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ABSTRACT

Adult literacy is a context-dependent, purposeful, and constantly changing phenomenon. What counts for literacy at the end of the 20th century is not what counted for literacy at the beginning of the century. Literacy is the ability to read, use written information, and write appropriately in a range of contexts. Literacy also includes the recognition and meaning of numbers and basic mathematical formulas within texts. Literacy must change over a lifetime. The 1989 national survey of adult literacy in Australia (No Single Measure) broke new ground by adopting a definition of literacy as social practice. The most recent evidence of the extent of literacy and numeracy difficulties experienced by Australia's population comes from the 1996 Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL) (n=9,302). By conducting the SAL, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) became part of the International Adult Literacy Survey. According to the ABS survey, the percentages of Australians with very poor, poor, moderate, and good/very good literacy skills are 19%, 26%, 35%, and 17%, respectively. The decision to base literacy programs on a remedial or developmental approach will depend on how literacy is defined. The ABS survey also showed a clear link between literacy and work. (Contains 32 references.) (MN)

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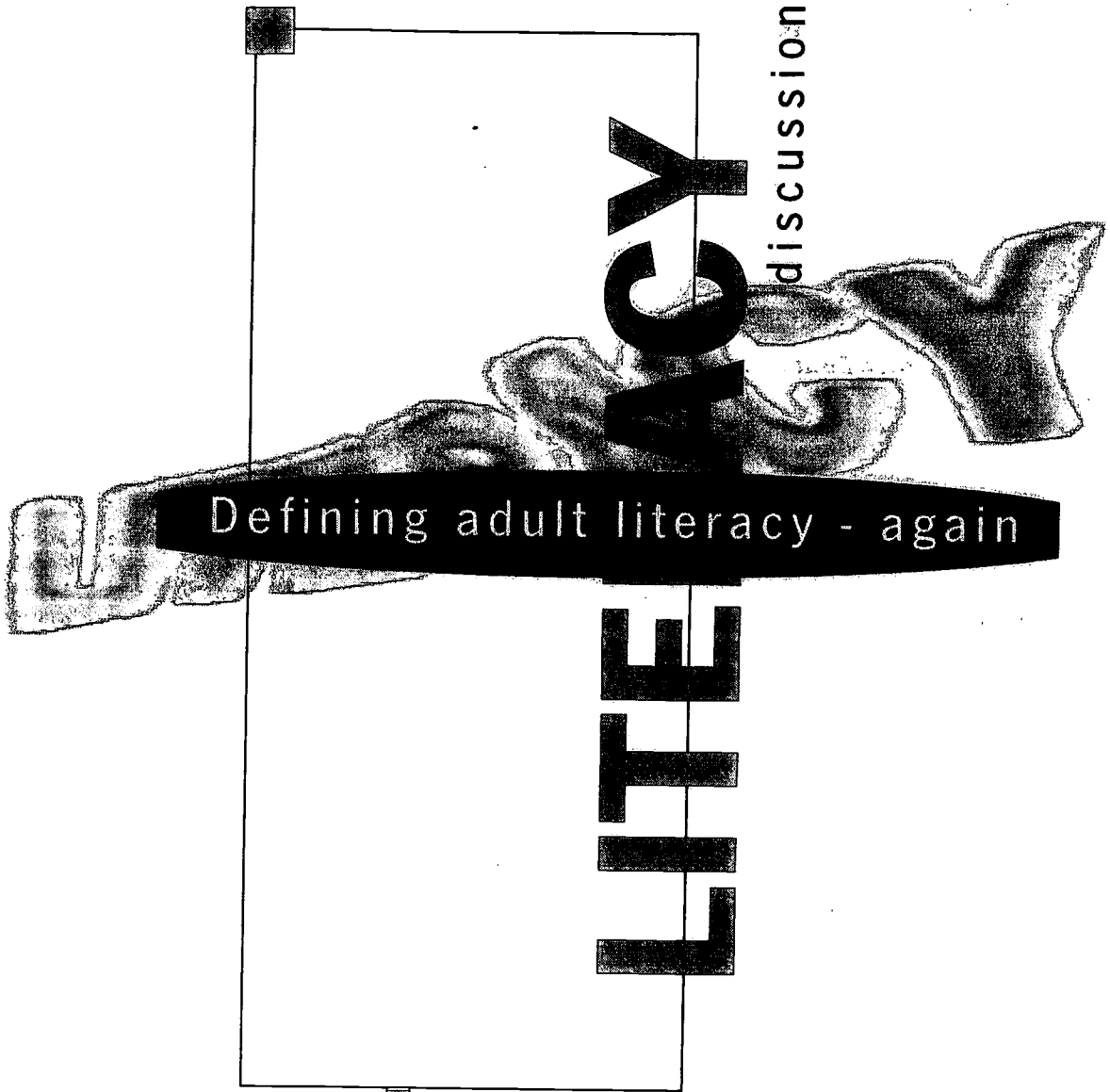

