Using an equality discourse to promote adult learning using non-text methodologies: is such an approach compatible with policy and practice in learning for literacy?

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Summary

This paper examines the relationship between literacy and equality and its relevance to adult literacy practice. It looks at findings from the Literacy and Equality in Irish Society (LEIS) project (2004-2006), on how literacy tutors can use creative non-text methods to promote an understanding of equality issues in learners’ lives. The article demonstrates how tutors and learners developed greater insights and an understanding into the causes and consequences of inequalities and how they can be challenged. The project also researched, designed and developed a resources guide (Lambe et al; 2006) to show how alternative methodologies can be used to support adult learning.

The range of issues that can be explored are potentially vast and might include unemployment, gender, culture and identity. The project worked across the border in Ireland to explore ways in which adult literacy learners might develop a better understanding of social and economic issues affecting their lives. To assist learners with this task, a range of non-text methodologies were employed. Findings showed that with appropriate support, tutors and learners could engage in a collaborative research process which in turn could influence the ongoing development literacy practices. The findings have relevance for the development
of policies which seek to engage adult learning in equalities issues using non-text methods.

**Introduction**

Assumptions about what literacy is are constantly challenged by new research findings and practices, which in turn are redefining the meaning of literacy. Adult literacy is not a static concept and history has shown that definitions of what it means to be literate are always changing. Indeed Crowther, Hamilton & Tett (2001, p.1) note ‘definitions of what it means to be literate are always shifting.’ Street (1984) identified two models which can assist with understanding literacy which he referred to as the ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models. Each of these models have developed discourses which generate very different ways of thinking about literacy.

The ‘autonomous model’ postulates that literacy is a set of normative, unproblematic technical skills that are neutral and detached from the social context in which they are used. The ‘correct’ skills are defined or fixed (by a powerful group) and learning becomes focused on a mechanical reproduction of ‘correct’ skills learned in the classroom and which it is assumed may be easily transferred to real life situations.

The other alternative ‘ideological model’, sometimes called the ‘social practices model’, recognises the socio-cultural, diverse nature of literacy. Arguing for such a model, Hamilton (2000, p.1) notes:

‘Literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skills, but are relational concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life and world’.

In this model, power to determine content and curriculum lies primarily with the learner rather than the educational organisation. This approach responds to issues that are derived from people’s own interests and knowledge of the world. The expansion
of this model to include a ‘critical approach’ adds a further dimension to an understanding of literacy by linking it to social and political issues in society.

Shor (1991, p.15) notes ‘critical literacy … points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices.’

A key objective of the LEIS project was to explore the links between adult literacy and equality issues and to examine how non-text creative learning methodologies might be used to enhance learners understanding of equality issues identified which have affected in their lives. The project therefore worked closely with learners and tutors to explore these equality issues using a range of text-free methods. The project adopted a social practices model of literacy development to explore inequalities and using text-free methods. This model acknowledges the social, emotional and linguistic contexts that give literacy learning meaning, and includes a critical approach to literacy. The project also held as a core principle the view that literacy programmes should be grounded in the everyday life situations of learners and should embrace issues of equality, social inclusion and social justice.

As the project developed, the need to provide training and support to enable tutors to implement new ideas began to emerge. A learning package which includes text-free/creative teaching methods was therefore designed with the aim of supporting tutors and learners to explore equality issues affecting their lives. Using non-text methods in adult literacy practice is not a new idea. However, what was innovative was the linking of literacy to equality issues across the Irish Border. The project also brought together people with different types of expertise in the field of literacy.
practice and across the Border, to promote dialogue about equality as an issue in adult literacy learner’s lives. The lead partners in the project were the Centre for Research and Teaching on Equality, University College Dublin and the School of Education, Queen’s University Belfast. Other literacy stakeholders including policy makers, tutors and learner from both side of the Irish border were also involved with the development of the project. More than one hundred tutors and learners were involved in the project, which was funded by the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation

**Literacy and lifelong learning policies in Ireland**

In recent years, lifelong learning policies, North and South, have emphasised the importance of literacy & basic skills as part of their lifelong learning strategies, but with somewhat different emphasis. In Northern Ireland, the lifelong learning strategy has emphasised:

> ‘the development of basic and key skills in the context of skills, knowledge and understanding essential for employability and fulfilment.’ (DEL 1999, p1).

