

Freire, New Literacy Studies (NLS) and Literacy as a Social Practice (LSP)

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Dr Bob Boughton, Prof. Alan Rogers and Prof. Brian Street have started this exchange – you can add your comments on the BALID online discuss page.

Dear Alan

I hope you remember me. Last time I wrote I was writing about the Cubans in Timor Leste. Since then, I have succeeded in getting a Cuban to Australia to pilot their literacy campaign model in an Aboriginal community - it's going well, and this year we will extend the pilot to several more communities.

As I try to write about all this, I am challenged (as an old stule popular educator) by the new literacy studies seeming abandonment of Freirian perspectives. Can you enlighten me as to when and why this happened? Did I miss something?

Regards

Bob

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Response from Alan Rogers

NLS and FREIRE

Some people think we should drop the word 'New' from New Literacy Studies - they are rather old by now!! – so I am using the term 'literacy as social practice' (LSP).

I don't think that those involved in LSP have abandoned Freire but they qualify his ideas in two main ways.

- a) **Freire teaching methods:** Freire advocated a syllabic approach to learning literacy (called the ma-me-mi-mo-mu approach). Although some programmes (e.g. REFLECT) remain wedded to this approach, it is almost universally abandoned. It simply leads to word games, the collection of individual decontextualised (or rather classroom-contextualised) words which have no relationship to each other than their sounds. It does not lead to usable literacy activities. I have written about this with examples from the field.
- b) **social transformation:** many of those who are committed to LSP do retain a strong sense of social transformation (see e.g. Mary Hamilton *Literacy and the Politics of Representation* Routledge 2011; Erik Jacobson, *Adult Basic Education in the age of New Literacies* Peter Lang 2012, the best introduction to digital literacies I know). But they modify it. Freire started off with an assumption of oppression – he believed that the men and women and communities (participants) he dealt with were oppressed. The LSP advocates do not assume this (after all, oppression is subjective, complex, multiple); rather they start from a different set of assumptions – more positive than negative. They set out to find out what is happening - not only what the LSP people think is happening but also what the *participants* feel is happening. So, one does not go into East Timor or the aboriginal community with assumptions about oppression and liberation but simply to find out a) what seems to be happening from the LSP point of view, and b) what the East Timoreans and the aborigines feel is happening. They do not go to teach a missing literacy (the Cuban approach, a 'needs-based' approach), but to explore with the participants what appears to be happening (very complex; not simple oppression) and where literacy activities (often informal and local but also sometimes formal and standardised) fit in. They look for what exists, not for what is in deficit (an asset-based approach to development). Through critical debate, then, as a whole group, they can decide on an action plan, explore what asserts they already possess and then decide how to access the skills required (including literacy skills) they will need to carry out that action. That is an adapted form of being Freirean.

It is, I think, true that there are some LSP people who appear to believe their task is to find out what is happening but not to change anything – mainly anthropologists and ethnographers; but those who are in the adult education strand are interventionists; they are committed to social change. Most of them do not accept the social inclusion doctrine, of incorporating the marginal and hard-to-reach (e.g. aborigines) into a core society that already exists and from

which they come; rather, they critique and seek to change their own core society as well as encourage access to its various facilities – what is sometimes called accessibility as well as access.

Does this help? it is purely personal; I am not speaking for anyone else other than my own impressions from reading etc. But I am copying Brian Street in as he may have different perspectives.

Best wishes

Alan

Response from Brian Street

I agree with Alan that the term New Literacy Studies (NLS) does have problems – the ‘new’ seems a bit odd now 20 years or so into the discussion; and people tend to think that the ‘new’ applies to literacy rather than to studies. So it is assumed NLS is about ‘new literacies’ – embedded in new technologies, internet sites, ‘digital’ literacies etc. – whereas the original NLS view was that it was providing ‘new studies’ of literacy. How this ‘new view applies to Freire has been an important area of discussion over this period, a more social practice view of literacy opening up broader fields than seemed evident in his approach. NLS/LSP approaches don’t want to deny the value of Freire’s work - but as Alan says, from this perspective, there are problems with Freire’s theory of writing, focussed mainly on syllabic scripts and therefore not much help with alphabetic or ideographic scripts. And also as Alan says, the focus on oppression and transformation does not fit well with the complexity of local, ethnographic perspectives central to NLS/LSP, that try to find out what people are actually already doing (many campaign organisers would say ‘they have no literacy’ but the research challenges this). So the LETTER Project (Learning Empowerment through Training in Ethnographic Research) rooted in NLS/LSP approaches, has attempted to find out about local literacy practices and, with the help of trainee teacher/ facilitators work through this experience in building towards further literacies that the participants want. This would apply as much to the East Timoreans and the aborigines in Australia who Bob is working with as to the groups Letter has already worked with, in India, Ethiopia, Uganda etc (see Rogers and Street, 2011). So I would ask – what might a NLS/LSP approach add to Bob’s work?

I look forward to further inputs this discussion,

Brian Street

- **Rogers, A and Street, B 2011 Teaching Literacy: Perspectives From Both Developing And Western Contexts’ *Viden om Læsning (Knowledge About Reading)* special issue, Jorden læser(Literacy Around the World), No. 10, Sept 2011 Nationalt VidenCenter for Laesning, Kobenhaven pp. 38-47**