

## PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

### **Shaping Their Own Destiny: Understanding Scotland's Approach to Adult Literacy Education**

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#### **Abstract**

Scotland has a strong learner-centred system of adult literacy and numeracy education. Examination of the Scottish system can usefully highlight the issues associated with application of this approach in adult education more generally. Two important aspects are the need for highly skilled educators and the difficulty of evaluating such systems. The authors conclude that the Scottish system is at a critical point in its development and may move closer to a more traditional model if the current approach is not deliberately maintained and developed.

Scotland's approach to literacy education is unique and has the potential to inform adult basic education in many other jurisdictions—about what is both desirable and undesirable within such a system. It has grown up through a combination of educational and political factors that have created the space for this alternative approach to basic education to emerge, along with the adoption of one dominant and influential theoretical perspective. Here we take a closer look at this initiative in terms of the background, the policy, the practice, and the areas that need further development. We hope this discussion will help illuminate ways in which changing the framing of adult education makes some things possible but makes others more problematic.

#### **Literacy in Scotland**

The United Kingdom has a complicated educational system. There are four different and distinct approaches, each of which has its own characteristics and history. The biggest serves England, with about 50 million people. The second largest is Scotland, serving about 4.5 million residents, and Wales and Ireland are smaller still. As can be imagined, this situation creates some tension, especially given the difference in population base and the concomitant size of the educational sector. Waves created in Westminster have the potential to splash Edinburgh, even if unintentionally. Many UK-wide organizations, such as the British Educational Research Association, have specific roles tied to the four nations.

The separation of Scotland in particular has been reinforced by the creation of a Scottish Government in 1999. Previously education was under control of a branch of the UK government known as the "Scottish Office," but is now managed by the Scottish parliament, which has its own electoral process. The Scottish Government may be dominated by the same party that dominates the UK government (as was the case from 1999 to 2007) or may have a different agenda (since 2007). The political difference between the Scottish and UK parliaments directly affects the direction of their educational systems. When Westminster and

Edinburgh agree, many ideas flow north of the border, but when they differ, the Scottish system tends to develop in unique directions.

Educational philosophy differs in Scotland and England. In terms of schooling, England has a mixed economy of state-sponsored schools, private schools, faith schools, city academies, magnet/specialist schools and so on. In Scotland all state schools are comprehensives in that everyone is able to attend, and there is a far smaller private school sector. Historically, the Scottish educational philosophy has promoted the notion of common, high-quality schooling for all children—though of course, this has not always worked out in practice.

The English adult literacy system differs equally profoundly from that which is provided in Scotland. England has adopted a comprehensive framework known as *Skills for Life* (DIUS, 2009), managed by sectoral councils and implemented to a large extent in further education colleges, which are similar to community colleges. *Skills for Life* provides clear progression and articulation pathways and is built on the notion that literacy skills are acquired in a linear manner. There is a fair amount of testing, and providing services to individuals who are not interested in certification can be difficult. *Skills for Life* is supported by a well-resourced research and development system, most notably the National Research and Development Centre at the University of London. Overall, the system is well-supported and significantly centralized.

Scotland shows more of a tension between local and centralized mechanisms. Literacy education is organized through 32 local authorities, varying significantly in size. These local authorities are responsible for organizing provision, employing literacy organizers and instructors, monitoring program quality, training and development for those involved, and reporting to the Scottish government on their programming. Each local authority has an associated literacy partnership, with membership from further education, the community learning and development organizations, and voluntary organizations. There is also a Scottish Government body called *Learning Connections* intended to oversee literacy provision in Scotland and provide support, though it lacks unambiguous legislative authority.

*Learning Connections* has been extremely influential in the development of Scottish literacy education by contributing to Scottish Government policy and in continual efforts to support practice in the 32 partnerships. They have funded research and developed training materials. Of all their contributions, perhaps the most significant has been their dedication to building an educational system around a social practices model of literacy.

