Life after and beyond “Skills for Life”, - what do teachers of literacy to adults need to know?

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This paper might be a year or so too late in the sense that what it talks about is very likely to undergo a substantial change in the coming years. For the last ten years or so I have watched the formation and implementation of the set of policies known as “Skills for Life”. It has, for reasons I will explore, been a strange and estranging process. I think it would be fair to say that the development of Skills for Life has transformed the teaching of literacy to adults to such an extent that many of the professional keywords we use have undergone a transformation in their meanings. Even the expression ‘Adult Literacy’ has come to have a meaning different to that of ten years ago and as I will argue later under the surface there are very important disagreements about what we mean when we talk about it. This paper might be a little out of date in the sense that the present economic crisis will lead to significant changes in adult literacy teaching and learning but in ways which are only now beginning to take shape and are still undetermined. The economic environment in which the existing policies were formed has gone and there is every indication that there might within the near future be a change of government and perhaps even of policy. Yet there are also good reasons to believe that there will be fair degree of continuity between the present and the future if only because some of the neo-liberal objectives which underlie “Skills for Life” and have shaped its development are, on present trends, likely to remain as the key factor shaping government policy. This paper will seek to explore some of these processes. There is another very good reason to present a paper on Skills for Life at this SCUTREA conference. I think that many people attending will be like some of my colleagues in the university where I work. They are aware of “Skills for Life”, and generally they instinctively dislike it because they feel it works against the values which brought them initially into the area of adult education. Very often these colleagues choose not to explore “Skills for Life” because they have experienced it as an integral part of the process by which much post compulsory education has been straitjacketed. I hope that the discussion around this paper will afford some sort of opportunity for such people to be involved in in an open and critical discussion.

The “New Labour” government elected in 1997 was committed to putting right what it saw as years of “Tory neglect”. In literacy teaching circles the election of the labour government was generally welcomed. At the time pronouncements about the priority Adult Literacy was to be given were usually accepted without
too much questioning. Perhaps now with the benefit of hindsight we might attach more importance to the terms in which this ‘neglect’ and its suggested remedies were couched. It is now relatively easy to detect that even in the earliest policy initiatives of the Blair government there was a definite tendency to view education for most people as being, in essence, workforce preparation. In terms of literacy teaching and learning Barton and Hamilton summed up how many felt about the new policies and their rationale:

> What may be confusing for literacy advocates is that we may largely find the ends of these policies to be benevolent, whilst finding the human capital rationalisations for these policy goals to be distasteful or plain wrong. (Hamilton and Barton 2000 p 386)

This description of how many literacy teachers felt about some New Labour policy appears in a response which the writers were making to the to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which had been published in 1997 by the OECD. This OECD sponsored research had attempted to measure levels of literacy in member countries and to produce a league table. Such research had a massive impact on the New Labour government. The problems with such international comparisons, or indeed all similar attempts to metricate and measure literacy were roundly exposed by Barton and Hamilton as indeed they had been many times before though in different ways by those associated with what is known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Heath 1983, Street 1984). In the works of the NLS researchers what Street referred to as autonomous views of literacy were subjected to a critique which really leaves them exposed as unconvincing. In preference to autonomous models of literacy proponents of NLS argue for the study of literacy in what might be referred to as ideological, socially situated, or cultural terms. I think it would be fair to say that the government, whilst sometimes tolerating an NLS approach in research has never tried to embrace this approach when it comes to the formulation of policy. In their critique of the IALS Barton and Hamilton made a remark which is perhaps even truer now than it was then when they referred to what they called enactive research

> We would describe the IALS research as enactive research, meaning that it is designed to rationalise and support policy decisions that have already been made outside of the research arena. Much government sponsored education research in Britain is enactive in this sense, and there are increasing pressures for research to support policy (2000 p.387)