In contrast, the first White Paper on Adult Education in the Republic of Ireland (DES 2000, p. 26) emphasised the need for social cohesion and equity as well as the skills requirement of a rapidly changing workforce in the emergence of an inclusive civil society. The policy agenda was therefore significantly different between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, with a special focus on meeting the needs of the economy in the North and a greater emphasis on equality and social cohesion in the South. (2006, p.18 Lambe et al;).

Working within two very different policy and practice frameworks inevitably posed many challenges for those working in the LEIS project. The emergence of a Peace
and Reconciliation process in Ireland, which was not tied to existing funding structures provided a new opportunity to work with tutors and learners on both sides of the Irish Border. Border Action (2006), the funding body for the project, notes the twin objectives of the EU Special Support Programme are to promote the social inclusion of those who are at the margins of social and economic life and to boost economic growth and advance social and economic regeneration. These aims provided a rationale for the project in both jurisdictions. The LEIS project also provided an opportunity to work with tutors and learners on both sides of the Irish border, sometimes with learners or tutors attending meetings and workshops together from both sides. This enabled tutors to share experiences working in very different contexts as well as to share experiences of inequalities from different sides of the political and religious divide.

**Connecting equality and creativity to literacy practices**

Baker et al; (2004, p.47) note that equality has a complex range of meanings or interpretations and like literacy, is a complex issue to define. In simplistic terms they note that equality is a relationship of some kind or other between two people or more regarding some aspect of their lives. The LEIS project was based on the view that poor literacy skills can be viewed as a manifestation or symptom of inequality. It also acknowledged the complexity of the task of helping tutors and learners understand the concept of equality. The project set out to develop clearer links between a theoretical understanding of equality and practical approaches to including equality issues through the development of creative and non-text methodologies. Using an equality framework developed by the Equality Studies Centre, the project examined ways in
which creative methodologies could create spaces for the exploration of equality issues within adult literary practice. The methodologies were also intended to empower both tutors and learners to engage with key equality issues relevant to the lives of literacy learners. For example, it was hoped that the methodologies could enable tutors and learners to explore inequalities arising out of the experience of conflict in Ireland.

The theoretical model described by Baker et al; (2004, p.34) is underpinned by the belief that there are clear patterns in the structure and level of inequality experienced by individuals and groups. The LEIS project chose to focus on four interrelated dimensions of the equality framework outlined by Baker et al; - respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; access to resources; and power relations. These dimensions provided an opportunity to look at the economic, political and cultural dimensions of equality as well as how the affective or emotional realm of learning impacts on learning. The theoretical framework and its connections with the methodological approaches is discussed in much greater detail in the project Resource Guide (2006, Lamb et al;).

Creative methodologies can enable learners to develop an understanding of equality issues through involvement in a participatory process which involves critical thinking and problem solving capacities. Fegan (2003, p.2) notes that creative learning methodologies can provide a sense of identity and purpose which can be used to promote greater equality, social justice and mutual understanding. He also notes they can transform individuals, neighbourhoods, communities and regions.
Since a key aim of the project was to provide a way of understanding equality issues using non-text methods of learning, five creative methodologies were selected and piloted. These methodologies were image theatre (a non-verbal technique where the human body can be shaped into images representing feelings and experiences of oppression), storytelling, drama, visual arts and use of a gamelan (a musical instrument from South East Asia which can be used to develop skills through equality relationships). Through engagement with groups of literacy learners and tutors, the project examined how equality issues might be better understood in the lives of learners.

Engaging tutors and learners in a participatory action-based research process

A participatory approach, where tutors and learners engaged as equal partners with the development team throughout the project was embedded in the project from the outset. Through engaging in stakeholder dialogue, the project examined equality issues seen as important both to tutors and learners. The learning methodologies piloted in the project were developed alongside an equality framework described above (Baker et al; 2004).

In the initial phase, both focus and pilot groups consisting of adult literacy learners and tutors from various community organisations, explored issues of equality and inequality in learners and tutors’ lives. The focus groups looked at what motivated adults to learn about inequalities, what kind of issues they want to know about and what would be the best ways of involving adults in this kind of learning. Non-text creative methodologies, including the use of collage, image theatre, storytelling and
popular theatre, were also piloted and this provided information on how effective tutors and learners considered these methods to be. The consultation included three pilot groups of 19 people and four focus groups of 99 people in total.