### **Social Practices Approach**

The social practices approach to literacy is based on the work of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) writers such as Street (1984), Gee (1996), and Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (2000). The NLS represented a significant change in the theorization of literacy. Previously, reading and writing had been viewed primarily as a cognitive activity, albeit one that could drive social change. The insight of the NLS was that it made more sense to view literacy as a social process that reflected a particular context and that it might even be more accurate to talk of “literacies” (e.g., Street, 1984). Instead of viewing literacy as a continuum of ability, the NLS saw it as a set of social practices around text. Different texts in other contexts would reflect other sets of practices and other literacies. These sets of practices are not hierarchically arranged, from simple beginner practices of reading and writing to advanced

and difficult practices, but are diverse in their reflection of the social context. The educational potential of these ideas has been developed most fully in the Lancaster school (see Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007; Papen, 2005).

The implication of a social practices approach is that the idea of a linear progression from early years reading through elementary and high school grades to post-high school is neither very accurate nor very helpful for adults as school-based literacy is only one particular set of social practices. Adults who are less familiar with this set of practices may well be enormously competent in other ways of learning and even in interacting with text. Furthermore, adults often want to learn literacies for personal and pragmatic reasons, rather than to ascend a theoretical ladder of skills. When considered, these principles shift the ground for adult literacy education very significantly.

### **Putting Social Practices into Action**

Scotland's commitment to a social practices approach to literacy education was formally put into policy in the *Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland* report (ALNIS) (Scottish Executive, 2001a). This document responded to two significant concerns. The first was Scotland's poor showing in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which suggested that the country had cause for concern regarding the levels of literacy skills in the general population. The second was Scotland's newly established government, who were concerned to show that the nation had its own approach to education and related areas. A relatively small group of people was responsible for researching and writing the report and were relatively close to each other philosophically. Rather than responding to the IALS challenge by creating a tight, linear system of progression for learners, they decided to go a different way by taking the ideas of the Lancaster school seriously and opening up the way literacies are now understood in the Scottish system. Qualifications were de-emphasized, with weight laid instead on the stated, practically-derived needs of learners.

The notion of "framework" was central to *Learning Connections'* work. The intention was to explain the social practices approach and provide foundations for practice rather than dictate rules for teaching and learning. There is strong emphasis on literacy, numeracy, and language as social practices and generally little assessment or exploration of learners' patterns of deficits or weakness. ALNIS established that the main focus would be on the learners' expressed needs and that the structures developed by *Learning Connections* and the literacy partnerships would create a framework to inform practice rather than dictate it. This approach varies very significantly from more traditional practices in adult literacy education, where learner's skills are measured on entry to the program and then they are placed at the appropriate point on a pre-determined curriculum ladder. As ALNIS states, "rather than focusing on a minimum standard, it is concerned more with establishing what the learners' goals are" (Scottish Executive, 2001a, p. 14).

Several years after the implementation of ALNIS, *Learning Connections* (2005) published a curriculum framework to add another layer of support for teachers/tutors, consistently designing it to be very open. The document is not a curriculum in the conventional sense, but rather a description of an approach to teaching and learning. The framework was supported with training for the trainers working in each of the local authorities, who were expected to cascade the information down to the instructors (called tutors) themselves. *Learning Connections* was aiming for a balance in the framework to bring

some level of consistency and quality control to literacy education, while also being open enough to allow for significant learner influence on teaching and learning.

The social practices approach is further reflected in the use of the word “learner.” This term is used to indicate that an individual is a learner in many aspects of their life, not just in the literacy program, and to acknowledge that adult literacy and numeracy learners may have negative memories of school. Interestingly, in Scotland the term “pupil” is used for school children, “students” for people in formal education, and “learner” for workplace and similar settings, using the word for literacy learners is both recognition of their adult status and recognition of the responsibilities associated with learning as an adult.

