

Whose Economic Wellbeing? A challenge to dominant discourses on the relationship between literacy/numeracy skills and (un)employment

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This article examines the relationship between literacy/numeracy skills and economic wellbeing, with a particular focus on employment, and its corollary, unemployment. Most people assume this relationship to be relatively unproblematic because the discourse on the role of literacy (and to a lesser extent numeracy) and (un)employment is well known. When, for example, the former Australian federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr Kemp, in the midst of a national literacy crisis, stated there were direct links between poor literacy, school drop out rates and youth unemployment (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs [DETYA] 1996:1), few people would have questioned this statement. Most people believe, and would rarely challenge, the view that literacy and numeracy skills are essential requirements for employment in the current globalised world, and that lacking literacy and numeracy skills may contribute to, in fact may cause, unemployment. To promote dialogue and debate on these issues, my aim in this article is to challenge these common sense understandings with an alternative critical discourse.

The dominant discourse on literacy, numeracy and (un)employment

An appropriate starting point is a brief outline of the dominant discourse on literacy, numeracy and (un)employment. At the outset, however, I need to point to the research and policy bias to date in favour of the role of literacy. Numeracy has not featured so prominently and is sometimes subsumed within a broader definition of literacy (for example, see DEET 1991:9, and the notion of quantitative literacy in Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997). Alternatively, numeracy is included within a term such as basic skills. The bias in favour of literacy is reflected in this article as I refer predominantly to literacy studies, though, as with many other studies, to some extent numeracy is inferred in discussions on literacy. I do, nevertheless, make reference to some recent significant numeracy studies.

Literacy assumes enormous significance in contemporary Western society. It is generally equated with success in life, with notions of a person being 'educated', obtaining a job and having access to the goods and trappings of wellbeing that are valued highly in society. The corollary to this perspective is that lack of literacy has dire consequences. Dawkins, former Australian federal

Minister for the Department of Employment, Education and Training, for example, claimed that for Australians: ‘... literacy is the difference between competing in international markets with a well trained workforce – and stagnation’ (Dawkins 1991:xx). Further, there have been claims that lack of literacy or low literacy skills in workplaces costs the nation billions of dollars in lost productivity each year (Miltenyi 1989). Lack of literacy is seen to restrict the ability of workers to adapt to new technology and new workplace practices, and leads to safety concerns, costly mistakes and a host of other negative features (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991:18-26). Not surprisingly, in view of this dominant discourse, federal governments since the early 1990s have channeled considerable funds into literacy programs both in the workplaces and for the unemployed.

Australia, of course, is not alone in focusing on the relationship between literacy skills and (un)employment. The best international examples are found in the many Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports over the last decade (eg. OECD 1992, 1995, 1997, OECD/Statistics Canada 2000). These reports draw on international comparisons of literacy rates using standardised measures and they strongly recommend a focus on improving literacy skills as the key to unlocking the benefits of globalisation (eg. OECD 1995:23).

On the basis of these statistical findings, powerful institutions invariably assume the authority to identify individuals and groups of people as lacking or deficient in literacy skills and to ‘prescribe’ (Freebody 1992:73) some form of literacy provision for the economic wellbeing of all concerned; individuals, enterprises, and the nation.

The New Literacy Studies

My approach to the role of literacy (and numeracy, explained later) differs from the dominant one outlined above. Rather than focus on measuring the extent to which different individuals or groups of people possess a particular set of literacy skills, my focus is on what literacy actually means to these people. It involves analysing how literacy is used and valued by people in different social contexts seen from their own perspective, and it follows from the work of researchers who argue for the need to study in a principled ethnographic sense, everyday literacy practices in specific communities.

This reconceptualisation of literacy based on literacy practices and sociocultural context has been referred to as the New Literacy Studies which gained popularity mainly from the mid/early 1980s based on the ethnographic studies of sociolinguists such as Heath (1983) and Levine (1986), and anthropologists such as Street (1984). In the past decade or so, many more academic studies have contributed to the New Literacy Studies to the extent that, at an academic level at least, there is now a serious challenge to the dominance of the more traditional ‘autonomous’ model (Street 1984) of literacy

(see, for example, Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000, Baynham 1995, Gowen 1992, Hull 1993, Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Street 1993). As I will indicate later, however, there are powerful interests at stake in maintaining the dominance of the autonomous model.

The New Literacy Studies focus on the social nature of literacy, on the micro literacy events and the practices that shape them, that are a part of people's everyday lives (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000). These practices are so numerous and varied that many researchers now refer to literacies rather than the one literacy. Critics of the International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS) point out that standardised literacy measures are unlikely to accurately describe the literacy activities/practices of the groups of people surveyed because they fail to adequately account for different cultural contexts (see Hamilton and Barton 2000).

