Empowerment as socialisation: Adult literacies education, social capital and well being

Sarah Galloway, University of Stirling

Introduction

The possibility has been raised that adult literacies education might encourage well-being. This claim has been made following surveys of learners suggesting that they have increased self-confidence, more social contact and generally get ‘out and about’ more after a period of attending literacies classes (Field, 2008, Tett and Maclachlan, 2007). Analysis of this tendency has been interpreted as the building of ‘bridging networks’ associated with the creation of ‘social capital’ (Tett and Maclachlan, 2007) which in turn might be understood to promote or encapsulate ‘well-being’ (Field, 2008).

Two issues might be raised here. Firstly, there is the issue of how to distinguish whether increases in social contact and self-confidence are linked to literacies education or are the consequence of ‘social club’ aspects of the classes. The notions of ‘bridging’ and also ‘bonding’ are associated with Putnam’s (2000) understanding of ‘social capital’. Putnam himself argues that there has been a marked decline in ‘social capital’ in American society, which he gauges in part by measuring a decrease in the attendance of ‘clubs’ by American people (ibid). Secondly, there has been discussion about what is meant by the term ‘social capital’ and whether it is a useful concept in adult education (Schuller et al, 2000, St Clair, 2005).

According to Field, the importance of ‘social capital’ is that ‘first and foremost, the concept of social capital is concerned with power’ where ‘social capital is a resource that empowers people’ (Field, 2005; 5-6). The idea that adult literacies education might empower holds influence in the field of adult literacies education, but the conceptualisation of ‘social capital’ described by Pierre Bourdieu holds greater sway than that of Putnam, perhaps because Bourdieu attempts to define ‘power’ in relation to symbolic productions such as writing and speech (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Bourdieu 1991). This incorporates the idea that power hierarchies are influenced by
the creation of discourse and identity which might be understood in the context of literacies education. Even greater is the influence of Gee (eg Lankshear, 1997, Crowther, Hamilton and Tett, 2003, Janks, 2010, New London Group, 1996) who draws in part from Bourdieu (eg see Gee, 1996; 128) to describe how literacies education might empower, but without relying on the concept of ‘social capital’. Bourdieu’s theorisation of education has been criticised for offering no escape from ‘power’ as he defines it (Field, 2005, Schuller, 2000, Tett and Maclachlan, 2007, Rancière, 2005, Jenkins, 1992). In this paper I assert that both Bourdieu and Gee offer understandings of power reproduction in the context of literacies education that are problematic. Taking the work of Bourdieu and Gee together, I describe how the assumptions that they make might suggest educational practices that serve to encourage the replication of existing power relationships rather than the creation of alternatives. In other words, that educational activity assumed to be ‘empowering’ can be understood as serving to socialise students into society as it stands. In response I suggest that theories of education rather than theories of socio-linguistics, such as those of Bourdieu and Gee, could be starting points for conceptualising an adult literacies education that offers alternatives to socialising or oppressive outcomes. Furthermore, I suggest that this approach might offer the possibility of exploring any association between adult literacies education and ‘well-being’. But first I consider the ideas of Bourdieu and Gee.

Language, power and discourse

Central to Bourdieu’s understanding of how both literacies education and power operate is the idea that people are unable to detect how some understandings about people come to be taken as valid and legitimate whilst others are not. According to Bourdieu this is because meanings are imposed upon people through an undetectable process which simultaneously replicates and reinforces hierarchies of power in society. Bourdieu describes this process as symbolic violence, where meanings and ‘truths’ are enforced through ‘symbolic productions’ such as speech, writing, or other symbolic forms like facial expressions or mannerisms. Bourdieu presents this notion as a self-evident truth (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; 4) and claims that anyone who fails to acknowledge it is in effect colluding with existing power hierarchies and neglecting the possibility of being able to understand
about how power operates. However, accepting the idea also means accepting ‘the truth’ that power is reproduced in undetectable ways. It seems that regardless of whether we accept Bourdieu’s idea or not, power relationships are continually reproduced and serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies by imposing meanings onto people through ‘symbolic productions’ such as speaking, writing or gesticulating.