LITERACY

Defining adult literacy - again

August 1999

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Rationale for this paper

This paper seeks to redress the myths and inadequate definitions surrounding the issue of adult literacy. Reference is made to a paper written in 1997 by Dr Paul Brock, *Breaking some of the myths - again*. In that paper, Brock effectively exploded the myth that literacy levels are falling and exposed many of the myths about school literacy. By drawing adult literacy into the spotlight, we seek to examine the real dimensions of the issue of adult literacy and similarly expose some of the myths which surround adults who have problems reading and writing.

Stating the problem

Adult literacy periodically finds itself under the spotlight. At the time of writing, media focus is on the issue of compulsory literacy training for youth under the latest Mutual Obligation requirements for jobseekers. Since the 1980s there has been an increasing recognition by government, training bodies and political commentators alike of the part that language, literacy and numeracy skills play in vocational training and work-preparedness. This is welcomed by the specialists and practitioners working in the adult literacy field but it also places them in a dilemma because debate in the public arena is often founded on simplistic and indeed erroneous notions of what literacy is. More particularly, discussion is frequently couched in terms of a sudden and unexpected crisis.

Half-truths, misconceptions and myths arise from limited definitions of literacy. When we adopt a more comprehensive understanding of what literacy is, then the answers to the questions commentators ask will become self-evident and other more pertinent and searching questions will arise.

Outline of our argument

In this paper we aim to set out a comprehensive definition of literacy. We hope to demonstrate that accepting such a definition would not only dispel some of the myths that abound but negate the need for approaching the issue in crisis mode. A comprehensive definition captures the innate complexity of literacy and allows a more thorough and reasoned understanding of the link between literacy and work.

First, we offer our definition of literacy, stating what it is and also what it is not. Then through a brief critique of the most recent statistical surveys and discussion of *remedial* versus *developmental* approaches to literacy, we elaborate the understanding of the term 'literacy' still further.

We illustrate the definition by exploring some of the myths which Brock raised in his paper. In particular, we seek to elucidate what adult literacy means by exploring the relationship between literacy and work and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy in schools.

Finally, we critically evaluate the assumptions underlying one of the most commonly asked questions about literacy - 'How many adults in Australia are illiterate?' In so doing, we illustrate the mismatch between popular understandings of literacy and what, in fact, it means to be literate in our society.

Definition of literacy

We offer our definition of literacy based on our teaching experience, study and knowledge of research into aspects of language, literacy and numeracy.

What literacy is NOT

Myths about literacy illustrate the misconceptions which arise from a paucity of understanding of what it means to be literate in our society. Literacy, as we will explore below, is a complex notion: a context-dependent social practice. What is very certain, however, is that adult literacy is not easily quantifiable; it is precisely not the very thing so many media pundits would like it to be.

How many illiterates are there? How long does it take for an adult to become literate? What's the average reading age? What percentage...? Questions such as these, seeking a simple, water-tight numerical answer often betray lack of understanding about the subject.

It is interesting to note that Wickert in her survey, *No Single Measure,* took great pains to avoid estimating a percentage 'illiterate', but despite this a figure of 10% was extrapolated (Wickert 1992 p. 149). This figure was used throughout International Literacy Year (1990) and beyond by the media and in literacy campaigns.

Literacy is not simply a matter of whether a person can recognise or spell a list of decontexualised words, or 'do sums' out of any context of use.

It is worth noting here that the term 'illiteracy' means the absence of literacy, i.e. where people are not aware of any connection between spoken and written language. This is extremely rare in developed countries. The term 'illiterate' therefore is not used by most people in the field of adult literacy because of its inaccuracy and also because of the stigma attached to it. Nonetheless, the term is to be found in some quotations in this paper.

