Editorial: The changing landscapes of literacy and adult education

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Literacy, numeracy and language learning has always had a central place in adult education theory and practice. Over the various historical moments and contexts, its meaning, uses and importance have been changing considerably. It is difficult, therefore, to build a consistent and complete road map to literacy and adult education that takes into account every trend, theoretical approach and practical experience. However, it is important to consider the importance of Paulo Freire's work that started in the early 1960s in Northeast Brazil (Freire, 1965). His work calls attention to educational-political processes as being central for adults to regain their voices as citizens in the fight against oppression (Freire, 1997). It seems that in a number of societies and particularly during the 60s and the 70s, literacy was key to social change and a matter of social justice. Literacies, therefore, provide us with a lens for understanding the world.

Literacies are without question inter-connected with a number of structural conditions and inequalities, including social class, gender, ethnicity and especially with lack of power so these issues are frequently analysed within literacies studies and its connections to social inclusion and exclusion. For example, women globally have been a key group who have been oppressed in relation to literacy, numeracy and language learning. Because literacies are complex, nations try to tackle it using a wide range of approaches or methods, precisely because of its basic importance, not only for citizens, but also for social, cultural and economic national systems. Literacies can be an integrating issue in public policies and a way of increasing social inclusion. Literacy studies, once strong in community adult education, have branched out to include new forms of literacies such as language literacy (with migrants), health literacy, digital literacy and workplace literacy.

There have also been, in the last decades, various understandings of adult literacies. For example, functional approaches focus on the citizens' uses of literacy and numeracy in every day-life activities. For some time such approaches seemed innovative and were linked, in many countries, with systems of recognition of prior learning. Other ways of

conceptualizing literacies are derived from critical and social literacy practices approaches that seek to locate learning in the context of wider structures of inequality. Fundamental to these approaches is the need for literacy practitioners to distance themselves from the framing of literacy learning simply as an individual difficulty that derives from some current, or past, personal problem or circumstance. This is because viewing literacy, numeracy and language learning as a process of individuals acquiring skills, and adult literacies teaching as responding to individual need, can reinforce a deficit model of the learner and a remedial view of adult literacy provision (see Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012). New research and practice has also shown that it is more appropriate to talk about literacies as plural, rather than singular. This approach, known as the New Literacy Studies (as in Barton 2007; Street & Lefstein, 2008), has been at the forefront in undermining the discourse of deficit because it grounds literacies in real peoples' lives and starts from the local, everyday experience of literacy in particular communities of practice. This means that there are different literacy practices in different domains of social life, such as education, religion, workplaces, families, community activities. These change over time and different literacies are supported and shaped by the institutions and social relationships that people are part of and do not transfer easily across contexts. The new literacy studies dispenses with the idea that there is a single literacy that can be unproblematically taken for granted, rather we have to think in pluralistic terms about the variety of literacies that are used in different contexts in order to make literacies practices meaningful to people.

Social, economic, political and cultural changes in society have also been determining the emergence of different perspectives on literacies. Society's evolution, scientific and technological progresses, the increase of opportunities in education and a mass higher education system in many national contexts, for example, create new areas of human knowledge and implicate a reassessment of the very meanings of literacy. However, as Camilla Addey (2018) points out, there is the danger of a single story being told about literacy and numeracy as a result of international standardised tests such as the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), or the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), a household assessment that measure literacy skills in developing countries. These assessments tell a particular story of literacy as numbers (see Hamilton et al, 2015) that can lead to narrow educational policies and incomplete learning practices.

These changing dynamics imply that there are many ways of conceptualising literacies so, in this RELA thematic issue, we direct attention to today's landscapes of literacy and adult education. We ask what are the major trends in the field today? Are there new theoretical and practical approaches that deserve a closer look from the research community? Are "old" theories and practices still being used or becoming visible again, both in research and in public discourses? What is the relationship between lifelong learning and studies of literacy, numeracy or language learning?

This issue comprises eight articles from Austria, Canada, Germany, South Africa, Sweden and the UK and they range from small-scale local, in-depth, qualitative studies to large-scale quantitative studies of a whole country. We begin with the most locally focused research, which is entitled 'Relationship with Literacy: a longitudinal perspective on the literacy practices and learning of young people without a diploma'. In it Virginie Thériault and Rachel Bélisle explore the temporal dimension of the relationship with literacy in the lives of two young people without a secondary school diploma. They find that by focusing on the relationship with literacy and its evolution over time, it is possible to put emphasis on young people's positive investment in a number of literacy practices and not be limited to school practices alone.

In 'Adult literacies from the perspective of practitioners and their learners: a case study from the north of England' Gwyneth Allatt's research reveals a wide range of ways in which literacy is understood by practitioners and learners, compared with a much narrower conceptualisation in current policy. She argues that teachers' and learners' perspectives reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, but that its meanings and uses vary according to time and context. In contrast, the policy environment that emphasizes employability and economic outcomes, creates challenges for teachers and learners to maintain their own perspectives in relation to what literacy constitutes and what is important in adult literacy education.