For Bourdieu, ‘symbolic production’ is affected by an individual’s anticipation of how ‘linguistic markets’ (ie people situated in social hierarchies) will receive their speech. He claims that speakers amend their speech to suit its anticipated reception and to avoid suffering sanctions that influence their position in the hierarchy of power. For example, an individual might unconsciously change their regional dialect during a job interview. This activity is an undetectable self-censorship that is legitimised by both speaker and listener and is understood to raise or lower the value of an individual’s ‘linguistic currency’ for exchange on ‘linguistic markets’ which are already dominated by particular groups. This raises the idea of individuals having ‘linguistic capital’ that can be exchanged for ‘social capital’ within social groupings, a type of currency which ultimately can be traded for goods or money, perhaps through obtaining lucrative employment.

Bourdieu conceptualises ‘discourse’ as a way of describing the consequences of individuals’ transactions on the ‘linguistic market’. Discourse is the speech, writing, ways of behaving etc resulting from people wanting to speak well and achieve optimum value on a particular linguistic market, be it academia or the school playground. It results from the contradiction between what a person might intend to achieve through the way they express themselves and the amendments forced upon them because of how they anticipate their speech will be received. Bourdieu uses the idea of the ‘habitus’ to explain how an individual’s discourse is unconsciously influenced by power structures in society, whilst simultaneously serving to replicate them (Bourdieu, 1991; 79). He also describes a dynamic relationship between discourse and an individual’s identity, where discourse ‘institutes’ identity through acts of naming, influencing how people conduct themselves (ibid; 120-122). The creation of identity is also reliant upon it being legitimised by others. For example, the wearing of a police officer’s uniform may influence the practices of an officer, but this is reliant upon other people, e.g. the public or the courts, legitimising (i.e. unconsciously going along with) the officer’s discourse and behaviour (ibid; 125).
Like Bourdieu, Gee also defines language in its social context and in relation to definitions of power, identity and discourse. Gee understands languages as sign systems which are historically derived social practices of particular groups, where practices evolve to privilege some groups over others. As with Bourdieu, his understandings of language, which includes ‘body language’, is linked to ways of defining power and how it operates in society. Gee does not utilise the terms ‘linguistic capital’ or ‘social capital’ or link such notions to the operation of a rigid economic system, however he does explain how the adoption of a ‘Discourse’ might allow an individual or group to acquire ‘goods’.

Gee uses the concept of ‘Discourse’ to describe social practices, distinguishing Discourse (with a capital ‘D’) from discourse (with a lower case ‘d’) which he uses when referring only to the ‘language bit’ or textual aspects of social practices. Gee defines Discourse as ‘...ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or ‘types of people’)’ (Gee, 1996; 190).

Discourse is a ‘sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, write and so take on a particular social role that others will recognise’ (ibid; 127). Gee cites Bourdieu to support the assumption that Discourses create social positions or perspectives from which people speak and act (ibid; 128). As with Bourdieu, Discourses are ultimately connected to the distribution of social power and hierarchies in society. There are dominant Discourses used by dominant groups who are empowered by their use, where ultimately the qualities associated with these Discourses can be ‘cashed in’ for ‘goods’ (Lankshear, 1993, 70).

**Power and literacies education**

Bourdieu defines symbolic power as the degree to which meanings can be imposed on individuals or groups. It is understood to be enacted through an educational process making all systems of education such as schools or colleges inherently oppressive. All relationships between teachers and students are understood to enact symbolic violence, reinforcing the dominance of individuals and groups in society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p6-7). This would define literacies education as a
process of inculcation where teachers impose meanings through processes which neither teachers nor students are able to recognise or detect.