What literacy IS

So, what is literacy? Brock concludes his paper with quotes from the NSW Department of School Education's *Literacy 97 Strategy: Focus on Literacy*. These statements have equal currency when applied to adults, and it is worthwhile repeating some of that document here:

I. Since 1991, the very nature of what constitutes literacy has been expanded by the emerging multimedia and information technologies, the appearance of the Internet and further developments in computing and word processing.

II. Literacy is learned in social contexts as people use literacy practices to interact with each other to achieve particular purposes. It occurs in a variety of situational contexts - in the home, in the community, at school, on the job, in recreational and other informal learning contexts. In the contemporary world, we employ literacy practices to argue, to explain, to debate, to demonstrate how something can be done, to provide information, to explore issues, to entertain, and to communicate creatively.

III. The literacy needs of individuals change throughout their lifetimes. As they move into different situations or specialised areas of learning and experience new technologies, they are continually required to adapt and extend their knowledge and literacy skills so that they can understand and use language appropriately.

IV. Practices of literacy evolve over time in accordance with changing demands made on individuals and changing expectations within the social and cultural context. (cited in Brock, 1997 p. 13)

Thus, literacy is a constantly **changing** phenomenon; what counts for literacy at the end of the 20th century is not what counted for literacy in the first decade of that century. Importantly, literacy must be viewed as **purposeful**; it is the ability to read, to use written information and to write **appropriately** in a range of contexts. Literacy also includes the recognition and meaning of **numbers** and basic mathematical formula within texts. The third point, that literacy needs change over a lifetime, provides an important argument for the provision of life-long learning opportunities as we shall argue below. The final point is that the practice of literacy itself changes in different social and cultural contexts, and it is of fundamental importance to grasp this understanding before one can begin to see what being literate actually means.

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Literacy further incorporates the notion of **critical literacy**. To be a fully literate individual, one needs to be able to use language skills to critique and question what one reads, hears and sees: to query why a person has constructed a text in a particular way, to notice what has been left out, to observe how the writer has constructed the text and consider who has published the text and why. Indeed, this critical dimension enables the individual to not just participate in a society but to challenge, and perhaps change, it. To use the words of Paulo Friere, the Brazilian 'father' of pedagogy of social action for the oppressed:

> Illiteracy is one of the concrete expressions of an unjust social reality. Illiteracy is not a strictly linguistic or exclusively pedagogical or methodological problem. It is political (Wickert 1992 p. 153).

The working definition perhaps most commonly used by professionals in the literacy and numeracy fields in this country is provided by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL):

> Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy that allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in a society (ACAL 1989)

The approach we take in this paper, is that literacy is not an isolated 'subject' to study, not a discrete, decontextualised set of skills that people have or have not got, but is part and practice of a community or workplace context. And it is important that these notions of literacy become the dominant ones and replace the more simplistic, 'common sense', '3Rs' or 'back to basics' views that seem to proliferate outside of educational contexts.

It must be understood that literacy is not a universal, neutral, autonomous skill that one can acquire once and for all regardless of social context, race, gender, cultural background and socio-economic position. It is closely linked to power structures in society. Thus, adopting a definition of literacy as social practice has immediate implications for the issues of literacy testing and the delivery of literacy teaching and vocational training.

Taking the issue of testing first, or rather the attempts to statistically measure and quantify literacy, we briefly describe two studies and consider the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) recent findings.

Rosie Wickert's 1989 survey, *No Single Measure*

In 1989 Rosie Wickert broke new ground when the results of the first national survey of adults with literacy difficulties were published. *No Single Measure* adopted a definition of literacy as social practice and, as the title suggests, challenged the

notion that literacy is a discrete quantifiable ability. It is not a skill or set of skills which can be neatly matched to a reading age and it cannot be tested and measured in a simple numerical way. Wickert took the title from Kirsch and Jungeblut:

> There is no single measure or specific point on a scale that separates the 'literate' from the 'illiterate' (cited in Wickert 1989, title page)

This statement was based on the observation that a person's literacy is contingent on their social circumstances and their familiarity with the literacy demands of particular situations. Furthermore, as discussed above, literacy changes over time as these demands alter.

