Dark Clouds on a Big Guitar? A Reflection on the Opportunities and Threats for Adult Literacies Work in Scotland.

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Introduction

‘Dark Clouds on a Big Guitar’ is the title of a Joan Baez song, published in 2003, and in using it here, I hark back to Ian Martin’s similar references to Joan Baez’ work in his 2006 SCUTREA paper, ‘Where Have all the Flowers Gone?’ Ian’s paper lamented the passing of an era where the ‘flowers’ of debate and discussion helped shape adult education’s social, democratic purpose. It made an impassioned plea for the revival of such debate in our present time where, he argued, ‘the processes of respectable-isation, demoralis-ation and responsible-isation’ (Martin, 2006: 288) have stripped adult education of its democratising and liberating soul. Ian also wrote;

The question is: Where have all those flowers of argument and engagement gone? [.....].Do they still matter? Do we still care? Are we better off without them? Can it really be said that in the kind of world we live in today we have come to the end of argument. (op. cit: 286)

‘Dark Clouds on a Big Guitar’ can be seen as a similar, if less pessimistic metaphor for the state of one aspect of adult education in Scotland, - adult literacies; where the ‘Big Guitar’ represents the ideology, passion and commitment that has steered the work over almost a decade, but where the ‘Dark Clouds’ of functionalism and performativity threaten to overshadow and deafen the big music of the guitar. And whilst the ‘flowers’ of adult literacies work have not died, I want to argue that they could be in danger of doing if we do not constantly and publicly re-engage with the sort of questions that Ian asked of adult education in general. This paper is therefore a reflection on the evolving relationship between theory, policy and practice in adult literacies work in Scotland from before the launch of its strategy in 2001 to today, in the hope that raising debate and discussion around such questions will help dispel the dark clouds hanging over it.

Devolution in 1997 saw the genesis of a new political landscape and changed relationships between practitioners, managers, academics and government, not only in education, but throughout the public sector. Ministers were no longer distant figures constructing policies in another land, but neighbours
and ex colleagues with whom professionals had and were able to continue having, communication, discussion and debate. So on several levels, contact was easier than it was when ministers were located in Westminster and there was also an optimistic sense that something different could emerge in the political landscape that would be distinctively Scottish and responsive to the needs of Scottish society. It was within this context that the particular nature of Scotland’s ALN policy was conceived, gestated and born. The paper will outline some of the key factors that helped shape the distinctiveness of Scotland’s policy that Juliet Merrifield in 2005 described as ‘remarkable, … one of the most dynamic and exciting places in the world right now to be an adult literacy practitioner’ (Merrifield, 2005: 21-22).

**Influences on Policy**

Prior to the publication of the policy, ‘Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland’ (ALNIS) in 2001 (Scottish Executive, 2001), seven research and consultation exercises were commissioned to audit provision, review the literature and consult with key stakeholders, including learners. The findings from these and previous research helped inform the 21 recommendations that formed the basis of ALNIS and hence the path that literacies has taken north of the border since then. Of particular significance here were those referring to guidance, assessment and Individual Learning Plans, the measurement of progress around ‘distance travelled’ and the adoption of the ‘Literacies in the Community’ resource pack (LiC) as the quality framework around which provision would be assessed (Scottish Executive, 2001:3-4). The Individual Learning Plan (ILP), jointly constructed by learners and trained tutors or specialist guidance staff was to be at the heart of the learning process and was to be developed around learners’ personal goals and aspirations in their learning and their life. It followed therefore, that progress in learning, i.e. success and attainment, should also reflect these goals, - so ALNIS affirmed that ‘the measurement of progress [in other words, the criteria for success at individual and national levels] should be based around learner goals and distance travelled’ (op. cit, 2001:3) not on the attainment of pre-determined qualification levels.

Turning to the LiC pack (City of Edinburgh Council, 2000), as a national quality framework, it firmly located literacies learning within broader social inclusion strategies and affirmed the need to recognise difference, diversity and anti-discriminatory practices. In so doing, it also affirmed a social practices approach to the teaching and learning of literacies, for in recognising difference and diversity in the population, it also recognised the difference and diversity of literacies practices and norms associated with them. What was particularly radical about the LiC pack however, was that it went further than a token acknowledgement of these differences, as the following quotes illustrate. Within the principles for the learning programme, it stated that:
Each individual’s literacy and numeracy practices in the different areas of adult life will be appreciated and valued.

Particular attention will be paid to minority group learner’s preferred uses of literacy and numeracy, and their values and contexts.

Alternative, unconventional literacy and numeracy practices will be valued within the curriculum and the programme.

(City of Edinburgh Council, 2000:6)

The commitment to a social practices approach to literacies learning was further cemented in another principle confirming that:

Literacy and numeracy will be recognised as changing social and cultural practices taking place in contexts that are also continuously developing and changing.