A series of short courses for tutors of literacy were also organised around the themes of the project. The courses involved tutors and creative learning methodologists working together in dialogue with each other, reflecting on the various dimensions of equality through a range of activities and examining ways in which learners might be engaged in equality issues. This included an examination of the links between equality, creativity and literacy using the equality framework described above. For tutors, it was important to have an understanding of how inequalities adversely impacted on individual lives and to known how to use models and tools to explore equality issues with learners. Another unit of study on ‘equality and literacy’ lasting approximately three hours was developed and piloted on existing part-time professional under-graduate and post-graduate tutor training courses with literacy tutors.

A total number of 125 people attended the courses organised in seven different locations across Northern Ireland and the Border counties of the Republic. The programme included seven short continuing professional development courses lasting ten hours and a further five courses, where training was part of an initial and ongoing professional development course for adult literacy tutors and managers. Some of the courses included community activists and literacy tutor participants lacking formal education and training. Most of the courses were offered as accredited courses and approximately 107 individuals took up this opportunity.
The focus groups and seminars emphasised the need for support materials and resources for tutors and learners. A Resource Guide, which included a rationale and discussion of the theories and methodologies employed and practical examples of how to use them, was prepared alongside the research process (Lambe et al; 2006).

An ongoing evaluation process involving an external evaluator and a project management group of eight literacy experts was established. The evaluation process provided constructive advice, support and feedback for the project team and had an instrumental role in achieving the project objectives. A final evaluation report was also prepared (Tett, 2006). The focus and pilot groups asked for feedback from participants using three questions - ‘what I learned, what I liked and what could be better’. The findings from this evaluation are discussed below.

**Using creative approaches to understanding inequalities**

The responses of learners to the evaluation showed that many had learned new skills in communicating and felt more confident talking about the issues affecting their lives. Comments showed that adults with low levels of reading or writing literacy were able to actively participate in learning, thus contributing to the broader goals of social inclusion and citizenship in lifelong learning, discussed earlier.

Tutors who used the creative learning methodologies in their practices, spoke about the fullness and meaning evident in the level of engagement of learners. As well as encouraging learners to think about equality issues affecting their lives (e.g. access to jobs, race, religion and gender inequalities), many also spoke about the methods as
being inclusive, encouraging imagination, improving self-esteem, creating a bond between groups and leading to improved listening skills. Through the use of non-text methods, tutors began to see how they might open up spaces for learners to question previously held assumptions on a range of equality issues affecting their lives as a result of low literacy skills.

One tutor commented on how attending training using creative non-text methodologies had helped her develop skills and knowledge in the use of these methods and had also enabled her to see how the methodologies might be used to help students understand the causes and consequences of conflict. Storytelling had enabled her students to talk about real life experiences of unemployment and alienation and isolation experienced by individuals and communities. It had enabled her learners to talk about the things that united as well as divided them and thus enabled them to develop and understanding and empathy for other points of view.

‘I use story telling with a group of young men, Usually if I ask them what they would like to do they say ‘we don’t know’. This time when I asked them to tell stories about their lives, it generated a great discussion about what they were interested in developing and that made a good contribution to equality.’

Another tutor who taught on a government funded ‘Jobskills’ programme for young men took along a sculpture she had made to discuss it with this group. She found that it was a good stimulus to discussion as she was sharing her own feelings and thoughts with the group in a very open way. She felt having a concrete object made it easier to raise more complex issues about equality that were generally hard to do in other types of discussion It was a good stimulus to get the group thinking, rather than asking the group to write down their thoughts which she felt would not have worked as it would have limited their thinking to what they could write.
Commenting on the use of sculpture to explore inequalities, another tutor commented:

‘in the course I met with people from lots of different areas. I felt worried about making a sculpture about peace because I’m not artistic and I didn’t want to expose myself in front of strangers. Anyway we worked in groups and it was great because doing it together lead to lots of discussion. We found that what we made together was much more interesting than what we could have made on our own. When everybody talked about what their sculpture represented you got right to the heart of things because it was a safe space and we were all able to speak honestly.’