Educational activity in school requires children to have a practical mastery of symbolic operations such as speaking, writing or ways of moving the body. Bourdieu claims that the homes of ‘bourgeois’ families encourage a mastery of speaking and writing in keeping with that necessary for success in the dominant culture in schools (ibid; 50). However the home environment for working class children, he asserts, encourages restricted literate practices suggesting a marked difference between the education they receive at home and that provided at school. Working class children are consequently understood to be disadvantaged in their preparation for school and require more formal teaching when they get there (ibid; 49). Bourdieu’s ideas imply that it is impossible for students from dominated groups to catch up and succeed within the education system because they will not be able to fully acquire the symbolic mastery needed to be inculcated into the dominant habitus. Seemingly advantaged groups must continue to increase their linguistic and educational ‘capital’ which can be exchanged for ‘social capital’ on the markets (ibid; 46).

For Gee, Discourse is also inherently problematic as it reproduces and replicates hierarchies of power through processes of identity formation. People allow social institutions such as language to do a lot of thinking for them. This is a situation which cannot be avoided because people can’t possibly make decisions about what each word means before they utter it, just as people couldn’t dance if they had to think about every step (Gee, 1996; 75-77). It is inevitable that speaking or writing involves people relying upon meanings which will exclude others (ibid; 21) but in a way that appears natural so that people are usually unaware that it is happening (ibid; 79). So, as with Bourdieu, there is an extent to which the process of Discourse production and its consequences is undetectable and goes unnoticed by participants. A Discourse cannot be critiqued from the inside. Rather, most of what a Discourse does and most of what people do with Discourse is unconscious, unreflective and uncritical (ibid; 190):

Like Bourdieu, Gee distinguishes between the Discourse acquired as a child and that learnt later in social institutions such as schools or workplaces, distinguishing between them through use of the terms ‘Primary Discourse’ and ‘Secondary Discourse’. In general, Primary Discourses are ‘acquired’ unconsciously through exposure in social groups such as the family whilst Secondary Discourses are often
‘learned’ consciously through formal teaching at school (ibid; 137-138). Gee claims that people are better at performing ‘acquired’ Discourse than ‘learnt’ Discourse. As with Bourdieu, Gee suggests that ‘middle class’ Primary Discourse has many confluences with the Discourses found in schools, advantaging those children and ultimately allowing them to achieve positions in society where they might exclude others and where their Discourse can be cashed in for ‘goods’ (ibid; 146).

Meanwhile, excluded groups acquire dominated Discourses at home, disadvantage them in the formal education systems and so serving to replicate existing power hierarchies.

**Literacy for empowerment**

Bourdieu asserts that the symbolic violence that he defines in his work is not an inescapable vicious circle of power replication (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; 36-37). However I tend to agree with his critics who find it difficult to detect from Bourdieu’s writings how an escape might occur (Field, 2005, Schuller et al, 2000, Tett and Maclachlan, 2007, Jenkins, 1992). Whilst Bourdieu describes a role for education in reproducing an oppressive social order, there seems to be no role for education in the creation of any alternative to this (see Rancière, 2005; 179). Instead Bourdieu seems only to describe a role for sociologists who must sit outside of educational activity and explain its operation to teachers and students.

Though Gee explains processes in education that disadvantage students, echoing those described by Bourdieu, he also attempts to outline the possibility of an empowering literacies education that might offer alternatives. Gee defines literacy as gaining mastery of a ‘Secondary Discourse’ (Gee, 1996; 143) where literacies education might enable students from disadvantaged groups to overcome barriers to participation in dominant Discourses. He describes how people from such groups might participate in a dominant Discourse through a process he describes as ‘mushfake’. Here, partial mastery of a dominant Discourse might be supplemented with meta-knowledge about how dominant Discourses operate, allowing excluded people to give the impression of proficiency (ibid; 147). For Gee, ‘mushfake’ could be utilised by dominated groups, allowing them to ‘capture’ Discourses and use them to ‘strategise and survive’ (ibid; 149).
There are consequences for how Gee’s understanding of an empowering literacies education might be practiced. The expectation is that teachers should create possibilities for students to acquire aspects of dominant discourses through exposure to them in natural and meaningful settings, rather than through formal teaching of technical aspects such as grammar and spelling (ibid; 144). However students also need to gain meta-knowledge about how Discourse operate so that they might critique for themselves who how Discourse constitutes people and situates them in society. Gee explains how this aspect of empowering literacies education must be formally taught by a teacher alongside explanations and analysis (ibid; 145).