The first concrete steps towards a major policy change were signalled by the New Labour Government in the person of the Education Secretary David Blunkett appointing Sir Claus Moser to chair a working group to investigate literacy and numeracy among the adult population as Moser put it his working group was to outline how policy could be used in ‘improving the lot of the many adults whose quality of life can be enriched by enhancing their basic skills’ (DFEE 1999 Chairman’s Foreword). In the report it is clear that the working group were concerned about what they felt was the negative impact of ‘poor basic skills’ on individuals and families. At the same time there was no doubt that
employability and the creation of a skilled workforce was also seen as a major factor behind the enquiry which Moser chaired. It is worth comparing this initial research with later work by Foster (DFES 2005) and Leitch (H.M. Treasury 2006) in the latter two the idea of employability and the need for skills as being linked to international economic competitiveness is far stronger and it is stated in such strong terms that is to be taken for granted that the purpose of education is the training of workers and anything else is at best secondary. Incidentally, or maybe not so incidentally, all three chairmen of the reports recruited by New Labour were directors of banks Sir Claus Moser with Rothschild’s, Sir Andrew Foster with the Royal Bank of Canada, and Lord Leitch with Lloyd’s. Moreover Foster and Leitch have been linked to companies seen as benefitting from the privatisation of state services. This latter point is important as it indicates a particular orientation toward state educational provision such as that of FE Colleges and Adult Education and very definitely the WEA with its labour movement traditions. The three reports might well be described as being the results of “enactive” research but when the tone of the Moser report is compared to that of Foster and Leitch we can trace the evolution of this type of research during the New Labour period.

The Moser report (DFEE 1999) called for the development of specialist qualifications for teachers of literacy, numeracy and ESOL working within the post compulsory sector. This call was later taken up in the Skills for Life policy document along with the announcement of the creation of a National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) which David Blunkett believed would become the leading centre for research on Adult Literacy and Numeracy in the English speaking world. In a characteristic move he also linked the development of this research centre to a commercial imperative “we will want to exploit any knowledge and best practice we have learned in overseas education markets” (DFEE 2001 page 49). The interesting thing here is the presentation of educational theory and practice as “education markets”.

The history of these specialist qualifications and the NRDC is an area of particular interest. I have spent a great deal of time over the last decade in the development of these teaching qualifications and have worked with several hundred teachers who have followed these courses. The work of the NRDC has been of importance to all literacy teachers who take an interest in their own professional development. It can be assumed that within the NRDC there have been struggles over the view of theory and practice put forward in its publications and activities. Any such struggles have not been made public but it might be assumed that with the government paying this particular piper it must at least ask for particular tunes to be played in a suitable style. Much of the research produced by the NRDC has been illuminating for those working in adult literacy yet it is very hard, looking from the outside to see how it has influenced policy.

New Labour policies often display a strangely contradictory character. Stuart Hall (2003) described this as being ‘New Labour’s double shuffle’. Hall argues that
new Labour is committed to what might be described as neo–liberal politics and imperatives but because of Labour Party history and traditions and since its core voters reject what are seen as ‘Thatcherite’ policies it tries to present itself as acting in what might be described as a modern social democratic manner. We might for the moment consider literacy teaching to be a form of public service and then consider how well Stuart Hall’s 2003 description of New Labour’s model of reform fits the introduction and development of the new qualifications for literacy teachers.

Public service delivery in the second term is really the key as to understanding how this hybrid New Labour regime functions. New Labour is committed to improving the delivery of public services. But its means of achieving this are impeccably ‘new managerialist’. Redistribution, where it occurs, must be by stealth, lest a more vocal and organised constituency should develop around it. New Labour has set its stony face against enlisting public service workers and professionals in the enterprise.

We are not accustomed to thinking about literacy teaching as a form of wealth redistribution but in many ways it can be viewed as such. After all, prior to the election of New Labour in 1997 there was a far smaller proportion of public expenditure allocated to literacy teaching than is presently the case even if we find the justifications for such expenditure ‘to be distasteful or plain wrong.’ (Hamilton and Barton 2000 p 386) there has been a massive increase in spending.

In the particular case of the specialist teaching qualifications for teachers of literacy it is perfectly possible to see their introduction, evolution and development as being thoroughly permeated with ‘new managerialist’ practices. The standards on which the new teaching qualifications were to be based were first produced by FENTO and when this organisation was superseded by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) the standards were taken up by this organisation. LLUK is now so omnipresent in post compulsory teacher education that we tend to forget what the nature of this organisation is but it is worth reminding ourselves and we need not go further than to look at its own description of itself to see that it is unequivocally the organisation of employers in post compulsory education, Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) is the independent employer-led sector skills council responsible for the professional development of all those working in community learning and development, further education, higher education, libraries, archives and information services, and work based learning across the UK (LLUK 2009)

What we have therefore in post compulsory teacher education in general and literacy in particular is an employer controlled curriculum and given that this “independent employer led” organisation is largely state funded we might well wonder about the nature of its independence. Incidentally, it seems to have passed relatively unnoticed that LLUK also has pretensions to exercise extensive control over universities though why this is not discussed more is surprising as
LLUK is quite forthright in this regard ‘LLUK represents employers, stakeholders and staff working in higher education (HE) across the UK’ (LLUK 2009a). I know of no-one working in HE who has asked to be represented by LLUK and I find the potential implications of this to be disturbing.

