 1984) states that "School is isolated from life and the pupil must therefore acquire abstract habits of thought if he is to follow the teacher's oral lessons" (p. 21).

Thus, students learn how to recognize words in their reading texts, spell words as they write, formulate conclusions from their reading, construct logical arguments in writing, become familiar with a variety of genre (narrative, essay, sonnet, etc.), and study the "great" writers, on the assumption that this knowledge can be stored and become readily available for use in future contexts.

Greene (1989) who refers to trait aspects of literacy, as book-oriented literacy maintains that one reason why this aspect of literacy is perpetuated in schools is that teachers tend not to question its underlying rationale and

remain blind to how literacy interacts with life; they lack "the capacity to see, to attend to the particulars of what surrounds" (Greene, 1989, p. 2). There exists almost a contradiction within schools that while on one hand, the emphasis on literacy is book or trait oriented; on the other, this emphasis is based on a particular ideology or political state. Mitchell (1988) points out that "Politics is literacy and literacy is political. Literacy learning is the most important function of any society's educational system. Equally as clear is the recognition that literacy content and pedagogy are shaped by a constant interplay of ideologies and interests" (p. 2). According to Mitchell, teachers are agents of a particular authority. They enforce procedures which focus on developing literacy as trait.

Trait-State: Understanding

Adaptation vs Empowerment

Adaptation and empowerment (power) are two of the metaphors used by Scribner (1986) in describing literacy. These concepts, however, have been widely used by a number of other writers. Adaptation is generally defined as preparation for fitting into the status quo; while empowerment refers to critical reflection, action, and taking control of one's life. It is likely that some people would hold the simplistic belief that there is a one-to-one correspondence between trait or school oriented literacy and adaptation on one hand, and state or contextual or functional oriented literacy and empowerment on the other.

Greene (1989), for example, asks, "what literacy in its accustomed guises (trait oriented) has to do with" everyday reality - "the concrete, the daily, the particular, to experiences in significant roles" (p. 3). However, as Venezky (1990) points out, literacy for adaptation also occurs in "real life" literacy contexts. As an example he states that while "training for punching the hamburger and french fry keys on the fast food cash register" allows the worker to adapt to the particular job requirements, it "is inadequate for advancement to managerial positions in such enterprises" (p. 72).

Two misconceptions may arise from the trait-state/adaptation-empowerment equation. One is that literacy approached from a state or functional aspect is automatically empowering. The notion of power, of course, depends upon the degree of power involved. Certainly, a person who learns to read a street sign can be said to have power over knowing that location. But this leads to the question as to whether a street sign can only be learned in the proximity of a street, or whether this label could also be learned in a trait or book oriented literacy program.

A second misconception is that trait or book oriented literacy does not empower people. Delpit (1988) suggests that in a power engagement, the individuals seeking power are in a better position of obtaining power if they can meet the present power structure on their own (language) terms. A letter of complaint to city council in which sentences are

ill-formed, arguments poorly presented, and misspellings and grammatical errors abound is less likely to have as much impact as a letter in which the language corresponds to that of the power structure and arguments are clearly and succinctly put. In fact Delpit sees a danger in the focus of schools on process orientations to teaching (such as whole language) through which students learn a lot about language involvement (usually using their own language as a norm) rather than on the manipulation and control over language structures that may be used as an instrument in negotiating for power. She believes that lower-class children will be at a greater disadvantage as their language norms tend to vary most from those who hold power. Delpit (1988) expresses her concern as follows: "Teachers do students no service to suggest even implicitly, that "product" is not important. In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it" (p. 287).

Literacy is not trait versus state nor adaptation versus empowerment. Neither is literacy a matter of dependence versus independence. As Lytle (1990) proposes, literacy is a matter of interdependence and collaboration. Literacy is trait and state or trait-state, with the hyphen emphasizing the interdependence or interrelatedness. Interdependence is manifested in a number of ways. Trait aspects of literacy cannot be entirely separated from literacy as state, nor can literacy be promoted as state without

addressing the question of how learners cognitively process and "know" print and language structures. Literacy cannot be "given" by a teacher/instructor nor can a teacher/instructor "make" a person literate. Literacy development must occur in contexts where interpersonal relations and responsibilities are defined through consensus and respect. If literacy is to be an instrument in attaining power, then the literacy user must have control over language for that purpose; on the other hand the power holders must be prepared to address the issue as presented via language and not resort to such tactics as responding ambiguously, blaming the victim, evading a response, or using consensus of the elite as justification for a decision against the power challenger(s). Fingeret (1990) points out that literacy is only enabling in attempts to share power if those holding power are willing to redistribute that power.

