Weaving literacy through lifelong learning

Report on the day seminar held on

Friday, 18th November 2016

UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

Introduction

Literacy practitioners, researchers and students from NGOs and higher education institutes with an interest in literacy in development came together for this engaging and interactive seminar organised by the British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID). It was organised with assistance and support from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), the UCL Institute of Education Post-14 Centre, and the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE), who funded six bursary places at the event.

We are grateful to Dr Ulrike Hanemann of the Literacy and Basic Skills Programme at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) who gave the keynote speech, and to Professor Alan Tuckett, past president of the International Council for Adult Education, for chairing the seminar. Professor Tuckett started the proceedings by providing a brief but comprehensive overview of the trajectory of adult learning in recent decades. Adult education has come to the fore and developed into a substantial and diverse sector serving individuals, communities and economies. Adult literacies are recognised as essential to furthering these activities and people's lives (Hanemann, 2015).

Exploring the links between literacy and lifelong learning through objects and images

Professor Alan Tuckett's opening remarks were followed by round table discussions, in which participants used objects and images to trigger impromptu presentations connecting literacy with lifelong learning. These extended traditional concepts of texts to reading images and map-reading: for example, a local enterprise created miniature business cards incorporating a map, which implies spatial processing that is not accessible to everyone. Reading sheet music was used to represent reading for pleasure, while a community learning space was highlighted as a 'safe space' as well as an opportunity to discuss news. An origami fortune-teller flower was used as an interactive game to promote storytelling and was subsequently replayed across families, homes and communities. Rites of passage

which incorporate coding of social boundaries extended the idea of literacies into traditional community practices and 'reading the world'. Thumb prints were used to highlight the wide-ranging stigma of being non-literate in many communities, preventing people from taking on roles which do not actually require literacy skills.

These conversations explored the boundaries between communication using reading and writing text, communication as mediated by social practices, and emancipatory 'reading the world' in development. Accounts of experiences, livelihoods and communities involved the politics of multiple languages and scripts. They touched on multi-modality and multi-literacies, as objects and images give way to making sense of traditional letters on a page. In particular, 'autonomous' models of literacy which focus on the technical skills of reading and writing were reconceptualised as 'ideological' models of literacy which emphasise contextual and social embeddedness, and implicit power negotiations.

This activity enabled participants to share a wide range of perceptions of literacy and highlighted the importance of ethnographic approaches exploring learners' literacy practices and lives. These, in turn, could inform curriculum and policy development that is meaningful in local contexts.

Promoting lifelong learning: incorporating multi-sector approaches to literacy

In her keynote presentation, Dr Ulrike Hanemann outlined the multiple perspectives and implications of literacy in lifelong learning: in policy, in programme design, and in teaching and learning. Current challenges lie in finding clarity (as shown by the multi-dimensional examples introduced at the start of the seminar), and in retaining critical structures without over-simplification.

The term 'literacy' has expanded in recent decades and the analytical framework attempts to theorise 'lifelong literacy' alongside concepts of language, learning, knowledge production, critical thinking, technologies and 'multiple literacies', to name a few. These 'multiple literacies' originate in the uses and applications of literacy in many different contexts and the pervasiveness of text-based practices. Dr Hanemann emphasised that metaphorical usage such as 'ocean literacy' could impede progress. Such plurality introduces complications in terminology and understanding, which in turn can create tensions with policy-makers who want to avoid confusion with terms which imply knowledge and skills more directly applicable to other sectors. However, she believes in encouraging 'learning

cities', which seek to mobilise the resources of every sector to maximise inclusive learning and the benefits of sustainable individual, social and economic development (UNESCO UIL, 2016).

In essence, literacy refers to a set of communication skills and practices around reading, writing and numeracy that are mediated by written texts generated through any number of technologies. This can incorporate image, or symbolic representation, and is not limited to skill automaticity, but extends through capacity with code and tools to competency in applying texts to everyday purposes and problem-solving.