(op.cit:6)

And so the stage appeared to be set for the implementation and development of a radical, distinctive approach to ALN that would set Scotland apart from its neighbours south of the border, and that would align ALN learning more closely with the theoretical understandings of literacies as articulated in the work of the New Literacies Studies (see for example, Barton 1994, Street 1984, 1995, Barton & Hamilton 1998, Crowther, Tett and Hamilton 2001, Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic 1998).

The Early Days

Shifting from a position where ALN had traditionally been ‘the Cinderella of a Cinderella service’ (Lo Bianco, 2001) was not without problems however, and whilst solutions to some of these were factored into ALNIS’s strategic objectives, others were not. The need to build up a physical and staffing infrastructure was recognised, and funding was allocated for its development for at least two years post 2001. Issues around monitoring and evaluation however, had received little attention before the launch of the strategy and it was here that some of the tensions between the ideological vision and the demands of government became apparent as those representing opposite ends of the spectrum argued for the validity of different forms of evidence through which to judge the efficacy of the policy. On the one hand, a national evaluation research project (Tett et al, 2006) and local authorities’ annual monitoring reports gave testimony to the ‘distances travelled’ by many learners, but on the other hand, the skill's agenda created pressure to prioritise other, more easily quantifiable, employment related outcomes. For though sections of ALNIS affirmed the adoption of a social practices approach and set its targets around numbers of learners accessing provision and the difference that it made to their lives, substantial sections of the strategy wed literacies learning to employment related skills, the perceived needs of
employers and the country’s overall economic prosperity. In addition, both the lifelong learning strategy (Scottish Government, 2003) and the Skills for Scotland Strategy (Scottish Government, 2007) have employability at their heart, and this too has impacted on the monitoring and evaluation of literacies work.

One pragmatic reason for this is that distanced travelled, and the difference that learning makes in life cannot be easily reduced to the sort of quantifiable soundbites beloved of ministers and in the early stages of monitoring, they were neither required nor deemed necessary. Over the years however, the number of learners achieving recognised qualifications and accessing employment crept into the reporting process and became part of the criteria by which local authorities’ ALN work is evaluated. And whilst such statistics may provide superficial evidence of progress towards the achievement of the Lifelong learning and Skills for Scotland targets, they simultaneously pose a potential threat to essence of Scotland’s distinctive policy. For in monitoring and measuring what is deemed to be valuable, that which is not measured, i.e. non-accredited and non-skills based learning, is deemed to have lesser value and becomes vulnerable, and this presents a very real threat to all that a social practice approach embodies.

Notwithstanding this threat, and because of all the progress that had been made in spite if it, Merrifield (op. cit: 21-22) felt confident enough to affirm that Scotland was ‘one of the most dynamic and exciting places in the world right now to be an adult literacy practitioner’, but her assertion received mixed responses from practitioners and academics alike. For as Ackland, Parkinson and MacLachlan (2006) each argued, all was not a bed of roses north of the border. They pointed to the flawed nature of the IALS statistics upon which learner targets are premised (Parkinson), of the employability and monitoring issues cited above (MacLachlan) and of the effect of the controlling discourses of managerialism, performativity and accountability on the everyday work of work of practitioners. In very different ways, each highlighted contradictions and tensions between the ideological vision of literacies work outlined above and the pragmatic demands of a target led, skills driven government agenda.

Nevertheless, the two maintained a fairly balanced, if not always comfortable relationship, and it has been the ideological that has driven the direction of practice, albeit unevenly. This unevenness has been highlighted through a series of national and local research projects that have shown on the one hand, examples of excellent practice and substantial qualitative evidence of change in learners’ lives, and on the other hand, shortcomings in the use of ILPs, guidance services and staff development opportunities (see for example, Tett et al, 2006, Glasgow Community Learning and Strategy partnership (GCLSP), 2005, MacLachlan et al, 2008). These and other pieces of research have also pointed to the inappropriateness of using employment indicators as a proxy for successful learning when they include only one of
the many outcomes that learners themselves cite. The Glasgow research for example, showed that of the ninety learners tracked over the course of their learning programmes, 49% embarked on them in the hope that it would lead to some form of employment, but only 5% had attained this goal on exit. The report commented that:

It became apparent that work related goals had proved the most difficult to achieve. Most learners still felt remote from the job market, in terms of their readiness and confidence to seek employment’ (GCLSP, 2005: 20)

Tett et al’s national survey (op. cit.) found similar trends and concluded that:

The greatest discrepancy between aspirations and actuality lies in relation to employment…[and suggests that]…as adults become more engaged in learning, their expectations of its immediate effect shift from the naively optimistic to the realistic, particularly in relation to enhanced employment prospects. (p57)

Both pieces of research however documented a wide range of other positive changes in the lives of almost all of the learners, but if there are not ways of recording them that do not then become performativity targets, how can they be safeguarded in a culture of increasing accountability?

In spite of these and other tensions and contradictions, the ongoing commitment to a social practices approach to adult literacies has remained strong since 2001 and though its implementation in practice is still uneven, it remains not just a guiding vision, but one that is practiced in many examples of literacies learning throughout the country. Some of these feature in the recent national report (Scottish Government, 2008) which documents a wide range of community based literacies work with health services, young people, families, ex-offenders, football enthusiasts, refugees etc. that arose from their interests and concerns, and that were neither accredited nor employment related. Thus far, the clouds are there, but not yet obliterating the music of guitar.