Implications

If one accepts a trait-state model of literacy, then literacy programs (school or adult based) cannot be viewed as either trait or state, although there may be a focus or emphasis on one or the other. As Venezky (1990) states, there is no reason why school literacy should be "plain vanilla literacy" (p. 5), and while he admits there are fewer literacy states or contexts in childhood as opposed to adulthood, children are involved in diverse situations outside of school - situations in which literacy needs exist. On the other hand schools cannot ignore their mandate

to assist students in becoming competent users of language, both in terms of process and product. Adult literacy programs cannot focus only on assisting adults in surviving in, adapting to, or changing a situation involving literacy, without providing for the development of knowledge and strategy for language use.

Learners (children and adults) who are exposed to a trait-state literacy focussed program should develop more realistic concepts as to what constitutes reading and writing and literacy.

Accepting a trait-state model of literacy necessitates a different perspective towards assessing literacy than is prevalent at the present time. Standardized tests, which are commonly used in schools tend to measure trait aspects of literacy; however, they tend to focus only on product and often include tasks which are of minimal significance or which are peripheral to language competency. Paris (1984) suggests that assessment must identify levels of literacy in terms of tasks, knowledge, skills, and strategies.

The focus of assessment in adult literacy at present is on simulated situational or functional type tasks. In order to assess literacy as state, adults must be observed as they encounter specific tasks and attempt to meet specific literacy needs. Since this type of evaluation is not always feasible, caution should be taken in using simulated situational tasks (actually facsimiles of tasks). Certainly, the meaningfulness of these tasks to the lives of the adults

must be investigated. Adult literacy should also be assessed in terms of the reactions (or symptoms) of individuals who encounter different state relationships. Publicity campaigns aimed at informing a nation that all those who function below a certain grade or other designated level need help (or at worst, are a threat to themselves and/or the nation) have little meaning for adults who are perfectly happy with their lives sans literacy.

The nature of the assessment must also consider the individual as a person. Allport (1960) was a strong believer in learning about people from people:

When we set out to study a person's motives, we are seeking to find out what that person is trying to do in his life including, of course, what he is trying to avoid and what he is trying to be. I see no reason why we should not start our investigation by asking him to tell us the answers as he sees them (p. 101).

Assessment must take into account trait and state. The nature of the assessment must be pertinent to the literacy needs. For example, the results of a standardized reading test may not be a good predictor of how well a person will cope with literacy demands in a workplace context; an assessment of a person's ability to deal with selected and representative workplace literacy demands should be a much better predictor. However, results on a standardized test

may be a very good predictor of how well individuals may do in university.

Literacy development should be a collaborative affair, in which interpersonal relations are key. Research (Harste and Mikulecky, 1984) has shown that engaging in workplace literacy frequently involves an interpersonal sharing. Literacy development in a school or academic based program should also allow for interpersonal interaction between learners as they address literacy goals, and between instructors and students who learn to respect and trust each other as co-partners in literacy development.

Finally, the overlap of the concepts of adaptation and empowerment must be addressed. The world is never completely static (necessitating adaptation) nor always in flux (involving empowerment). Events tend to evolve so that adaptation and empowerment interact. Literacy groups or agencies must carefully examine their role in adaptation and empowerment. Adult literacy groups must recognize that activism entails a "going beyond" the status quo but to go beyond, implies a knowledge and understanding of present conditions, including language use. Likewise, schools must be flexible in providing for students with diverse values, and for those who come from different socioeconomic levels or different cultures. Head Start programs, for example, should not focus only on changing the child, the family, and the community. The school must also change and not just in terms of offering different programs but also in accepting a

different value system and adjusting its total organization in light of new values and roles.

Concluding Statement

Adult literacy, a current and significant issue, has been defined from different perspectives which have had profound implications describing how adults function in literacy contexts and in identifying who might be interested in and benefit from literacy programs. Literacy has been addressed as an educational issue, a social issue, an economic and a political issue. There is no doubt that what adult literacy is, transcends many areas.

What is needed is a conceptual framework to help adult literacy stakeholders understand the interrelatedness of the many factors that are integral to or impinge on adult literacy, to understand when an issue is or is not literacy based. It is hoped that the Trait-State Model will, at least, constitute a beginning for such understanding.

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