As part of this 'social turn' as Gee (2000) calls it, numeracy studies have also developed along similar lines. Baker (1998:38), for example, argues that numeracy is usually presented as a set of pure skills separate from the contexts in which they may be used. Numeracy as social practice, by contrast, involves the uses of numeracy (or numeracies) in cultural contexts and acknowledges power relations (ie. an 'ideological' model in Street's [1984] sense). A builder, for example, will use string to compare the lengths of diagonals in approaching the practical problem of establishing a right angle, which is a quite different approach to that of a mathematician, and yet, it is the school-based formal mathematics of the latter (the autonomous model) that is valued and given power and status in society (Baker 1998:39-41).

Importantly, ethnographic studies of literacy practices reveal the role of social networks. People do not necessarily engage in these practices in isolation. Many studies indicate that literacy practices can involve sharing, such as a group reading of a letter (see Heath 1983), or assistance with literacy related tasks can be exchanged for other services in a local community (Moll 1992). Often, people act as 'mediators' or literacy 'brokers' in assisting others (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Baynham and Labanga Masing 2000). In the workplace, which is most relevant for this article, increasingly there is evidence that, within informal communities of practice, workers engage collaboratively with literacy practices (eg. Hart-Landsberg and Reder 1995).

Ethnographic studies of literacy practices usually reveal relations of power. Barton and Hamilton (1998:7), for example, state that these practices are patterned by social institutions and power relations, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others. Most people are unaware that their beliefs, especially those involving literacy, form part of a discourse which has ideological and therefore political implications. This is largely because, as Fairclough (1989) illustrates, these beliefs, have become 'naturalised'; they are taken-for-granted, common sense understandings which have become accepted by most people as apolitical truths. The more dominant and popular the beliefs, the more natural and commonsensical they appear.

This, of course, is the situation with the relationship between literacy skills and economic wellbeing.

Critical ethnographies of literacy practices in different local sites, however, often contradict this dominant discourse. For more than a decade, a range of ethnographic studies of workplaces have indicated that the provision of literacy programs to workers in need may not always be in the interests of these workers (eg. Gowen 1992, 1996, Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996, Hull 1993). Most of these studies focus on the perspectives of the workers, those subject to the dominant discourse on literacy and (un)employment (see Black 2001:4-12), and, invariably, workers' perspectives contradict this discourse in various ways. But such is the apparent common sense and naturalness of this discourse that most people, including those closely involved with workplace literacy issues (government officials, administrators, company representatives, teachers), continue to believe it and thus help to maintain this dominant discourse (Castleton 2000).

In the following two sections I will briefly outline some of my own research which reinforces the arguments I wish to make in this article. There are two studies; the first involves unemployed people, and the second involves maintenance and construction workers in a local council.

Case Study No 1 – Literacy and the unemployed

In 1991 the federal government released its Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP), and an important part of that policy was funding for jobseeker literacy programs. So began funding for jobseeker literacy programs which have survived changes of federal governments and continue today, though in a modified form.

Clearly, these programs were designed from the outset to assist the unemployed to get work, and they have always been underpinned by the assumption that low literacy is a factor which contributes to, and indeed may cause, unemployment. Jobseekers often had little choice other than to participate because the program fell within a process known as reciprocal obligation; that is, in return for income support, jobseekers were obliged to take up any reasonable offer of assistance and do whatever they could to improve their employment prospects.

For my research study I interviewed a total of twenty-seven Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) 'clients' who were referred to a TAFE college in early 1993 (see Black 2001). There were more males than females (16 male, 11 female); and most of the respondents spoke languages other than English at home (19). Many of the respondents indicated they were happy to be referred to a literacy program, especially those with poor oral skills in English. It seemed a welcome opportunity to develop their skills in spoken and written English and, furthermore, they seemed to believe that it would lead, in some cases almost magically, to jobs. This corresponds to Auerbach's (1994:10) contention that:

One of the biggest myths that ESL learners hold on to is that English is the solution to their problem, that the reason they have low status jobs is that their English isn't good enough and if only it were better, everything would be fine.

Everything was not so fine for other respondents. The English speaking background respondents, in particular, were far more pragmatic. They would only attend a literacy program if they could see a direct link to jobs, and most could not. These respondents, despite the risk of losing their unemployment allowances, left the program early.