**Current Challenges**

But our ‘remarkable’ times are now vulnerable. Amongst the many clouds hovering on the horizon, three in particular pose significant threats to all that has been achieved in the last eight years. They are; the re-fresh of the 2001 strategy, the government’s concordat, and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).

ALNIS represented a five year strategy and towards its end, Scotland's national literacies development agency, Learning Connections, instigated a series of consultation exercises with a wide range of stakeholders, and a range of themed working groups to gather evidence about the successes, shortcomings, challenges and potential ways forward for a new, refreshed
strategy. Its report (Scottish Executive, 2007) presented the key findings of the exercise and a series of recommendations for the future direction of literacies work in Scotland. On the positive side, it documented the significant progress that had been made in engaging new learners, in partnership working within the local authorities, in its innovative approaches to teaching and learning, and in the adoption of a social practices model. It stated that: ‘The Social practice model has enabled a strong commitment to learner-led approaches to ALN learning’ (p4). Other strengths of ALN provision across the country were seen as: the LiC pack, the Curriculum Framework, awareness raising campaigns, professional training and qualifications, the work of Learning Connections and the wide benefits of learning that learners reported.

Less positively, it highlighted a list of shortcomings together with proposals indicating ways of rectifying them that should be incorporated into the new ALNIS re-fresh. Some of these that are pertinent to this paper were that:

- Challenges remain in measuring progress...[and that]...Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms require further review, in order to retain compatibility with the Social Practices model (p 5 & 7)

- Individual Learning Plans were either not widely in place for learners or not sufficiently owned by learners. (p 5)

- Clarity of national priorities was requested, underpinned by the Social Practice model (p 6).

- Strong request for ring-fenced funding, supported by national and local level strategic responses, to protect ALN service planning and delivery (p 8).

These and other recommendations give testimony to the overall ideological commitment to a social practice model. They recognise however, that its adoption is still problematic in some spheres, and so offer ways of countering the problems in the refreshed policy. The timing of this exercise and report could not have been more unfortunate however. 2007 brought a general election in Scotland, where the current/outgoing government would not endorse the recommendations in a new policy, and the incoming one still has not done so. We are therefore in a strategic limbo, made worse by a series of changes to the government department where ALN is located, and the above cited emphasis on skills, so the report’s recommendations float in a policy ether and the threats to a social practice model remain.

The second threat pertains to funding. Although government funding for ALN was never formally ring-fenced, there was an expectation that it would be hypothecated, as it was in most instances, and as one of the quotes above testifies, the recommendation was that this be addressed in the refreshed
2008 brought an end to these arrangements however. It heralded ‘a new relationship between the Scottish Government and local government’ (COSLA, 2008: 1) with the launch of a concordat whereby, with the exception of some essential services, local authorities are now free to allocate their funding as they wish within the framework of a Single Outcome Agreement (SOA). This SOA specifies a set of commitments and national targets that all authorities must work towards in ways they deem best, and allocate funds for their achievement in ways that they deem best. Within the twelve commitments however, - only one refers to adult education, and that to vocational education/skills. Of more concern to ALN are the detailed National Indicators and Targets that will be used to measure progress towards the attainment of the commitments. The only ALN related target specifies that authorities must ‘reduce the number of working age people with severe literacy and numeracy problems’ (Scottish Government 2008 b: 10). Those not of working age and those whose ‘problems’ are not ‘severe’ therefore, do not appear to count in the new relationship, and the focus on ‘those of working age’ suggests that the learning should relate to their work, whether this is their primary aim or not.

The third cloud relates to IALS. For reasons unclear to most, the government has commissioned a re-run of the IALS survey in Scotland and is using the widely discredited (Hamilton & Barton 2000, Sticht, 2001, Street 1996) 1996 original version of the questionnaire and tests that have been shown to be methodologically, culturally and ideologically flawed. In addition, they make little reference to IT, none to emails and none either to texting which is fast becoming one of the most popular forms of written communication. The results will therefore produce an inaccurate, misleading and potentially damaging picture of the population’s abilities or literacies in use.

And therefore…? 
So the clouds are gathering and the forecast is not very bright. But there is hope and that hope abides in the many practitioners, managers and development workers who still sing to the songs of the guitar and stay true to its tune in spite of the clouds. And as academics, we can help them and those who construct their path to remain in tune, by continually and publicly raising the sort of awkward questions that Ian Martin advocates and by profiling all of the good practice that undoubtedly flourishes in Scotland. For it is still a remarkable place for adult literacies work, but this work is at a crossroads, and the signs are that the path it may be forced to take is one that is antithetical to its original vision. If this happens, next year, we may still be citing Joan Baez songs, but this time, we, like Ian will also be singing, ‘Where have all the flowers gone? and this cannot be allowed to happen.
References

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