Another tutor working in a rural college used a collage to encourage students to represent their views about inequalities that they perceived in their lives. This enabled students to think quite deeply about issues that had affected them without being inhibited by the need to write down their thoughts. She reported that students worked well together and talked about their individual experiences using the collages as a media for the discussion. Issues discussed included a previous lack of education opportunities, feelings of powerlessness in creating change and a lack of understanding arising from the religious and political division which they lived under.

The tutor noted:

‘actually participating in making the collage increases the students understanding of equality and enables people to talk about themselves honestly without having to put pen to paper.’

Many tutors spoke of the enhanced understanding of the causes of conflict which they were able to link to their own lives as well as the lives of her students and which they were now able to link to their teaching and to helping resolve conflicts. One commented:

‘They provided me with simple exercises for conflict resolution which I was able to use with my students. Even my students with learning difficulties easily
understood the idea that you need to learn how to cooperate if you are going to solve conflict.’

Some tutors spoke of the value of the methods in creating safe spaces for groups from both communities to explore equality issues impacting on their lives which lead to a common understanding of how a lack of literacy skills can created inequalities.

Evidence from the pilot courses showed that the use of creative non-text methods with both teachers and students had many social and educational benefits. Tutors reported that their understanding of literacy had how it might be acquired had been challenged. In addition the demonstrated that the use of such methods can provide a more inclusive way of learning which is not based on text – based privileged forms of knowing, being and doing.

The methods also enabled tutors to develop new skills and created greater levels of cooperation and understanding between literacy tutors in both parts of Ireland.

One tutors noted:

‘I found working with tutors from the south made me look at my own practices more openly because what I had taken for granted about accrediting learners was different for them. It was a bit uncomfortable to have the things I see as common sense challenged but it did improve my practices.’

Some of the tutors also expressed their criticism of the use of creative methodologies. Some felt the activities might require a high level of preparation or be perceived as ‘childish’ by learners, while others questioned the value of activities having so much fun. For some tutors and learners, education may be perceived as a serious activity where it is not always easy to equate learning as synonymous with a high level of enjoyment. While tutors were very enthusiastic about the use of creative methods for
exploring equality issues, they also indicated that ongoing advice and support might be needed to enable tutors to introduce creative methodologies into their practices. They indicated that such advice and support would help build tutors confidence in their abilities to use the methodologies. They also spoke of the need for a clear rationale to validate the learning in the eyes of managers and funding bodies. These comments showed that tutors that while tutors were enthusiastic about the new methodologies they were also aware of the limitations many of which were practical, but which could nevertheless be important in determining success.

The seminars provided tutors with an opportunity to generate both new ideas around using equality issues in the curriculum and new ways of working using creative methodologies appropriate to different situations and environments. Many of these ideas generated by tutors are included in the project’s Resource Guide. For example, an exercise was developed to help tutors select a range of learning outcomes for course development.

The Guide also provided a useful tool for the induction of new tutors and overall, the methodologies used were welcomed for enabling learners to become aware of and talk about equality issues affecting their lives.

When used alongside the equality framework outlined by Baker et al (2004, p34) the methodologies were found to enable tutors and learners to talk about inequalities in new and creative ways. Tutors reported that they had learnt to recognise the need for respect and recognition of difference, important to each learner. The ‘love care and solidarity’ dimension of the framework enabled tutors and learners to explore the
emotional dimension of learning through for example, the examination of painful issues in people’s lives through creative ways.

Tutors also recognised the resource issue of the framework. For example, tutors mentioned how limited availability of classes at the times and locations which suited students, and problems arising from inappropriate accreditation systems, but were often not able to bring about changes leading to greater equality. Tutors also reported that they had developed a greater understanding of how they could recognise the strengths and expertise of themselves and the students through dialogue. They found that the methodologies had changed the balance of power between tutor and learner, because there was less emphasis on the skills of reading and writing and more on the ability to express views in an open and non-judgemental way.

Some of the tutors reported they didn’t understand the equality framework and were more concerned with the practicalities of using the methodologies in their work with students. However even these tutors reported a greater understanding of power issues between themselves and students and among different communities, clearly an important aspect of equality.

