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ABSTRACT

This booklet is intended to help new adult literacy practitioners in Australia explore the possible meanings of the term "literacy." The booklet begins with the question, What is literacy? The next (and largest) section of the booklet considers various metaphors of literacy. A table detailing some ways of talking about literacy is presented. It lists the following topics: six conditions (sickness and/or handicap, ignorance, incapacity, oppression, deprivation, deviance); ways and means of responding to them; the goals of the possible responses/interventions; and situations where the interventions may be applied. Also included in the section on metaphors of literacy are discussions of the following topics: literacy as control; literacy as a "crisis"; literacy as autonomy and the importance of helping learners master basic skills; literacy as a right and a means of promoting social justice; literacy for social action and the concept of transformation; literacy as technology; and literacy as social practice. Concluding the booklet is a discussion of the implications of the various definitions of, and ways of looking at, literacy for adult literacy practitioners. Appended are nine selected definitions of literacy and eight examples of literacy as control. (Contains 41 references.) (MN)

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DISCOURSES
OF
LITERACY

Jean Searle
Griffith University

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RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE SERIES



DISCOURSES OF LITERACY

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Discourses of literacy

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Introduction

This booklet has been written to assist new comers to the field of adult literacy in examining what the term 'literacy' might mean. This is quite a daunting task as volumes have already been written about literacy: its history, definitions and measurement, its representation as a range of skills or as social practices and its impact on individuals and on broader socio-economics. Also, quite recently, a new academic discipline of 'Literacy Studies' has opened up 'literacy' as a field in which theorists from a range of disciplines can explore "the role of literacy in social development; the economic and cultural values of literacy; and the effects of literacy on cognitive development" (deCastell, Luke & Egans, 1986: vii). So the problem is one of what to select from the abundance of available information.

This has been resolved by focusing on aspects of literacy which have had a significant impact on the field. The starting point is a consideration of the term 'literacy' and how the meanings attached to it vary depending on the time period and the context of use. Then, using Barton's (1994) discussion of metaphors of literacy as a guide, some discourses of literacy are outlined and their influence on the adult literacy field explored. Finally, some implications for practitioners are discussed.

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What is literacy?

If you were to ask a range of people what they think 'literacy' is, you are likely to find that they respond in a number of different ways. It may be that they equate 'literacy' with being able to read and write - but read and write what? To a child, 'reading' might involve sitting in a circle and taking turns reading a story at school, or snuggling up to Grandad as he reads a bedtime story. To an adult, 'reading' might be turning to the sports pages in the newspaper to find sporting results, or associated with completing an application form. Each of these definitions suggest that reading is purposeful, involves a text and implies a context. However, other people will talk about literacy in terms of newspaper headlines such as, 'Literacy standards fall' or 'Learn to read or lose the dole'. But who decides what the standards should be? Do they change through time? And, why is literacy perceived to be a 'social good'? In an attempt to answer these questions, the following quotation from Gee (1990) is presented as a starting point.

Literacy is a socially contested term. We can choose to use this word in any of several different ways. Each such choice incorporates a tacit or overt ideological theory about the distribution of social goods and has important social and moral consequences.
(Gee, 1990: 27)

As Gee (1990) points out, the subject of literacy has social, political and educational implications. In fact, according to Christie (1990:2), there is "virtually no area of contemporary life in which literacy is not involved in some way, and it is imperative that all people understand the many kinds of literacy which collectively have such an impact on their lives". As a result, being 'literate' depends on the definition of literacy that is adopted at a particular time in history and in a particular context (see Appendix 1 for a selection of definitions). Further, as demonstrated in Appendix 1, there is no universally accepted definition of literacy. In fact, literacy may be viewed as a cognitive or thinking skill, an emancipatory act, or as a social practice. Also, we can see that definitions of literacy evolve over time, depending on the desirability of literacy, both politically and philosophically. Literacy is dynamic. In summary, although Appendix 1 presents a limited number of definitions, they represent some of the major influences on the theories and practices underpinning the Adult Literacy field.

Metaphors of literacy

Given the difficulty in defining literacy, many commentators have resorted to the use of metaphor. What is interesting is that the actual metaphors used vary, depending on how literacy is viewed. The following table, (Table 1), presents some examples of the different ways of talking about literacy.