Here I suggest that whilst Bourdieu seems to offer no prospect for an empowering literacies education, Gee’s conceptualisation is also problematic with at least two repercussions for teachers and students. Firstly Gee himself identifies an issue (Gee, 1993; 291-292) relating to how literacies education might encourage students from disadvantaged groups to participate in dominant discourse and alter it along with existing power relationships. The problem here is an absence of criteria to enable judgements about whether new power relationships, discourse or identities are more desirable than those they replace. Gee attempts to get around the problem by introducing two ethical principles which must be used to make judgements about Discourse, but in so doing he makes the alarming assertion that anyone who disagrees with his principles might be considered as inhuman because he ‘would withhold the term ‘human’, in its honorific, not biological, sense, from such people’ (Gee, 1996; 20). This seems to shut down any further discussion as to how judgements might be made about the desirability of educational outcomes. A second problem relates to how Gee’s conceptualisation of an empowering literacies education is reliant upon teachers delivering knowledge about how discourse operates to students, giving them the knowledge that they need in order take control over dominant Discourses. Gee himself declares that ‘Knowledge is power, because it can protect all of us from harming others and from being harmed, and because it is the very foundation of resistance and growth’ (ibid; 191). Yet Gee also seems to be describing a paradox where literacies education for empowerment makes students dependent upon teachers and academic researchers for knowledge about how power operates, seemingly replicating existing power hierarchies in the process.
Discussion and conclusion

From examining the work of Bourdieu it seems that activity which might increase students’ ‘social capital’ serves only to make students operate better in an oppressive society, where literacies education might offer limited opportunities for this type of ‘success’ for students from excluded or dominated social groups. Meanwhile, Gee’s conceptualisation of an empowering literacies education, which echoes many of Bourdieu’s ideas, seems to suggest the taking up of educational practices by teachers and students which might replicate existing power relationships, effectively socialising students. How these understandings of literacies education might be associated with any notion of ‘well-being’ is unclear. But as I mentioned above, the alternative offered by Putnam's notion of ‘social capital’, described in terms of ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’, cannot distinguish between the educational aspect of literacies education from that which may be found in any other social situation, be it a social club or workplace.

My response is to suggest an alternative to sociological theories of power and language such as those of Bourdieu or Gee, instead taking theories of education as a starting point for understanding educational situations. This means moving away from attempting to define power and its operation where education is typically conceptualised as a process of passing down knowledge from teacher to student and where associated discussions focus on what the content of that knowledge should be. Instead, there might be a movement towards understanding education as having a fundamental interest in ‘subjectification’ – that is in being and becoming a subject of action and responsibility – rather than only in qualification (providing students with knowledge and skills) and socialisation (that is, inserting students into existing socio-political ‘orders’) (see Biesta, 2010). Here education is conceptualised as a process of emancipation rather than empowerment, raising the idea that education might encourage emancipation from existing society rather than empowerment to participate within it.

There is already a tradition of considering education in this way in the context of adult literacies education found particularly in the legacy of Paulo Freire (e.g. 1972). Freire’s theory of education describes the passing down of knowledge from teachers to student as an oppressive process of ‘banking education’ (see ibid; 49). He raised
the alternative of an emancipatory education, conceptualised as the enactment of a relationship of equality between teachers and students. Integral to this relationship is a social interaction with symbolic artefacts such as words, texts or pictures, where students and teachers might ‘read the world’ for themselves without the assistance of outsiders as implied by Gee or Bourdieu. However Freire’s work has been much criticised over the last forty years (Galloway, 2012). For me, this suggests a need to develop discussion amongst educators, students and academics about how an emancipatory education might be understood and practiced, opening up the possibility for an adult literacies education that might not always serve to socialise students into society as it stands (Galloway, 2011). A reorientation of discussions along these lines might also encourage the consideration of how education manifests in literacies classrooms or elsewhere and whether this might be understood as a form of well-being.

References

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