More sophisticated than many previous studies, this survey attempted to measure three dimensions of literacy - document (eg forms and memos), prose (eg newspaper articles and books) and quantitative (numerical operations) literacy and focussed on individuals' reading abilities.

The 1997 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey: *The Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL)*

The most recent evidence of the extent of literacy and numeracy difficulties experienced by the Australian population comes from a survey conducted in 1996. By conducting SAL, the Australian Bureau of Statistics became part of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) co-ordinated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada. This international study involved many countries undertaking similar surveys over a four-year period.

In Australia 9,302 people were surveyed. Interestingly, the survey attempted to measure both subjective and objective aspects of literacy. In the first part people were asked to rate their own reading, writing and basic mathematical skills and note was made of how often people used these skills in their daily life and in the workplace.

The second part of the survey was an objective assessment of the same three types of literacy that had been tested by Wickert, namely prose, document and quantitative. Similarly to Wickert, SAL did not define literacy in terms of a basic threshold above which someone is 'literate' and below which someone is 'illiterate' (ABS 1997b). Instead, literacy is defined as a continuum for each of the three types of literacy. Five levels of achievement were determined.

There has, however, been some concern about the methodology used (Levine 1998 p. 46). For example, some critics argued that the issue of familiarity with the task itself is a factor for consideration; thus, if you are not a regular theatre goer, then answering questions about buying a ticket to 'Les Miserables' might be more difficult than it is for regular theatre goers. This is because we know that familiarity with a literacy/numeracy task is a strong predictor of success in completing that task.

Thus, as we can see, despite the resources and extensive international expertise devoted to developing this latest survey instrument, attempts to measure literacy via a bank of tasks is always problematic, as this approach assumes that everyone is equally familiar with all the tasks.

The findings of the ABS survey

Some brief comment on the findings enhances our definition of what it is to be literate. The results show that the majority of Australians rate their skills as excellent or good. That is, people rated their skills highly, in stark contrast to the 'objective' assessment of the results we see below.

The interesting question is why there is such a disjunction between perception and 'reality'. Part of the answer might lie in that, as the survey also showed, many people actually read and write very little. For example, responses indicated that only 24.5% of people write more than one page per week. Thus, when reflecting on one's ability, a person might consider their writing skills are adequate for the purposes they require. There is a predictable link between how often people use literacy and how they rate their skills; predictable because we know that literacy skills need to be used regularly to maintain them.

The survey showed that those most at risk of having limited English literacy and numeracy skills are indigenous Australians, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, those over 65, the unemployed and those with little schooling.

Having said this, another finding of the survey was that, whilst non-English speaking background people had the highest percentage of literacy problems in English of any group (although not necessarily in their first language), there are numerically more English speaking background (ESB) adults with poor or very poor skills. Thus, the common assumption that most of the adults in Australia who have difficulties in reading and writing English are from non-English speaking backgrounds is plainly false. The vast majority of those with literacy problems actually speak English as their first language.

One of the key findings of this survey was that across all three types of literacy, young people (in the age range 15-19) performed significantly better than older people (in the age range 55-64). This suggests that, if anything, our literacy is improving, not deteriorating. As Brock pointed out in his article, things were **not** better in the 'good old days'(1997).

Thus, several factors appear to be of importance when profiling those adults with limited literacy skills. Schooling is certainly one of those factors, but we also know that there are many different reasons why some individuals do not learn to read and write adequately whilst at school age. For example, health problems, socio-economic problems, interrupted schooling, attitude toward school, absence from school, late detection in hearing and sight problems and non-English speaking background may all be contributing factors.

We also know the toll that excessive stress places on an individual learner's ability to learn. Undue stress from whatever cause; economic, familial or peer group pressure and in whatever manifestation; emotional, physiological, psychological or a combination of all these, means that there will always be a body of students who are not ready or able to maximise their learning potential during their school career. If the stresses placed upon them start early in, or indeed before, their school career, then their struggles with literacy will impede their ability to learn other curriculum subjects. We can conclude, in relation to schooling, that no matter how high the quality of literacy teaching at school, we can never guarantee that all students will leave school with adequate literacy skills to enable them to cope with the changes in literacy demands they will encounter as adults.