Table 1: Some ways of talking about literacy

	Condition	Response	Means	Goal	Application
1	Sickness	Treatment	Clinical intervention	Remittance	
	Handicap	Rehabilitation	Compensatory aids	Alleviation	Dyslexia
2	Ignorance	Training	Instruction	Mastery	Orthodox literacy tuition
3	Incapacity	Therapy	Counselling	Adjustment Assimilation Autonomy	
4	Oppression	Empowerment	Political organization/ Legislation	Rights	Conscientization
5	Deprivation	Welfare	Reallocation of material resources	Benefit	Positive discrimination
6	Deviance	Control	Isolation Containment Physical coercion	Correction Conformity	Negative discrimination

Source: Barton (1994: 13)

These metaphors represent quite narrow concepts of literacy. However, when the term 'literacy' is linked to computers or politics, as in 'computer literacy' or 'political literacy', the concept is much broader. It is in this sense that the term 'literacy' is used in the next sections of this booklet, that is, as an overarching metaphor for some of the activities and discourses associated with adult literacy. Each of the following discourses will have been drawn upon by adult literacy practitioners to a greater or

lesser extent, at different times, depending on their own background and interests, or educational context.

Literacy as control

An historical overview of literacy, such as that presented in Appendix 2, shows that as a concept 'literacy' has never been politically neutral. In many societies, literacy has been used as a means of maintaining power and control, whether by religious, government, bureaucratic or trading groups with vested interests. The ancient Greeks for example, perfected the use of rhetoric as a means of persuasion or social control. Writing was denounced as encouraging mental laziness (Ong, 1982) and also because it could be interpreted by the reader in many ways other than those intended by the author. This powerful argument was subsequently presented as a rationale for restricting access to literacy as a means of religious control. For example, literacy in the Catholic tradition was reserved for church authorities only, for fear of incorrect interpretations (Heath, 1986; Gee, 1990). In contrast, the Swedish literacy campaign of the 17th century advocated the teaching of reading, of horn (prayer) books, in order that people might read God's word with their own eyes. Nevertheless, such 'reading' was strictly mediated by religious authorities (Arnové & Graff, 1987; Graff, 1986). This tradition is continued today through a range of fundamentalist religions in which a literal 'reading' is required.

As a result, literacy became gendered and elitist, that is, restricted to two classes of men, the upper classes of society (priests, rulers, scholars and the military) and the middle-class traders. Such users of literacy reflected the various power relations (civic, religious and military) within society (Gough, 1988). In addition, alongside the use of literacy for commercial purposes was the need for written records for administrative and bureaucratic purposes, traditions which continue today, some of which are documented in Appendix 2.

With the industrialisation of Western Europe came mass education. Whereas previously, an elite form of education based on a classical tradition had been available to the upper classes, now, all children were required to attend compulsory schooling. However, the purpose of public education at this time was again as a form of social control, to produce sober, law abiding citizens (Limage, 1987) and compliant workers. As a result, public education was limited to rote learning, drill and copying in a fair hand (Donald, cited in Green, 1993). Importantly, the policy of using education as part of a civilising process was one which also extended to

the colonies, particularly in relation to the indigenous populations, though with varying degrees of 'success' (see Fesl, 1993).

Similar views on the importance of education would also have informed UNESCO, an organisation which, since the end of World War II, has been at pains to quantify, explain and remedy the problem of 'illiteracy'. Although the focus has been on measuring the extent of adult 'illiteracy' by gathering statistics on access to schooling, in developed, developing and underdeveloped countries, it could be argued that these campaigns represented another aspect of social control. Initially seen as 'developmental', the early UNESCO literacy campaigns and the World Bank literacy programs were based on the premise that a literate population would somehow increase the productivity and hence the economic development of their country. The mass literacy campaigns, particularly in the developing Third World, focused on 'inoculating' individuals with literacy in order to achieve cognitive enhancement, social and economic development. They also had a political agenda, being "something of a crusade...the moral equivalent of war" (Bhola, 1982 cited in Arnove & Graff, 1987: 3). But as Limage (1993: 23) stated, "When learners in these...programs discovered that the only 'functionality' involved was to make them better workers, the majority of the experiments failed". Limage and others questioned not only the actual purpose of the campaigns, but also who had (or has) access to literacy (in relation to gender and class).