The concept of lifelong learning is based on emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values and is not limited to the classroom or a standard curriculum or age-range. It relates to formal, non-formal and informal modalities which include workplace, community and home environments. Lifelong learning is not limited to 'post-literate' readiness for learning, but involves creating learning opportunities across settings, unlocking potential through learner-centred approaches, and integrating literacy with multi-sectoral approaches.

The lifelong literacy framework incorporates three dimensions: as a lifelong process, as a lifewide process, and as a sector-wide and cross-sector process. Lifelong learning recognises that knowledge and skills are maintained and advanced through use and lost through non-use. Where once primary education or lower secondary might have been sufficient, it is increasingly the case that higher order texts and information, the use of technology, and geographical mobility contribute to a demand for lifelong literacy.

Literacy is seen as a continuum and not a binary divide between 'literate' and 'non-literate'. This has impact on how it is measured and evaluated, and in turn on policy, making established understanding of 'literacy rates' unviable. It becomes more meaningful to enquire how people need to acquire what literacy skills, given the contexts of their lives, which may change over time. The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), instituted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is an example of work meaningfully to assess adult literacies across populations, similar to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Such competency requirements help to inform basic education entitlements and contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which looks at percentages of adults and youths achieving set levels of literacy and numeracy. These levels are aligned with the completion of basic education in formal education systems and imply standardised national qualifications and curriculum frameworks. They also advocate non-formal routes to support adults, by recognising prior learning and appropriate learning scenarios to progress through lifelong literacy and learning. The distribution of power, resource and opportunities across societies has an impact on national achievement and progression, requiring policies to implement support structures and remove barriers. These all have cost implications.

Literacy as a lifewide process recognises many different ways and settings of learning. It addresses how and why people use literacy, and the creation of 'literate environments'

which incorporate many opportunities to read and write as entry points or complements to systematise more effective teaching and learning. Beyond traditional literacy classes, this includes activities in local languages plus indigenous practices where reading, writing and learning are involved. It encompasses literacy and numeracy provision which integrates vocational skills development. Literacy as social practice recognises the collective action implicit in many development initiatives, requiring awareness and integration of learners' life aspirations and their existing literacy practices, and dealing with any barriers that exist.

Literacy as part of lifelong learning systems seeks policy which integrates literacy across educational provision. This recognises literacy as part of a set of key competencies: these include communication, numeracy, digital skills, critical access to and processing of information, and ownership of the learning process.

Policy-makers may have evaluated literacy levels through out-dated measures which comparative surveys demonstrate to be insufficient for basic life demands. Despite contentions around the measurement of skills via comparative surveys, they have brought literacy back as a priority in policy-making, with cross-ministerial and cross-sectoral emphasis beyond departments for education. This can contribute to financial stability with undertakings to build the systems and human resource capacity as it becomes incorporated into national development strategies.

There has been increasing discussion about the importance of developing demand-led cultures though incentives, offers and policy measures which recognise the personal investments required to develop and maintain lifelong literacy. Initiatives should be directed towards the most disadvantaged and disconnected in order to support social equity and inclusion, and to raise awareness of the need for long-term commitments in order to deliver outcomes.

Dr Hanemann concluded that the challenge requires more than excellent learning programmes: it requires a combination of learners who demand and the multi-stakeholder processes which can deliver.

Family learning in Kenya and Uganda with Africa Education Trust (AET)

Lesley Waller presented Africa Educational Trust's cross-generational literacy projects in West Nile province, Northern Uganda and among the Maasai in North Central Kenya. These involve joint classes with parents and children at home, in school and in community learning centres, raising literacy and numeracy skills in the local languages. Adults in these remote and conflict-damaged areas have experienced disrupted or no schooling, and there are few printed materials. As parents felt unable to support their children's schooling, pedagogic approaches have been developed which address both together.