ALNIS recognizes the important parts played by practitioners and learners in making the system work. The needs assessment conducted by the Scottish Executive (2001b) during preparation of the report included input from practitioners and learners who would use the services. There was clear indication that adult literacy and numeracy was not only important to Scotland, but that the learners and the practitioners were central contributors to the development, process, and success of the programs. It was noted that the reputation of the field as a whole also needed to be changed “...we need a dramatic increase in the status of literacy and numeracy provision from its current status as stigmatized, remedial and the ‘poor relation’” (Scottish Executive, 2001a, p. 12). The social practices approach to literacy and numeracy work was seen as the way to make these changes while recognizing the social justice commitments of the government. So what changes when a social practices approach is taken seriously?

### **The Teaching Practices**

When learners enter a literacy program in Scotland, whether in a community based training facility or a college setting, they begin a process of developing an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) with a practitioner. This collaborative process results in the recording of goals for learners alongside the steps to be taken to attain them. There are different views on the amount of work that should be covered by a single ILP, though a general average appears to be around two months. This would be about 16 hours of instruction for many learners.

As per the social practices approach, the ILP is based on what the learner wants to be able to do in their life as a result of the literacy learning. The learning plan starts with what the learner already knows followed by materials and lesson formats determined and developed by the desired learning. Tutors may work with groups of learners and have assistance from volunteer tutors for more individualized instruction. The aims of instruction go beyond literacy practices, as there is strong recognition of the need to support learners in developing the confidence to be self-directed learners, and this aspect is one of the key strengths of the Scottish instructional approach. “The aim is to assess the learner’s ability to apply their learning to real contexts and to measure the economic, personal and social gains that they make, including their willingness to continue to learn in the future” (Scottish Executive, 2001a, p.14). The context in which the learner wants to use the skills is of utmost importance. No longer are courses developed in a top-down manner, instead there is a genuine attempt to create a learner-centered educational process.

Because of the highly individualized learning planning process, diversity and inclusiveness have to be recognized within the process. Some learners, such as those with specific challenges, will be more concerned with developing specific abilities or maintaining

their abilities than necessarily working towards more formal education and qualifications. Others will be committed to increasing their skills for academic or vocational purposes and will be working towards these ends. Around 6 years ago there was an increase in the number of people who did not have English as their first language in adult literacy programs, particularly in large urban areas, and the programs were able to accommodate their needs. One of the great strengths of the Scottish approach is the flexibility to respond to the specific requirements of each learner.

### **Assessment of Learning**

In North America many literacy programs lead, directly or indirectly, to the Certificate of General Educational Development (GED). This formal outcome affects the way programs are structured and the way learning is assessed throughout the system. If the final outcome is Grade 12 equivalency, then measures referring to grade level make sense through the process and can be intuitive for instructors and learners.

Scotland has no GED or equivalent. Instead, there is a complex set of qualifications specific to vocational areas and mapped onto a 12 point framework covering everything from the most fundamental abilities to doctoral degrees. The adult literacy and numeracy system covers the first four levels of this framework, roughly equivalent to the level of qualification achieved by 15 year old pupils. The processes for recognition of this level of ability are not straightforward. The Scottish Qualifications Agency (2008) provides descriptions of what people should be able to do at this level of practice, and tutors support learners to produce work that meets these criteria.

The ALNIS document did not discuss learner assessment at the level of policy, but the Curriculum Framework (Learning Connections, 2005) addressed the issue quite widely. While the authors cautioned against frightening learners with initial assessments or summative tests, they outlined six kinds of assessment: alerting tools, placing tools, diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, and evaluation. This was followed by ten principles of assessment. Three of the most interesting principles are 1, that “assessment should be closely integrated with teaching and learning activities and “learners can learn from their assessment experiences”, 2, “having set their own learning goals, learners should regularly review their own progress,” and 3, that “assessment should allow learners to see the connections between what they are learning and the real-life applications of that learning” (Learning Connections, 2005, p. 23). These principles reflect well the social practices approach.

### **Reflections on the Scottish Approach**

The Scottish approach to adult literacy and numeracy education provides a fascinating natural experiment in the application of a radically learner-centered approach to the education of adults. There are several issues we suggest are particularly important to acknowledge, and in our view these would have to be tackled in any attempt to create such an open system of adult education.

