Understanding Literacy: what theoretical approaches can help make literacy teaching and learning more effective?

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Having worked in literacy in developing countries for quite a few years now, I have come across a number of different approaches to the task of enabling people to learn to read and write. Some of these approaches and understandings appear to me to be complementary, but others seem to be in conflict with one another. At the same time, all of us working in this field come with our own views on the task of developing literacy programmes and the principles on which they should be founded and guided and we are normally strongly convinced of the value of our particular approach.

However, I can see a risk that in doing so we fail to recognise what other approaches have to offer; this in turn may result in our work being less effective than it would otherwise be. With so many millions of people in low-income countries whose lives would arguably be better if they were literate, and with so many who are very keen to become literate or to develop their literacy, then it is rather important that our work as literacy specialists should be as effective as possible!

Let me try to explain these various approaches in more detail. Firstly, many of us in BALID would support the view that literacy needs to be seen as a contextualised social practice. This is not just a theoretical understanding but it also carries practical implications for on-the-ground literacy programmes. If literacy is contextual, then it suggests that literacy learning programmes should be designed very much with local needs in mind, and that programmes should therefore be individualised, in the sense of being specifically designed for a particular time and place.

In harmony with the social practice view, although I believe that it is not always explicitly linked with it, is the well-established perspective of adult education theory. This approach argues that adult learners are very different from learners who are children and, in particular, that they come to learn with a very different attitude to that of children. Adults are voluntary learners, choosing to learn what they have identified as being important to them – which may well be connected with their desire to do better financially, or to manage reading and writing tasks without the support of others. At the same time, they bring to the learning situation greater experience of life than do children. Adult educationalists argue that these attributes of adult learners need to be taken into account when developing learning programmes. As with the theory of literacy as a social practice, the upshot is that literacy programmes have to be designed with the local situation in mind; it is not possible to design a literacy programme for one context and then import it successfully to a different context.

This stands somewhat in contrast to the traditional view of literacy work and of literacy itself. From this point of view, literacy is simply a matter of learning to read and write, and learning to read and write is a matter of learning how to decode and to encode written text; in other words it is about learning how the symbols written on a page relate to the sound of the language which they are representing, and how, in writing, certain symbols have to selected to represent the sounds of the words one is wanting to communicate. In this sense, forming the symbols correctly, linking them with other symbols, and combining them to accurately represent complete words and utterances are all extremely important. This view has been reinforced by recent studies in human cognition. The

problem here is that this understanding of literacy may lead literacy specialists to conclude that literacy is a learned skill which can be taught in the same way to all learners in all contexts. The only aspect which would change would be the language in which the skills of decoding and encoding are being taught; adults would be taught in the same way as children with a strong emphasis placed on phonic awareness, and with no particular recognition being given to their particular needs and life circumstances. Literacy learning would involve learning the skills of literacy with little attention given to the application of those skills to actual texts in the environment of the learners or to any learning beyond that of learning to read and write. Here there is an obvious contrast with the social practice and adult education approaches to literacy programmes.

I do of course generalise about these approaches to literacy; in reality they are possibly less distinct than I have portrayed. However in their "purest" form there do appear to be contradictions between them. Or are there some complementarities? After all, even in social practice based literacy programmes there is still a need (as I believe that most would agree) of making sure that adult learners acquire the basic skills involved in reading and writing. The question is how this is done and the degree of prominence of this aspect of literacy within the literacy learning programme as a whole.

Alongside the social practice, adult education and literacy as skill approaches to the teaching and learning of literacy, there are also understandings of literacy programmes as resembling a machine composed of interdependent parts, each of which needs to function well if the whole enterprise is to be effective. Thus, literacy programmes are seen as a complex system, each part requiring attention if the learners are to learn. A number of elements of the literacy system have been identified, including initial conceptualisation, community involvement, local training, development of materials, as well as, of course, financing. Approaching the task of designing a literacy programme with this model of literacy in mind in my view helps literacy specialists to ensure that they give proper attention to all the necessary aspects of effective literacy programmes. It may be that well experienced literacy specialists have an intuitive understanding of literacy programmes as complex systems but I would argue that an explicit understanding is necessary as well.

For the sake of clarity and perhaps for further reading for those who are interested, let me identify the key proponents of the four theoretical understandings I have explained above, together with some of their most significant writings.

1) Social Practice theory of literacy:
   - Brian Street *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984); *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives* (2001)
   - Shirley Brice Heath *Ways with Words* (1983)
   - David Barton *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* (1994/2007)
   - David Barton and Mary Hamilton *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (1998)
2) Adult Education theory:
   - Alan Rogers and Naomi Horrocks *Teaching Adults* (2010)
   - Jane Vella *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* (1994/2002)
   - Stephen Brookfield *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning: A Comprehensive Analysis of Principles and Effective Practice* (1983/1991)
   - Malcolm Knowles, Elwood Holton and Richard Swanson *The Adult Learner* (8th ed 2015)
3) Literacy as skills:

- Helen Abadzi *Adult Illiteracy, Brain Architecture, and the Empowerment of the Poor* (2005); *Can Adults Become Fluent Readers in Newly Learned Scripts?* (2012)
4) Literacy Programme System theory:
    - H.S. Bhola *A Sourcebook for Literacy Work: Perspectives from the Grassroots* (1994)
    - Ulrike Hanemann *The Evolution and Impact of Literacy Campaigns and Programmes 2000-2014* (2015)

These are the four distinct approaches to literacy work which I feel are the most relevant for our work. There are certainly others. We need to be aware of them so that we can not only improve our own practice but also become aware of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of our own perspectives.

In conclusion, then, let's all consider what we might learn from approaches to literacy which are less familiar to us, and see how what we might do to improve our own practice in this field.

I would be happy to discuss this further and to include other perspectives which might also be relevant so that together we can build up a comprehensive schema which might be helpful not only to us but also to others coming into literacy work.

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