These classes were popular (20,000 participated in a Uganda project between 2009 and 2013) and motivational for parents and children alike. Resourcing included training community parent educators, community management committees and locally developed

manuals and other materials supporting family learning practices. Pre- and after- school learning environments were central to this work. In Kenya, the REFLECT approach through play, dance and local stories was integrated to improve parental engagement with schools and resolve key societal issues and concerns, such as girls' drop-out rates. After initial alienation from schooling, some pastoral Maasai are choosing to become more settled and share these forms of ownership of their children's education.

As a result of these projects, children have better oral language, can read better in school and perform better in subjects taught in the local language. Parents' confidence and advocacy around their own roles, their children's learning and issues presenting in the schools have improved. Through informal learning, issues such as time management and discipline improve and children are more proactive in engaging with their parents in their learning. AET recognise continuing challenges in engaging men in the literacy classes, multi-lingual communities, the capacity and retention of trained parent educators, and sustaining home learning communities after the end of the project.

Community literacy in Uganda

Dr Willy Ngaka of Makerere University presented on volunteer-led informal community literacy initiatives, where the challenges include a culture of monetisation. In this context, literacy as social practice, i.e. how reading and writing are used locally, is key to underpinning educational provision and to developing literate environments and materials. Literacy mediation is a process whereby children help their parents, for example where some can read the Bible but not anything else. The initiatives have included national conferences where many language-groups have joined together to celebrate their traditions and successes, the local development and publication of materials, and establishment of local libraries and other learning environments. Every 5th March at 11am, there is a DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) campaign which aims to stimulate reading. A lack of infrastructure and resourcing are significant challenges.

Literacy and maternal health in Pakistan with Feed the Minds

Albha Bowe of Feed the Minds described two large projects with the National Rural Development Program (NRDP), a partner NGO aiming to improve maternal and child health in Sindh and Narrowal, two districts with high levels of poverty. The primary objective is to make maternal health services and information available in areas where government services are limited, and to create a demand-led culture empowering women in maternal and child health. A secondary expectation is increased general knowledge across the community about general as well as maternal health and hygiene, and ultimately improvements in general health indicators.

Women's health committees are set up, which draw on the local community to identify trusted and respected project partners including potential community midwives able to provide ante- and post-natal support as well as to assist with deliveries. Facilitators are identified who can provide community classes addressing reproductive health within the

community both formally and informally. These classes are delivered around information booklets in the local languages, with interactive and participatory pedagogy which encourages use of image, song, role-play and drama. These were then found to develop into cultural practices in the local communities disseminating health messages. The participants generally have a background of very limited schooling, and they greatly valued the opportunity for learning in a social context. These social practices were key to ensuring that mutual learning took place. Participants' health indicators showed that the learning was effective and was paralleled by development of their literacy skills. In particular, literacy and mobile digital practices were used for follow-up queries, concerns and referrals.

> 'The literacy level has definitely been an issue because … the midwives are selected by the Women's Health Committees but, you know, you have to choose carefully: it has to be a woman of a certain age, who's respected, and sometimes that will be a person who does not have a particularly high level of literacy but she is the most appropriate person and someone who would be trusted.'

Six months was recognised as not being long enough to raise literacy levels, and post-project sustainability mechanisms were needed. While the focus is on women, especially maternal health, this also involves a men's support group, who formally help with implementing the project practically on a day-to-day basis and informally disseminate an understanding of the project. Initial results indicate that the areas where literacy has been integrated most strongly with maternal and child health have shown better overall health outcomes.

Literacy for immigrants in the UK and Europe

Professor Martha Young-Scholten of Newcastle University, UK, introduced three projects aimed at adult immigrants who fit under the category of Low-educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) for Adults. This group is demonstrated to take three times longer to benefit from integration and vocational programmes designed to support their educational advancement. A range of studies internationally and across different language groups has found that active, individual and relevant learning mattered most in demonstrating progress over standard time periods (such as six months), where 'individualised activities are superior to group teaching when they look at what works in the classroom'. A further finding was that 'well-qualified teachers are key'. Pre-entry level ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teaching is a recognised area of shortage, for example, and the volunteers available may not have specialised in 'language experience' training appropriate to the target groups. Similarly, tailored materials may be in short supply for the 'self-paced, individualised and autonomous learning' quoted as most helpful.

