

BALID Discussion Meeting 14th Dec 2011 led by Ian Cheffy

Transferable Literacies: to what extent do literacy practices taught as social practices result in transferable literacy skills?

Notes by Ian Cheffy

The members of BALID had a lively discussion on this important topic which is central to social practice understandings of literacy, and in particular to the application of these concepts to educational programmes for adults. It was unfortunate that several members had had to give their apologies at the last minute for being unable to attend, as they would have enjoyed the vigorous interchanges between those present, all in convivial (though rather noisy, pre-Christmas) surroundings.

Ian's contribution to the discussion was informed by his experience of basic education for non-literate adults in Africa and by his commitment to the development of literacy programmes which more successfully meet the literacy needs of the adult learners than many programmes do at present.

The consensus of the discussion was that social practice understandings of literacy run the risk of so much emphasising the distinctiveness of discrete literacy practices that they give insufficient recognition to the fact that textual literacy of any kind requires the application of technical skills such as decoding (reading) and encoding (writing) and of the understanding that textual material carries meaning. In moving from one literacy practice to another, individuals apply some of the same basic skills irrespective of the particular literacy practice involved. Individuals may be hampered in fully participating in a new literacy practice through not understanding the particular concepts and terminology of the new practice and perhaps some of the orthographic features, such as when encountering new writing systems (as, for instance, people in Ethiopia do when moving from Amharic, to Arabic, to Roman scripts) but they are able to apply some prior knowledge and experience of literacy. They are not learning to be literate entirely from scratch each time they encounter a new literacy practice.

It remains true, however, that the possession of technical skills, although necessary, is not sufficient for individuals to be regarded as literate. Literacy for individuals comes through the successful application of technical skills leading to the mastery of the literacy practices necessary for them in their particular environments.

Ian's notes prior to the discussion contain some further background to this debate and some useful references.

As McCaffery, Merrifield and Millican (2007) indicate, "A social practice model of literacy directly challenges the standard concept of literacy as a set of abstract, cognitive skills that are transferable and independent of social factors". This view has been extensively argued by Brian Street (1984; 1993; 2001; 2005; Street and Lefstein 2007 etc). On the other hand, it seems self-evident that literacy learners, whether children or adults, "only learn to read once" (Cummins 1991).

Applied to the case of non-literate adults in the global South, the social practice view would suggest that literacy programmes should enable learners to develop literacy competencies, including the fundamental skills of decoding and encoding, through engaging in specific literacy practices (economic, religious, political etc). However, if literacy practices are contingent on their context, as the social practice view argues, the basic

abilities acquired through engagement in one literacy practice are not necessarily transferable to any other practices. This, however, contradicts much of the evidence.

How can the social practice view of literacy be developed further to resolve this empirical (and theoretical) problem? Does Cummins (1981) provide a clue from the field of bilingualism in his concept of “common underlying proficiency” which argues that, irrespective of the number of languages in which a person is proficient, the same mental processes are in operation? A high level of proficiency in more than one language then enables the bilingual person to develop a “metalinguistic awareness” of the nature of language itself (Bialystok 2001). Could the same concepts not be applied to the acquisition of literacies on the grounds that, irrespective of the literacies in which they are participating, individuals draw on a common reserve of knowledge about sound-symbol correspondences, directionality of text, linkage of text and illustrations etc, which provides them with at least a basic level of proficiency in ‘literacy’? Through engaging in various practices, individuals might be said to develop a “metaliteracy awareness” which facilitates their acquisition of a new and unfamiliar literacy. These concepts may be helpful in our understanding of transferability between literacies, whether or not literacy is understood purely as a matter of decoding text or more fully as a set of social practices which involve text in some way. The cognitive dimension of literacy is not to be ignored, even whilst it might be appropriate to shift it from the dominant position it has been attributed in many programmes and to instead acknowledge cognition as one factor amongst many, of which social practices are at least equally important.

When considering the pedagogical outworking of these theories, adult educators designing literacy programmes which are based on a social practice model do not need to introduce learners to each and every literacy practice available to them in their environment. Although it is strongly advisable to introduce learners to the technical skills of literacy in the context of specific literacy practices which the learners want to acquire, it can be assumed that some aspects of literacy are transferable between literacies, as has already been argued. If a literacy programme is designed around the literacy practice of, for instance, reading the Bible, as is common in many parts of Africa, the programme does not necessarily have to include formal instruction to introduce the learners to other literacies, such as reading a magazine or understanding medical records. There may be considerable value in doing so, especially if full mastery of the new literacy is to be developed, but it is not essential since adult learners will not be at a total loss. They are capable of applying their previous knowledge developed in one literacy practice to another literacy practice. They are also able to draw on other resources available to them, in line with the insights of actor-network theory (Ivanič, Edwards et al. 2009). Many examples of “translation” or “transformation” of literacy from one context to another can be found also in Gebre, Rogers et al (2009) and Nabi, Rogers et al (2009).

Some Key Questions for Discussion:

- Does the social practice view allow room for some transferability of skills between literacy practices?
- If basic technical skills can be transferred, what about other dimensions of literacy practices?

- Can a social practice pedagogy be developed for the teaching of basic skills or is it only appropriate for learners with some knowledge and experience of literacy?
- What factors affect whether learners transfer their literacy skills to new practices? Is it a matter of opportunity, need and identity, as suggested by Rogers and Uddin (2005)?

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