For some respondents the chances of gaining employment appeared remote, regardless of their level of literacy. One had back problems and a compensation claim pending, following an accident while working on the railways. Another had a dust allergy and was unable to work in a factory. Besides, as he stated, in his previous line of work there was no need to talk with a machine. One man was sixty and ready to retire. Another respondent, Mary, at fifty, after spending many years in a clothing factory and working as a cleaner, felt she should not be forced to attend a literacy program. She had always found work in the past, and had no difficulties working as a hospital cleaner. She felt that improving her literacy skills would make little or no difference to her job prospects.

An in-depth examination of the previous work histories of the respondents indicated that literacy had played but a minor role. Mario, for example, had to seek out his wife in order to produce written quotes in his work as a building subcontractor. But he nevertheless managed adequately; his employment was not threatened. Similarly, two Lebanese respondents relied to some extent on their wives for literacy support in managing food outlets, but it was more of an occasional frustration than any form of disadvantage in the workplace. The inescapable conclusion from the interviews was that literacy had not played a significant part in the employment outcomes of these respondents in the past, and so why should literacy make a difference now? Had the nature of work changed overnight? Or were there other agendas operating? I will address these questions later in this article.

Case Study No 2 – Literacy and teamwork

The second case study features local council workers with responsibilities for cleaning and repairing drains and small construction jobs such as footpaths and roundabouts. The enterprising manager of the depot was in the process of restructuring the traditional work gangs into competitive teams. Competition had resulted in other local councils being pressured to either contract out some services or to establish profit-based business units. The depot manager introduced competitive teams ostensibly as a means of warding off these measures in this council. Maintenance and construction workers therefore had little choice – essentially they were told to become competitive or they would lose their jobs.

The manager and two of his supervisors were concerned that the existing workers might not have the skills to work effectively in competitive teams, and there was talk of establishing a literacy class. The new work involved workers taking greater responsibility for ordering supplies and equipment, organising their time, and keeping track of their costings. Reference was made to workers needing to be 'teched up ... I mean, we're talking about putting computers in trucks' (supervisor). The manager mentioned that the new teams were expected to be able to quote for work while on the job, and not to simply refer it to the engineers for an assessment at a later date.

My research study involved observing workplace practices and recording in-depth interviews with fifteen of the local council workers, in addition to the manager and his supervisors. The aim was to examine both the literacy practices involved in this type of work and the skills of the workers to undertake these practices (Black 1998, 2001). All the workers were male, most from English speaking backgrounds, most lacked formal schooling, and the average age of the respondents was 48 years.

Although the manager of the depot stated his team members would need to have 'a reasonably high level of literacy', observing the teams in practice revealed that few literacy practices were in fact required in this line of work. Most team members were required only to sign on, and the main form of communication was oral, both informally within teams, and by two-way radio with the depot. If a written report was required, such as an incident report documenting an accident such as cutting through underground cables, team members would not normally write their own report: *That normally comes up with Vincent ... Vincent's the cost clerk, but he's in charge of all the incident reports* (supervisor's comments). Numeracy skills appeared more significant, such as calculating concrete pours, but these were soon learnt on the job: *you've only got to multiply the width by the length ... give us three by four is twelve, that's 1.2 (cubic metres), that's four inches (100mm in depth) ... you learn that* (supervisor). This was not the sort of academic maths learned at school involving the understanding of underlying concepts. Instead, it was an example of performance-driven numeracy; that is, numeracy learned in practice (Baker 1998). But even these practices were not undertaken by everyone on the teams; it was the team leader who assumed most responsibilities for the calculations and all paperwork. After all, he was paid more to do this.

While some workers admitted they had poor literacy and numeracy skills in a formal schooling sense, as with the concrete pour calculations above, this had little impact on their work performance. As another worker stated: *Well, I get by on jobs here, like, I can lay bricks, got me truck licence through here ... I can do whatever I find in my life that I need to be able to do*. Even a task such as quoting the cost of a new driveway would not prove difficult. There would always be someone on the team who could provide assistance with a written quote.

Social networks of support were crucial in this type of work. While the manager had established competitive teams, from the workers' perspective they were still in 'gangs' with the same rules of mateship applying. All that had changed for them was the nomenclature, and the fact that some people received extra pay for being team leaders, an issue which had become a source of division within the workforce. In fact, there were deep divisions within this workforce. Some workers regarded the extra pay for team leaders as a form of bribery: *bribe one man to get the best out of the rest*. There was deep resentment and cynicism directed towards management at the Town Hall for their priorities, which appeared not to include maintenance and construction activities. Over the years, the number of staff at the Town Hall, and their remuneration, had increased exponentially, and yet here in the maintenance and construction depot, workforce numbers had been reduced.