According to Hall (2003) New Labour is intent on trying to prevent the organisation of more vocal and organised constituencies around its policies. This takes us into new area and in a very small way shows a fundamental contradiction in the approach to what New Labour calls ‘governance’. Moser called for the professionalisation of literacy teaching and Skills for Life took up this call but this entailed problems. The fundamental issue became one of how to professionalise literacy teachers without them becoming more ‘vocal and organised’. This problem can actually be detected in the subject standards. Part of the process of professionalisation requires that literacy teachers learn about the nature of literacy. This inevitably means that literacy teachers will for example need to learn about the approach to literacy taken by those working within the NLS tradition, thus more teachers will be shown the arguments against a strictly skills based concept of literacy. In other words the standards themselves tend to lead towards teachers being equipped to challenge the basis of the official approach to literacy teaching. This type of contradiction can be seen in many guises indeed the notion of professionalisation itself carries with it the idea that professionals should be listened to and this happens exactly at the time when New Labour ‘has set its stony face against’ (Hall2003) allowing teachers to participate in the development of policy.

The place of research in the formulation and critique of policy towards literacy teaching is particularly interesting and a review of the implications of this research would seem to indicate that in setting its face against much of the most compelling research (albeit for good reason from their point of view) the government has undermined its own efforts to, as they put it, drive up standards. Uta Papen (Papen 2005). has produced a wide ranging critique of some of these problems and what I argue below is, I think, quite similar to what she has written though perhaps less circumspect.

The approach to literacy taken by the government and LLUK etc.has been fundamentally a skills based approach based on notions of functional literacy. There are various reasons for this but I think the most important is that from the viewpoint of the government the skills approach appears to offer the best way of controlling the literacy syllabus, and what happens in classrooms. Above all the skills approach appears to offer the best prospect of being able to test and measure the performance of students, teachers and institutions. For better or worse this process of measurement itself amounts to gauging the degree of conformity to what OfSTED, the LSC, or LLUK say literacy teaching should be.

The classic official formulation of what literacy is said to be in England and Wales is given in the opening passages of the Moser report though it was in use before
it appeared there. It is we are told ‘the ability to read write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general’ (DFEE 1999). This definition makes sense at a superficial level but it can easily be shown as being inadequate. It is necessary to question among other things the idea of a necessary level of literate functioning, and what there is also the problem of trying to understand what ‘society in general’ might be. It would also appear that this definition does not require that there be some type of critical interaction with text as a part of literacy. A huge amount of research work in the tradition of NLS indicates that literacy is far wider ranging and complex than this definition allows for.

Within the NLS tradition literacy is seen as being ideologically, socially and culturally constituted. It cannot be properly understood if it is seen as having a disembodied autonomous existence. As Brian Street (1984) puts it the model of literacy he argues for

...assumes that the meaning of literacy depends upon the social institutions in which it is embedded; .... literacy can only be known to us in forms which already have political and ideological significance and it cannot, therefore be helpfully separated from that significance and treated as though it were an autonomous thing.

Herein lies the problem for a government which wants to raise levels of literacy but does not want to encourage a critical engagement with theories of literacy as social and cultural practices, and even less would encourage an examination of the institutions in which literacy is embedded. The autonomous skills model appears to offer a way out of this problem. From the government perspective people following skills based literacy courses can be prepared for tests and be shown to have passed a particular level, targets are met and the largely illusional picture of everything progressing smoothly can be maintained. At this point it is worth saying something about what teachers of literacy actually do in reality.

In many cases I think literacy teachers have developed remarkable coping strategies with regard to many of the excesses of Skills for Life. Teachers of literacy to adults by and large seem to adopt a double tracked approach of ensuring that outwardly their lesson plans, schemes of work and individual learning plans are framed in the type of language required by Skills for Life or OfSTED or LLUK etc. whilst in class they try to continue working in accord with what they feel is best for their students. Many teachers I talk to indicate that they view preparation for Skills for Life tests as being something which they do alongside their literacy teaching. What I do know for certain is that in most cases when literacy teachers talk of their successes they do not do so in terms of how many students have passed how many tests but they almost always talk about the ways in which their work as literacy teachers has helped their students to change their lives in some significant way.
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