The first project outlined a multi-platform learning programme which elicited immediate feedback from learners, with the aim of helping them to develop listening skills semi-independently with peers, and which culminated in speech-recognition of their scaffolded bite-size learning. This is now being extended to integrate games and move beyond a word-level focus. Another project looked at creating very short, engaging and accessible stories

(up to 300 words) for the target group, to encourage reading for pleasure. The final project looks at designing modules for teachers and trainers internationally. These offer free online standalone multi-lingual training, or continuing professional development, and they include language acquisition, working with LESLLA learners, and working with bilingual and multi-lingual learners.

Panel Discussion

Digital engagement was a consistent theme, from its integration into roadside commercial practices, the need to travel to the next village to charge a phone, to its use in learning processes and social engagement. Professor Young-Scholten pointed out that these practices are often not recognised as literacy while Dr Ngaka illustrated the motivational elements of engaging with technology and how this might contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 4. An issue which resonated with practitioners across the board was how to manage evaluation processes, from qualifications to national surveys to programme implementation, without undermining the teaching and learning processes that seek to achieve learner autonomy and improved quality performances.

Feedback

Over 75% of participants rated the day as 'excellent', with the 'ethos and atmosphere' being 'very constructive and enabling'. Many commented on the wide-ranging dialogue incorporating many and varied perspectives.

The keynote presentation from Dr Ulrike Hanemann was highly valued, providing structure to a complex field whilst also encouraging flexibility and creativity. Her framework for the integration of literacy and lifelong learning was identified as 'a tangible way forward in a possibly nebulous, complex field'.

Participants emphasised the value of the opportunities for group work, as well as appreciating the quality of the four brief case-study presentations. In line with this finding, the primary request was for more time overall and for more time to exchange with others. Feedback highlighted an extended awareness of the diversity of multi-literacies and practices continua, and associated ideologies, and the 'cultural embeddedness' of literacies activities. Participants also appreciated better understandings of implementation factors such as community and intergenerational contexts, options in evaluation of impact, and the sustainability of post-project outcomes. Learner-centeredness was threaded through as a theme.

Several participants commented that they would be looking at further means to integrate literacy development into projects, ranging from participatory approaches to curriculum and resource development to amplifying literate environments drawing on local contexts.

Participants identified a range of intended actions arising from the event including:

- *Think more closely about ways of developing literacy resources that are better linked to context and acknowledge cultural/symbolic/local language literacies*
- *Work to strengthen community involvement at all levels*
- *Look at how the projects we support through grant-making integrate and promote literacy approaches in their processes and how they evaluate this, particularly where literacy could open new opportunities*
- *Think through how to weave literacy into implementing livelihood projects*
- *Think in depth about what is literacy and for whom*
- *Try to involve indigenous knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in literacy for lifelong learning*
- *Need to negotiate with participants; begin where they are and what they want to learn.*

Conclusion

As Dr Ulrike Hanemann highlighted, the diversity of literacy practices, areas of activity which incorporate increasingly higher-order literacies, and cross-cutting themes is immense. Literacy is no longer perceived as a polar have/have not but as a continuum of knowledge and skills embedded into local contexts. This is more so as literacy is integrated into three-dimensional lifelong, lifewide and systemically and politically life-deep processes of learning. These necessarily implicate forms of measurement and evaluation. Beyond the call for basic adult education as a human right and basis for economic development, lifelong literacy touches on health, community development and digital accessibility and inclusion.

Resources

This report and further resources including video clips and presentations can be found on the BALID website, http://balid.org.uk/

Reference

Hanemann, Ulrike. "Lifelong literacy: Some trends and issues in conceptualising and operationalising literacy from a lifelong learning perspective." *International Review of Education* 61.3 (2015): 295-326.