Robert Walldén, in his article 'Interconnected literacy practices: exploring classroom work with literature in adult second language education', explores literacy practices in adult intermediate second language instruction, involving two teachers and their diverse student groups over four weeks of work with literature. He found that there was a strong orientation towards meaning making, which was scaffolded by the teachers directing attention to language, style and narrative structure. Thus, different kinds of literacy practices were interconnected. The participant teachers did not prioritise the practices of critical text analysis, but Walldén shows how the students used their diverse experiences and knowledge to read both 'with' and 'against' the grain of the text.

In the fourth article titled 'Critical information literacy: Adult learning and community perspectives' Catherine J. Irving considers the evolution of information literacy as a distinct area of inquiry and instruction in libraries and the development of critical approaches. She argues that such approaches help interrogate how information access and control affect literacy goals and people's democratic right to information. She points out that information literacy that is grounded in social justice goals can be strengthened through the collaboration of librarians with other adult educators, community development practitioners, social service providers and activists.

The next three articles are all focused on changes that have occurred across their respective countries. First, Zamalotshwa Thusi and Anne Harley provide a case study of '"Political literacy" in South Africa' based in Freedom Park, a township outside Johannesburg, drawing on research conducted in 2018. They use 'political literacy', as conceived by Paulo Freire, as a theoretical lens through which to consider non-formal education in the changing context of South Africa. They consider the influence of Freire's thinking in the black consciousness (BC) movement in South Africa during the 1970s and then contrast this with a current BC-aligned non-formal education intervention. They found that, in contrast to the ways in which Freire was used in the BC movement in the anti-apartheid struggle, this 'political class' leaned towards what Freire termed the authoritarian left.

The article that follows, by Irene Cennamo, Monika Kastner and Peter Schlögl focuses on Austria. Entitled 'Signposts of change in the landscape of adult basic education in Austria: a telling case' it traces the current shift to politically motivated interventions in adult basic education. Their methodologically triangulated case study unveils a unique spirit of empowerment and emancipation amongst practitioners but finds that this spirit is at risk because of a strong tendency towards impact orientation in terms of employability and upskilling. Policies favour: standardisation; technocracy over expertise; narrowing the curriculum; teaching superseding facilitating; and are against research and development. In order to preserve the tradition of empowerment within adult basic education, the authors emphasise the importance of raising the informed and critical voices of practitioners.

Maren Elfert and Jude Walker's focus is on Canada and their article, entitled 'The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy: Policy Lessons from Canada', explores adult literacy infrastructure in two phases from the 1970s up until the launch of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994; and subsequently the story of IALS and changes occurring up until around 2005. They draw on theories of policy formation, and recent and previous research, including interviews with key stakeholders, to argue that mainstreaming literacy has failed and explore the reasons for this failure. They conclude that only a robust infrastructure can survive the vicissitudes of governments and bureaucracies. It is also needed to avoid the constant reinventing of the wheel in educational policy-making that can be avoided when literacy is mainstreamed.

The final article in this thematic issue is 'Low literacy in Germany: Results from the second German literacy survey' by Anke Grotlüschen, Klaus Buddeberg, Gregor Dutz, Lisanne Heilmann and Christopher Stammer. These authors briefly discuss the state of literacy research in large-scale surveys and offer some critical viewpoints. Next, they present the results of the two LEO surveys from 2010 and 2018 and identify that the 2018 survey reports on the literacy *practices* of low-literate adults in order to show if adults compensate for their low-literacy by performing non-written practices more often. The authors provide information about the composition of the low-literate adult population in Germany (aged 18–64 years) and show that written practices can be partly substituted by oral practices or can be managed with assistance. However, they point out that, because digital practices and the use of complex computer interfaces will become more and more important, this partial exclusion is problematic. Overall the survey results show that whilst reading and writing are crucial health literacy, financial literacy and so forth need to be embedded into these practices and this has implications for current stereotypes about adults who have low-literacy.

All these articles make visible the changing policy context with its emphasis on standardisation and the narrowing of the curriculum away from emancipation and towards functional skills. However, they have also shown that practitioners have resisted this conceptualisation and instead have emphasised the importance of developing criticality in citizens in the fight against oppression. So to some extent 'old' theories and practices are becoming visible again through the examination of political literacy but new theories are also being developed such as the temporal dimension of literacy, information literacy, theories of policy formation. These articles also go against the trend of telling a single story about literacy, numeracy and language learning by presenting a diversity of practices and contexts that show the variety of literacies that are meaningful to people. For the future, the research presented here shows the importance for education providers and policy makers of retaining robust infrastructures for both literacies and lifelong learning as well as their potentials for developing holistic learning practices.

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