Whilst one survey is not sufficient data to show a trend over time, the ABS figures would tend to indicate that Australia has a significant literacy 'problem' but these figures are also in line with other developed countries including Canada, the USA and Switzerland. The exception is Sweden, which dramatically outperforms all other countries in the sample. ALIO would concur with ACAL's appraisal that:

> The findings of (recent) adult literacy surveys are clearly a cause for concern and they are certainly an indication that this is no time to reduce funding for adult literacy and numeracy provision. (ACAL, 1998 p. 6)

However, as ACAL go on to say:

> These kinds of findings however are not new and although they may have surprised many in the general population they would have been known to adult literacy and numeracy educators. (ACAL, 1998 p. 6)

Summary of findings of the ABS survey

Of all Australian respondents aged between 15 and 74:

86% rated their reading skills as excellent or good

80% rated their writing skills as excellent or good

79% rated their basic mathematical skills as excellent or good

19% are at Level 1 (very poor skills)

26% are at Level 2 (poor skills)

35% are at Level 3 (moderate)

17% are at Levels 4 and 5 (good and very good skills)

Remedial or developmental ?

Finally, in our exploration of the definition of literacy, it is important to realise how different understandings of the word 'literacy' will actually determine how we approach literacy teaching and frame government policy and political activity. Often the traditional way of viewing adult literacy is as essentially *remedial*. In Australia it is expected that everyone except small children can read and write. So, anyone who has gone through the Australian school system yet 'lacks' literacy, presumably 'failed' to learn it at school. Hence, a *deficit* model attaches to the students and the field of adult literacy. The 'remedy' attaching to the deficit model is to teach literacy as a subject in which the learner needs to succeed **before** attempting any other vocational learning.

When failure rests with the individual, it is easy to allocate responsibility or blame. Failure to learn at school is seen as illegitimate, that it is the student's own fault, their intellectual inadequacy or a result of their own behavioural wrongdoing. Alternatively, if the student is not at fault, then teachers, 'boffins' and/or educational institutions must all have failed them.

Such an attitude is exemplified by the columnist Padraic P. McGuinness who writes:

> Of course, the first question ought to be why anybody who has been through the school system without learning to read and write has not come to attention at an earlier age. This is clearly a failure of the school system and of individual teachers - but it may be a part of larger problems such as dysfunctional families, peer pressure or indiscipline in the schools. (*Sydney Morning Herald* 30.1.99)

Thus, for McGuinness, the fault lies largely with the schools and their teachers, and, to a lesser degree, with parents. Absence of teacher control and lack of discipline echoes a common refrain but the reasons for 'failure' to learn in school are much more complex than that.

In response, we would point to the large body of literature and research which shows that literacy starts well before formal education and schooling. That literacy practices in the home have a major impact on the development of a child's literacy skills is well documented, for example, in the extensive work of Shirley Brice Heath. Her studies show that those children whose home life incorporates literacy practices such as the observation of family members reading and writing, having bedtime stories read aloud to them from an early age and the enquiry format of question and answer which might accompany such a reading, have a better chance of succeeding at school (Brice Heath 1994). This is because their home literacy practices closely reflect the literacy practices they meet at school. Her studies also show that those children whose home literacy practices do not reflect the literacy practices of schooling begin their formal education at a considerable disavantage.

In his article, Brock illustrates this point through reference to his own daughter;

> My five year old Sophie writes beautiful sentences, replete with meaning, more often than not accurately spelt (and she learns by having her spelling "guesses"

> corrected)...She relies upon the grounding in and her mimicking of these literacy practices - and their correct formulation - which she has received in our home along with the richness of texts. (Brock 1997 p.10)

The point here is not to blame the parents when children 'fail' in an education system but rather to acknowledge that education systems principally reflect the values of the dominant culture in that society. As Shirley Brice Heath so clearly illustrated in her research of the literacy practices of Afro-American and white working-class children, they are both, in different degrees, ill-equipped to meet the expectations of the white middle-class schooling system in the USA. They are poorly prepared for the assumptions about learning and other behaviours they will encounter in school. The 'hidden curriculum' operates on a value structure which is not completely familiar to all students.

As educators, we know that schooling is the one of the major vehicles for socialisation in Western society. When students find that many of the implicit values in school are not the same as those rewarded at home, then problems or delays in adjustment may arise. There has been extensive research into the effect on student performance of such variance and the relationship between home and school is an important focus of teacher training courses.