Literacy as 'a crisis'

In the previous section, we have seen how Western governments and colonial authorities used literacy as part of a civilising process and further, how UNESCO linked literacy campaigns to economic development. However, as Graff (1986: 72) pointed out, the assumption that increased literacy will improve economic development, growth and progress, is a myth that is both limiting and distorting. So, we do need to be mindful of what literacy can reasonably be expected to do. In addition, we need to be aware of how statistics about literacy are used. Literacy 'myths' are often perpetuated (or manufactured) by social commentators who use a range of definitions and statistics to highlight (or invent) a 'literacy crisis'. As Cook-Gumperz (1987: 1) argued,

Literacy rates are seen as indicators of the health of the society and as a barometer of the social climate. As a result, illiteracy takes on a symbolic significance, reflecting any disappointment, not only with the workings of the education system, but with society as a whole.

If literacy levels are determined by achievements on standardised tests, falling scores on such tests would then support a 'slide hypothesis' (Welch & Freebody, 1993: 9) which could be used to justify a 'back-to-basics' approach to literacy education. Hodgens (1994) however, argues that these sudden 'crises' reflect a fundamental shift in the social order, following the instability and permissiveness which marked society in the 1970s.

"Illiteracy, as reported, is an indicator of a deeper institutional malaise. The moral order of society itself is seen to be at stake" (Hodgens, 1994: 17). According to Hodgens, media headlines associated with literacy tend to use emotive images of affliction, disease or shame, for example, "Learn to read or lose the dole". Such images, it is argued, reflect the discourse of moral disorder and the consequent need for greater control and accountability.

Literacy as autonomy: basic skills

The 'autonomous' model of literacy, as defined by Street (1984) views literacy acquisition as the development of a series of decontextualised basic skills. It assumes unidimensional progress from illiterate to literate, or indeed towards 'civilisation' or economic 'take-off'. In America this discourse was aligned with Protestant missionary groups such as Laubach and the Summer Institute of linguistics (Barton, 1994:190). Looking at Table 1, the metaphors associated with this 'conservative' view include those of sickness and ignorance. So, for example, 'illiteracy' may be seen as a 'problem' or deficit which must be 'detected', 'treated early', 'prevented' or remediated in some way. This view of literacy presumes that the skills of reading, writing and enumerating are context free, are universal in time and space, and generate consequences for cognition, social progress and individual achievement; in other words, they are generic skills.

The adoption of skills-based approaches to instruction and structured curricula is reflected in literacy education as being the acquisition of sets of decontextualised rules and patterns, as prescribed in phonics checklists, spelling rules and traditional grammar. Not only is this a reductionist view of literacy education, but it has been drawn on to inform public debate about falling 'literacy levels or standards', 'back to basics' campaigns, and has been used inappropriately by employers and others in the form of initial assessment 'tests' or literacy screens.

Literacy as a right: social justice

This principle characterised many of the early adult literacy programs. It stems from an historic declaration on literacy proclaimed at a UNESCO sponsored International Symposium for Literacy held at Persepolis, Iran in 1975, which stated that literacy is “not just the process of learning the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, but a contribution to the liberation of man [sic] and his full development. ...Literacy is a fundamental human right”. This view is based on an ideology which is “humanistic in quality not because it is about human products as in the past, but because of what it *does* in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy” (Dewey, 1916: 230). The ‘progressive’ educational practices of the 1970s built on the foundations laid down by Dewey and subsequently underpinned many adult literacy and learning principles such as: focusing on the learner’s needs and interests; the educator being a facilitator and supporter of learning; and the belief in ‘literacy as a fundamental human right’. In keeping with this philosophy is the notion of volunteerism in which members of the community who wish to ‘empower’ others or ‘share their love of reading’ complete a short training course then work individually with an adult literacy student. The discourses associated with humanism use the metaphor of growth with a focus on personal integration and wholeness. In adult literacy, this is reflected in the ‘whole language’ approach to teaching and learning. Together with the interest in ‘process writing’ in the 1970s (seen as an alternative to the autonomous model of teaching decontextualised skills), these approaches underpinned a number of debates beginning with the dichotomy between ‘process’ and ‘product’ and moving to ‘whole language’ versus ‘genre’ in the 1980s.

Literacy for social action: transformation

Another more radical ideology, which was to have a major impact on adult literacy in Australia, was conceptualised in the emancipatory discourses of Paulo Freire. To Freire, literacy education was more than the goal of personal empowerment, it was the means to bring about radical social and political change. Freire gave recognition to techniques related to empowerment through dialogue and through problematising, for which he used the term ‘conscientization’. Education was to become the pathway to freedom, and literacy performed a vital role in a highly political act as ‘the oppressed’ struggled against the hegemony of the ruling elites - the oppressors. So, for Freire, literacy learning was an integral part of acquiring values, of “forming mentalities” (Street, 1984:186) and of social action. Freire challenged the top-down ‘banking’ approach of UNESCO, in favour of grass-roots literacy programs which enabled the learners to

transform their social situations. Early leaders in the adult literacy field in Australia responded to Freire's approach, particularly after his visit to Melbourne in 1972, by adopting many of his principles not only to encourage adult learners to engage in social action within their communities, but on the wider scale to become politically active in working for government acknowledgement of 'the oppressed' literacy students.

