Adult literacies in Scotland

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Scotland is unusual in having an explicit commitment to an approach to literacies education that frames literacy and numeracy as diverse practices that are patterned by social institutions and power relationships. This approach, usually known as ‘social practices’ (see Hamilton et al, 2006) was adopted in the Scottish Curriculum Framework (Scottish Executive, 2005), which states that:

We are using a social practices account of adult literacy and numeracy. Rather than seeing literacy and numeracy as the decontextualized, mechanical, manipulation of letters, words and figures this view shows that literacy and numeracy are located within social, emotional and linguistic contexts (p. 3).

One reason for using this approach is the strong tradition of community education in Scotland that has been influenced by the critical pedagogy of Freire (1972). This tradition validates the breadth and depth of knowledge that adults acquire in a variety of contexts and particularly through their lived experience (Tett, 2010). Viewing literacies as contextually embedded means that the focus is on the broader processes of facilitation and support of learning rather than the transmission of knowledge.

Hamilton et al (2006) point out, however, that there are a number of versions of ‘social practices theory’ that range from an emphasis on the socio-cultural to an emphasis on the psychological. In Scotland, the social practice approach draws on the prior knowledge and experience of the learner and utilises the literacies events and practices in the learner’s life in order to develop literacies capabilities and nurture critical engagement in the learning process (Scottish Executive, 2005). Thus it prioritises a learner-centred approach that uses the techniques and approaches associated with non-institutionalised modes of education that offer useful ways of engaging individuals in learning.

Ackland (2011) has been critical about the Scottish discourse of social practice because she argues that it has been used to legitimise change in policy that has not challenged the status quo. This is because, whilst the Curriculum Framework might have advocated a more radical critical approach, the version that has been adopted in policy has paid little attention to this and instead has interpreted it in individualistic ways. Ackland also points out that the social practices approach has been colonised and appropriated by practitioners in support of their established practices ‘in order to
argue for their own interests’ in maintaining a focus on individual learners’ development (p. 72).

These concerns and others about the dominance of economistic discourses have been lent credence by a recent policy document, *Skills for Scotland*, (Scottish Government, 2010), which states that:

Improving levels of adult literacy and numeracy is crucial to securing a competitive economy, promoting education and lifelong learning and tackling ill health and improving well-being.

However, these policy discourses are somewhat contradictory as, although they are explicit in foregrounding an economic rationale for adult literacies provision, they simultaneously situate it within a wider social justice agenda. For example, the development of adult literacies is articulated as central to the achievement of economic prosperity where benefits ‘such as social justice, stronger communities and more engaged communities’ are seen as consequential on this prosperity (Scottish Government, 2007, p. 6).

Contradictory discourses about economic pragmatism and social justice both vie for priority in policy documents about the purpose and nature of education. However, the conception of social justice is nearly always focused on inserting individuals back into society rather than changing society (Tett & Maclachlan, 2008). For example in *Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020: Strategic guidance* (Scottish Government, 2011) the vision is that:

By 2020 Scotland's society and economy will be stronger because more of its adults are able to read, write and use numbers effectively in order to handle information, communicate with others, express ideas and opinions, make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners.

So is it possible to move from an individualistic approach to literacies as a way of more effectively promoting social justice for all? There are spaces within these policy frameworks that mean there is potential that the social practice view of literacies can enable provision that makes a contribution to social justice. Ways that this can be done include:

- Exploring the contradictions of policy in ways that challenge discrimination and oppression;
- Adopting purposeful approaches to literacies which take account of all forms of prior learning and knowledge and challenges learners to take risks;
- Developing and encouraging critical awareness about the possibilities for learning; and
- Asking why people might not have developed literacies skills in the first place.
Learning is crucial to social justice but this should be a particular kind of learning that is a resource for people to help them identify inequalities, probe their origins and begin to challenge them using skills, information and knowledge in order to achieve and stimulate change. Although this is a difficult task it provides a vision of what might be possible leading to a more equitable life for everyone.

References


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