A productive way of looking at literacy is to view it non-judgementally, as a legitimate area for **ongoing** skill development, that is lifelong learning.

Adults may seek help with literacy when what they and/or their employers used to consider as 'adequate' literacy changes; they may need to upskill due to work (or other social) reasons. This model of lifelong learning is more in line with current research, which sees literacy, like oracy, as inextricably linked with the society within which it is used and the social uses and purposes to which it is put.

The *remedial* approach to literacy is one that argues an 'upfront' approach to literacy issues in training. It argues that literacy problems need to be addressed before an adult can learn any other subject or follow training. Literacy needs are best taught as **integrated** with subject matter with which the adult learner wishes to engage. Each subject will have its own genres, vocabulary and language conventions. The full meanings available in a subject area can only be realised when one has a competent grasp of how those people talk and write about a particular field, whether it is the legal profession, panel beating, gardening or art history. The language is inseparable from the content because language constructs the content as it is communicated from one person to another.

The deficit model is appealing in its simplicity and it is easy to make broad generalisations that seem plausible. Brock cites Macken in her lament that: 'myth repeated enough, becomes part of the community's pool of knowledge; misconceptions, held with enough passion, set the agenda for society' (Macken 1997 SMH cited in Brock 1997 p. 1).

A *developmental* approach to literacy, however, sees literacy as a lifelong learning process; being literate means being in a flexible and dynamic state. It is perhaps best thought of as a process rather than a final static product.

Literacy is a social practice or behaviour which changes as demands and common practices in society change. Indeed 'new literacies' are continually developing and in turn the proliferation of these 'new literacies' shape the society. Language has a symbiotic relationship with society. Commensurate with all this, the needs of the individual are changing throughout their lifetime and indeed every time an individual moves into new linguistic contexts and needs to transfer their literacy skills. Our teaching methodology requires a *developmental* approach to literacy which makes use of an integrated approach to teaching. This means integrating both new training and subject knowledge with the language requirements and also integrating aspects of literacies together such as numeracy and computer literacy.

The link between literacy and work

The 1997 ABS survey cited above showed a clear relationship between literacy abilities and labour force status. Labour force status was classified as 'employed', 'unemployed' or 'not in the workforce'. Significantly, when we view the statistics of Level 1 respondents from the perspective of labour force status we find, ' The proportion of unemployed people at Level 1 (30%) and of those not in the labour force (35 %) was almost three times that of employed people (12%) (ABS 1997 p. 25).'

Also, there was a larger proportion of employed people rated at the higher levels (3, 4 and 5) compared with the other two categories (unemployed and people at these levels). The survey also indicated that individuals with lower literacy levels were generally in the lowest income brackets.

Limited literacy may contribute to a person *remaining* unemployed, or being stuck in a job that is poorly paid but makes few demands on the employee's literacy. However, it does not *cause* unemployment. A clear distinction needs to be drawn between individual and societal factors in unemployment. Certainly, limited literacy skills may well be one of the manifold variables affecting an individual's work chances, but it does not follow that literacy levels in a society have a direct causal relationship with a nation's level of employment. Or, to put it another way, there would still be unemployed adults even if they all had university degrees. This was cogently argued by Luke in his paper *Literacy and Work in 'New Times' (1992).*

More highly developed literacy skills *may* contribute to an increase in workers' flexibility and range of skills, may lead to greater job mobility, may reduce the chance of being screened out of some jobs and may increase individual independence in dealing with literacy demands (Lo Bianco & Freebody 1997 p. 109). However, they may equally simply help decide which individual gets one of the limited jobs available, without reducing the overall pool of unemployed.

We should make no false claims that literacy can create jobs, promote employees or increase productivity. Literacy is only one of many factors that potentially contribute to employment and wealth creation. It is important that both government and media have an educated awareness of what a more highly literate labour force *can* and also

cannot achieve (Luke 1992 pp. 12-13). Systemic industrial sector and labour market solutions are still required.