As part of the shift to competitive teams, all workers were obliged to attend formal training sessions conducted by the manager and supervisors who extolled the virtues of working competitively. Many workers resented this formal training. They were especially opposed to American videos featuring Tom Peters: *you see videos, every video you see is on an assembly line track ... American, Yanks, you must do this*. They also resented a return to a formal learning environment which had not served them well in the past: *... You know, I feel like a school kid again*. When asked in the interviews about the type of training they would prefer, these workers suggested they wanted to learn on-the-job and from their fellow workers: *they'd have to have someone, right, you go out with that gang, you stay there for a fortnight, you learn the way that they do this*.

Any formalised literacy or numeracy program envisaged by management would have failed with this group of workers. Quite apart from the resistance of these workers to formal learning environments, the literacy and numeracy practices in this line of work did not warrant it. These practices could easily be managed on the job with workers learning from each other.

It was apparent that there were two views on reality in this workplace: one, a new culture guided by visions of a new work order expounded in current management texts (knowledge workers, working smarter, more flexibly); the other, an old culture based on the lived, conflict-oriented experiences of workers borne out of a history of struggles with management (see Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996:31).

Micro/macro links

The above two case studies challenge aspects of the dominant discourse on literacy/numeracy and (un)employment. In this section, I will indicate some of the links between the micro aspects of the everyday lives of individuals and groups revealed in these two case studies, and the political economy, the broader macro-structural aspects of power.

Looking first at unemployed people referred to literacy programs, the interviews indicated that, while in a normative schooled literacy sense the

respondents were found lacking, this had not prevented them from working in the past. At the time of the interviews in 1993, Australia was in the midst of an economic recession, and essentially it was the economic climate that had changed and resulted in so much unemployment, not people's lack of skills. Although the nature of work has changed rapidly, especially in the past couple of decades, not all jobs are now in leading edge industries requiring meta-level knowledge. On the contrary, most new jobs in Australia and in overseas developed nations are predicted to be in the low paid retail, trade and service sectors (see Department of Employment, Education and Training 1995), and many of these jobs will involve repetitive and deskilled textual competence (Luke 1992:9).

It can be argued that the issue is not so much a widening skills gap, rather, a widening jobs gap, particularly in poor economic times (Hart 1992:76). From a government and business point of view, however, it is precisely this poor economic climate that encourages a focus on lack of skills, because, in so doing, responsibility for the problem of unemployment shifts to those who can be identified as having a literacy problem. Politically, this strategy is likely to be more effective, and certainly easier, than focusing on the real cause of unemployment, the crisis of the political economy of capitalism:

... the structural problems of poverty, of the de-skilling and elimination of jobs, of capital flight, of systemic racism and sexism, problems that are 'naturally' generated out of our current economic and political arrangements (Apple 1987: viii).

In the case of the local council workers, they also were being targeted for their lack of literacy skills, though in practice, it was difficult to demonstrate that lack of literacy or numeracy skills was significant in their work performance. The manager and his supervisors wanted changes from their workers, but improved literacy skills were not the main issue. They wanted their workers to take on a new social identity; to work with renewed commitment and enthusiasm, to be 'happy' even (Black 2001:201). Lack of literacy was in effect a code used by management to indicate that workers lacked this new social identity, this new set of beliefs and values aligned with those of management. The new work order can be seen to represent a 'soft touch hegemony' (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996:23), a discourse which on the surface appears to be in the interests of workers. In encouraging workers to identify themselves with the core values of the company/enterprise, however, the primary purpose is not worker happiness, an 'enchanted workplace' (Gee 1994), but increased productivity. Many of the maintenance and construction workers recognised this sub-text in the changeover to competitive teams because they had a distrust of management borne out of conflict over many years. Publicly they went along with the changes because they had little choice – their jobs depended on their compliance, but privately they resisted it.

I would argue, based on my studies, that there is a causal relationship between literacy (and numeracy) and (un)employment, but that it is the opposite to the dominant discourse outlined at the beginning of this article. Lack of literacy and numeracy skills do not cause unemployment or limited employment opportunities. Rather, it is these economic conditions that cause literacy and numeracy problems. They give rise to the need for governments and others, acting in the interests of capital, to introduce competition policies and shift responsibility for productivity and efficiency to workers, to produce and inflate literacy and numeracy problems, even though, as an increasing number of ethnographies of workplaces indicate, literacy and numeracy are not the problem, or at least not the main problem. While this perspective is unconventional in the current new times, it is not original. As Aronowitz and Giroux (1985: 66) in a critique of the literacy crisis of the 1970s stated, the problem of low literacy or functional illiteracy: 'is produced by the constitution of the job market by economic and social inequality and political powerlessness'.

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