Literacy as technology

Writing in response to the UNESCO campaigns, Oxenham (1980) sought to move away from the ideologies governing these campaigns by suggesting that State and commercial interests in literacy were mainly concerned with the use of 'literacy as a technology', that is "a technical method of achieving a practical purpose" (Oxenham, 1980: 41). It has already been demonstrated that throughout history, 'literacy as technology' has been used successfully to control access to certain forms of knowledge, but in recent years, a new form of 'literacy as technology' has become part of the human capital discourse (Lankshear, 1993). In a recasting of the 'literacy as autonomy' model, literacy is again being seen as a tool which is essential to gain access to new forms of knowledge, or new modes of thinking and ideas. A lack of, or inadequate literacy, today, means to be dispossessed, not only in relation to employment, but also in the ability to maintain a healthy and independent life - particularly with the withdrawal of public funding from social welfare provision (Lankshear, 1993).

At the same time, literacy in the 'new work order' (Gee & Lankshear, 1997) is again being constructed as a 'technical method of achieving a practical purpose', this time to determine 'who' needs 'what' literacy, as well as how literacy skills or competencies should be measured. In this technological discourse, education (or training), is seen as an assembly line producing human skills and capacities. Educational outcomes are stated in advance and individual performance is assessed in relation to these objectives. This increasingly familiar discourse has been embraced by recent governments to manage the Australian economy and skills development. The impact of award restructuring and introduction of competency based training on the adult literacy field has been discussed in earlier booklets in this series (Kell, 1995; 1998), suffice to say that these initiatives have transformed traditional understandings of 'literacy' and literacy pedagogies.

Literacy as social practice

In contrast to the earlier representations of literacy, which, Street argued, are all (including Freire's model) variations on the 'autonomous' model, Street (1984) proposed an 'Ideological' model. This view of literacy "accepts that what is meant by literacy varies from situation to situation and is dependent on ideology" (Barton, 1994: 25). So, from this perspective, reading, writing and enumerating are viewed as meaningful cultural practices, learnt in specific cultural contexts (Baker & Street, 1991:2). Thus, uses of literacy and numeracy cannot be generalised across cultures, and cannot be isolated or treated either as 'neutral' or 'technical'. This has implications for power relations. Given that the meaning of literacy depends upon the social context in which it is embedded, and that the particular reading and writing practices taught depend upon social structures and the role of educational institutions, there cannot be a single, autonomous 'literacy'. It would be more appropriate to refer to multiple 'literatecies'. As demonstrated in the work of Scribner and Cole (1981) and Heath (1983) (see Appendix 1), the 1980s saw a broadening of research methodologies to include ethnographic studies of people within their own societal contexts. As a result of viewing literacy as social practice, Scribner (1983:5) stated that "instead of conceiving literacy as involvement with written language that is the same everywhere and involves some fixed inventory of capacities, we began to think of literacy as a term applying to a varied and open set of activities with written language". So for Scribner (1983), Heath (1983), Street (1995, 1984) and others, 'literacy' is a cultural activity or social practice, which is purposeful, and is shaped by the relationships (status, gender, power), values and ideologies of those involved.

So, what does this mean for us as literacy practitioners?

All of the discourses outlined above have important implications for adult literacy theory and practice. While there was no single theory which informed the adult literacy field, practitioners have drawn on the aforementioned range of discourses to inform their practice and to develop 'statements of principle' which have remained consistent through time. However, since the late 1980s, we have seen the mainstreaming of literacy in vocational education, with literacy being positioned in the Australian Languages and Literacy Policy (1991) as being "central to the reshaping... of our education and training systems (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991: 1). At the same time, the field has become more professionalised, with the introduction of formal qualifications for teachers, the implementation of the National Framework of Adult English Language, Literacy and Numeracy Competence, the National Reporting System, and language, literacy and numeracy competencies included in industry standards.