When considering the connection between literacy and work, it is important to observe that the transference of literacy skills from one context to another is not a simple process. Brock's formulation, 'Graduates: literate one year, illiterate the next', points to the unfamiliarity of the content matter that the new worker is dealing with, and 'the new linguistic contexts within which the educational graduate from the former 'institution' is usually expected to operate immediately' (Brock 1997 p. 11). And one can readily imagine other circumstances where one's literacy skills would be challenged by the context of situation. For example, we could consider the stress placed on a prospective worker filling in a literacy screen for an employer, or a manager having to attend a work retreat writing and communication course without the usual secretarial support.

Brock (1997) cites *Australia's Language: the Australian Language and Literacy Policy* which noted:

> Research in the United States indicates that people who perform literacy tasks adequately in a high school setting cannot necessarily perform literacy tasks of similar complexity in a workplace or community setting. (1991 p. 38)

Similarly, in Australia, Mikilecky reported that students who performed literacy tasks adequately in school cannot immediately perform similar tasks in a workplace or community setting (in Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997p. 102). Furthermore, they found that there were greater numbers and different types of texts and activities demanded in the workplace than in schools.

In exposing this myth, Brock seeks to convince the uninformed that it is not a simple process to transfer literacy skills from one set of contexts to another. Teachers are aware that there needs to be explicit instruction in the features of a text and the opportunity for a cycle of practice and feedback in order to achieve mastery of a specific text-type. Just because they have left formal education or joined the workplace, adults are not somehow immune from this need.

The value and importance of explicitly teaching subject content integrated with language use in that subject is widely recognised in the adult literacy field. It is not only necessary for those who are encountering difficulties with the new discourse but also for the more competent students. Indeed, it would be impossible to teach a subject or a new work practice without recourse to their respective language use; they are inextricably linked. The need is to explicitly address the broad language needs of the learner and move beyond just teaching specialist vocabulary. The implications of all this for the current Vocational Education and Training (VET) in schools initiative is that the literacy requirements of any job will need to be taught along with the content. Where the literacy demands of the job are small, then broader educational goals will be set and taken up by the school.

Conclusion

When faced with such a seemingly easy question as 'How many adults in Australia are illiterate?', we are first obliged to address the nature of literacy. The question implies that being literate is an 'all or nothing' situation. However, as we have argued throughout this paper, literacy is context-dependent and the questioner would need to consider both what the literacy skills were being measured in relation to and what the relevant situational factors were. We need to be aware, when we are discussing being literate, whether it is, for example, in relation to shopping for groceries, paying a gas bill or writing a tender document, for the texts are of different complexity. We also need to be aware of the context in which we engage with the text and our purpose. Do we want to simply know how much we owe on a gas bill, or do we want to challenge the amount and comment on the service? Most of us would have had experience of our own literacy skills being challenged when reading a legal or medical document, for example. Literacy is essentially purposeful and it is honed and shaped throughout our lives, as our language use itself takes part in shaping our changing relationships and the contexts we encounter. Literacy is a lifelong process. Even if the questioner is referring to some basic skill or imaginary base line, the same applies. It is indeed perhaps most helpful to move away altogether from the idea of literacy and start to talk about different literacies: multiple literacies to incorporate the range of tasks which challenge people today, including computer literacy and visual literacy.

The above question also raises some of the methodological problems, which we touched on earlier in this paper, of trying to quantify the extent of the problem. Interestingly, questions of how many people would self-identify as having such a problem were illuminated in the ABS survey. If a person was coping well with their daily affairs or indeed, as is sometimes the case, doing extremely well financially in a family business despite only having limited literacy skills, is there in fact a problem? Should such a person be counted as a literacy statistic if the person does not identify as having a problem? Indeed, does a problem exist, and for whom? What is pertinent to remember here is that literacy students usually self-refer when there has been some change in their life, such as a promotion at work, a change of job or a change in domestic circumstances. They are motivated to address the problem and this is of fundamental importance in the teaching of adults. Best results are achieved when adult learners have clear goals and direct their own learning.

Whilst defining literacy is a difficult process, we trust that by illustrating it in relation to literacy and work, we have teased out some of the issues. Practitioners and theorists in the field have much to contribute to the debate. Political commentators in the literacy debate, and those who publish or broadcast them, have a public duty to ensure they provide accurate reporting from an informed position. Our duty, as practitioners and theorists, is to make available information based on extensive teaching experience, research and serious thought. By so doing, we can assist commentators in employing more comprehensive notions of the nature of literacy □

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