A striking feature of is the sheer complexity of a system where every learner can genuinely negotiate their own outcomes. There are at least two implications arising from this complexity. First, this type of system is resource expensive—to be done well, time and money has to be put into the creation of individualized learning programs for each learner,

and a customized package of resources must be created. While in an ideal world this would be completely justified by the advantages of engaging hard to reach learners, the context of literacy programs is, unfortunately, not usually so generous. The devotion of so many resources to each learner will eventually affect the number of learners who can be served. The balance of resources to each learner (where more is better) versus the number of learners who can come into the programs (where more is also better) is difficult to get right.

Second, there is an issue regarding the knowledge required to manage and administer this learner-centered approach. It can be much easier for tutors if there is a clear linear progression for learners to follow with predetermined assessments making their job relatively clear-cut. In the Scottish approach, tutors, often very part-time, not well paid, and not necessarily professional educators, are being asked to play a very significant role in creating learning programs for diverse learners. In our view, this is a lot to ask, and there is a real mismatch between the skills been asked for and the rewards on offer. The viability of such a radically decentralized system relies upon a well-educated and committed workforce, including the potential “professionalization” of literacy tutors. This is challenged by both the limited resources of local authorities and the British tradition of voluntarism.

Further, the assessment of learning remains a real challenge in the Scottish system, and here there are two sub-issues. First of all, ILPs vary enormously in their scope and intended goals, and the associated processes are extremely diverse. In many areas tutors are not well trained in (or in some cases even aware of) the ILP process and the use of the results. (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, 2005). The ILP paperwork may be seen as a laborious bureaucratic exercise and may contradict the learner-centered approach when the learner is not interested in the process, or at least the recording of the process. The initial assessment of learners at intake is not well developed, making attempts to recording progress less reliable than they could be. ILPs, while philosophically highly desirable, are not always highly functional.

The second of these assessments problems is the difficulty of assessing programs as an accountability mechanism. While programs can be judged on the number of learner ILPs fulfilled on an annual basis, this is not necessarily good management information if the ILPs vary as widely as suggested above. In the current accountability climate, the reliability and validity of learner progress measurement and the evaluation of program quality are highly related. The challenge will be to continue to respect learner-centered programs while obtaining improvement in the quality of evaluation data.

The social practices model is emerging as an extremely interesting and insightful way to understand how people use texts, but may need more substance to be useful as an educational framework. It can tend to emphasize the learners’ current context strongly, while obscuring the very real and pragmatic skills necessary to underpin a wide range of competencies engaged in practices. This is to some extent a mis-reading of the social practices literature, which does recognize skills, but is consistent with the learner-centered approach and the concomitant assumption that learners know what they do not know and what they need to know. There is a considerable amount of work to be done in developing a range of educational models, including practitioner training and support, centered on the social practices model.

Scottish literacy and numeracy education is at a critical stage. There is a choice to be made. One option is continuing with a social practices model and accepting that it will

require more resources, more training, and may never be able to provide for tight achievement and accountability measures. Another option is to move to a more formalized, less learner-centered system such as the English Skills for Life approach. This features a core curriculum and leveled tests, making teaching and assessment of learning more standard and more efficient—assuming that it is teaching and measuring what needs to be taught and assessed. The most likely option is that Scotland will persevere with some form of the current system, patching up the worst holes trying to deal with problems and challenges as they arise. This could well prove to be as good an approach as any in the constantly evolving world of adult literacy.

For individuals in other jurisdictions and sectors of adult education, the Scottish system offers some lessons. It shows that the more flexible and open to learner influence your educational system, the more highly educated and skilled the practitioners have to be. It highlights the dilemma of evaluating teaching and learning when outcomes are left so open, when resources are limited, especially for teacher development. The ongoing experience shows that a small country has the potential to develop a unique, important, and innovative system and inform the global community on ways that adult learners can shape their own literacy destiny.

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