The project also helped tutors develop an understanding of how theories of equality can engage learners in a debate about literacy and its relationship with ‘equality principles’. By challenging a ‘skills’ approach to developing literacy, the theoretical framework helped tutors understand and articulate a ‘non-deficit’ perspective for adult literacy development which engages learners in understanding everyday life situations including inequalities affecting their lives. It therefore shifted participants’
perspectives on literacy from one of ‘people with low literacy skills’ to a perspective of ‘people with unmet literacy needs.’ Through the project’s advocacy of the use of creative methodologies, tutors and learners understanding of literacy were widened to include visual literacy, oral literacy and situated learning within creative processes (storytelling, drama/theatre, music and visual arts).

The equality framework was used as a tool to initiate discussion about inequalities. In the discussions that followed, tutors raised a number of equality issues arising from their own practices. Some examples of these were structural and institutional inequalities that create barriers to using creative approaches, the difficulties in working within rigid curricula and the privilege of learning through text-based work. The project also explored the potential to examine and discuss ‘power relationships’ through the use of non-text methodologies within adult literacy. Issues such as health, housing, welfare, family and other issues arising from low levels of literacy were all raised. The methods used in the project started with what people already knew. Each activity involved drawing on the resources and knowledge within the group and giving recognition to the issue raised through creative activity.

The LEIS project has shown how working with partners across different sectors can help integrate knowledge and ideas to improve practices. In this case, a teamwork approach enabled knowledge about inequalities in society to be translated into literacy practices, thus ultimately changing the ways literacy learners think about inequalities in their lives. It also provided new opportunities to involve tutors and learners together in researching their own needs and in so doing influencing the development of practices.
Conclusion

Perhaps one of the achievements of the project was building greater insight and understanding of the causes and consequences of inequalities and the possibilities that exist for change. This was already demonstrated through the evaluation process and the comments of those who participated in the project. The project’s approach to literacy work challenged individually-based deficit views of learners and instead focuses on people’s ability to do what they want in their lives. In the words of one tutor it ‘opened my eyes and mind to what is possible through using other methods.’ Through dialogue between tutors and other professionals on both sides of the Irish border, the process also promoted greater understanding of equality and literacy practices right across Ireland. In addition the work of the project was based on the premise that literacy is far more than a set of basic skills, but rather, are a set of social practices. Adult literacy education is in itself an issue for inequality since adults with low literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed, living on low incomes and experience poor health and early morbidity.


Using a ‘social practices’ account of adult literacy means that rather than seeing literacy as the decontextualised, mechanical, manipulation of letters, words and figures this view shows that literacy is located within social, emotional and linguistic contexts. Literacy practices was seen to integrate the routines, skills, and understandings, that are organised within specific contexts and also the feelings and values that people have about these activities. The use of innovative, non-text based
methods was designed to take account of the emotional context of learning for those who have often experienced failure at school and may have low self-esteem. (Schuller et al., 2004). By focusing on equality and creativity, the LEIS project has shown how theories of equality and non-text creative methodologies can be used to develop new skills and understanding for adult literacy learners. The LEIS project empowered adult learners to critically examine some of the many issues affecting their lives. While finding ways of addressing these inequalities has no easy answers, this should not be a reason for denying learners the opportunity to examine and discuss these issues within literacy programmes and practices.

By focusing on equality and creativity, the LEIS project has shown how equality and creativity can be used to develop new skills and understanding through the use of non-text methodologies. This can then empower learners to examine and understand the equality issues which affect their lives and the lives of others. Shor (1999,p.1) argues:

‘This kind of literacy … connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical…’

The challenge for the future will be to find ways of aligning literacy policies and practices to these broader goals of equality and social justice.

**References**


[www.leis.ac.uk](http://www.leis.ac.uk)


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1 The key partners in the project were the School of Education at Queen’s University Belfast and the Equality Studies Centre at University College Dublin. The School of Education, Queen’s University, the lead partner, is the main provider of tutor education for Adult Literacy & Numeracy in Northern Ireland, providing a range of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes including initial and continuous professional development programme. The Equality Studies Centre, University College Dublin, is an inter-faculty research and teaching centre involved in outreach to community and local development organisations and is providing expertise in Equality Studies. The project also involved the National Adult Literacy Agency, which focuses on national co-ordination and training and policy development in adult literacy work in the Republic of Ireland, and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Northern Ireland, a guidance agency which connects adults with learning, providing support services to those concerned with improving access to learning. A number of other voluntary and community organisations also contributed to the development of the project. The LEIS project employed two full time Development Workers and two part-time Project Coordinators.

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