The question now is 'How to stay true to adult literacy principles while working within technicist discourses?' One response is to learn to work 'in the cracks'. Adult literacy practitioners have always found ways of complying with managerialist demands while maintaining their humanist principles. However, others argue that with the increased casualisation of staff we need to take a more radical approach and learn to question the dominant discourses. For example, we could critique the current discourses and constructions of 'education' and 'training'. We could question why 'learning' has been reduced to 'competent performance of a skill', and 'education' replaced with training packages which may be cost effective and efficient, but whose interests do they serve? How can we assist marginalised groups within the current training climate? Finally, we need to consider what lessons can be learnt from the past, and what discourses we, as practitioners, can call upon to fight back.

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Appendix 1: Selected definitions of literacy

Definitions of literacy

Grey (1956)

"A person is functionally literate when he [sic] has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture and group"

(Grey, 1956, cited in Oxenham, 1980: 86).

Graff (1979)

"Literacy requirements, we now understand, vary among different social and economic groups, regions and communities... Thus measures of literacy must be comparative. The meanings and uses of literacy are more complex and diverse than ... typical questions and tests allow"

(Graff, 1979: 5).

Scribner & Cole (1981)

"We approach literacy as a set of socially organised practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it"

(Scribner & Cole, 1981: 236).

Heath (1983)

Introduction of the phrase 'literacy event' which referred to 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes'

(Heath, 1983).

Freire (1987)

Literacy is about 'reading the world' not just 'the word'

(Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Wickert (1989)

Literacy as performance of a range of literacy and numeracy tasks, covering a range of skill levels from one to five within prose, document and quantitative literacy domains.

(Wickert, 1989, building on the work of Kirsch and Jungeblut, 1986).

Australian Council for Adult Literacy

Adopted for International Literacy Year (1990)

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 recognize and use language appropriate to different social situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society.

(ILY, 1990)

Street (1992)

'Literacy practices' to refer to "both behaviour and conceptualisation related to the uses of reading and/or writing. 'Literacy practices' incorporate not only 'literacy events' as empirical occasions to which literacy is integral, but also folk models of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them" (Street, 1992: 13).

The New London Group (1995)

'Multiliteracies' which relate "to the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural...'multimedia' and in electronic 'hypermedia'. ...to focus on the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness"

(Cope & Kalantzis, 1995: 6).

Appendix 2: Literacy as control

Literacy as Control

Rhetorical Tradition

Ancient Greeks' use of oral language for persuasion as a means of social control (Gee, 1990). Denounced writing as encouraging mental laziness (Ong, 1982), also the author loses control over interpretation (Plato).

Religious Tradition

Copying of manuscripts reserved for privileged elite, for fear of incorrect interpretations (Heath, 1986; Gee, 1990).
Restricted religious languages: Koran - Arabic (Street, 1984);
Torah - Hebrew; Latin Mass.

Commercial Tradition

The development of writing for trading purposes was evident in Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. Other cultures developed trading languages, restricted to specific traders and trading purposes (Heath, 1986; Scribner & Cole, 1981).

University Tradition

1300s rediscovery the classical legacies (Graff, 1986).
Beginnings of classical subjects at universities for elite class.
18th C. Enlightenment and consolidation of classical tradition (Graff, 1986) and beginnings of grammar schools for elite (Christie, 1990).

Bureaucratic Tradition

Ancient Greece and Rome written records for civic and military purposes.
11th C. England records for tax purposes (Clanchy, 1979). Later parish records and 19th C. registration of births, marriages & deaths.
Henry VIII separation of church and state - beginnings of bureaucracy, political and diplomatic papers. 19th C. parliamentary records (Scott, 1990).

Industrial Tradition

Mass education - compulsory primary schooling. Focus on drill, copying, correctness and discipline for compliant workforce.

Post-Industrial Tradition

Literacy for the armed forces (Dymock, 1993a; Sticht, 1975, 1977)
UNESCO mass literacy campaigns for social control.
Compulsory secondary education.

Technological Tradition

Literacy crises (Graff, 1986)
1990s skills formation (Dawkins & Holding, 1987).
Literacy linked to productivity. Scientific view of education
(Moraitis & McCormack, 1995).

The publication of the Research into Practice Series² is one strategy to implement the dissemination of research. The aim is to provide a series of booklets on different aspects of adult literacy in order to:

- *establish a knowledge base regarding adult literacy practice and research*
- *raise awareness about adult literacy*
- *bring research and practice together*

The authors of the booklets, who are recognised experts in their field, were invited to write for an audience of literacy practitioners in the community, TAFE, university, ACTU, industry and private providers. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Language Australia.



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