The *Both...and...And* Of Everything
by **Margaret Herrington**

This is neither a philosophical treatise nor a grand narrative about the theory and practice of adult literacy. Rather it addresses the practical day-to-day issue for literacy workers of trying to construct a professional space for development when quite different concepts of literacy coexist and compete around them. While polarities can be helpful in distinguishing different positions within debates, the real world contains polar opposites in the same world. Many literacy practitioners have to find ways of working with opposing concepts at the same time.

Recent policy developments in the UK—the Skills for Life Initiative in particular—have cast this perennial problem in sharp relief. While the insights of major writers such as Freire, Graff, Street, Barton, Hamilton, Ivanic, Gee and others have shown how concepts of literacy are shaped by their relationships with culture, ideology, power, etc., the actual policy frameworks within which many literacy educators work tend to be governed by narrower or more limited concepts. Simpler narratives about autonomous and functional rather than ideological and critical models still underpin literacy policy goals, even when they are accompanied by layers of more explicitly ideological concepts of lifelong learning and social inclusion (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett 2001); and policy-makers are the paymasters for practitioners. In this short article I would like to discuss the *both...and* issues facing practitioners with reference to current practice in England and Wales.

Having it both ways?

Adult literacy practitioners across the world have long worked out ways of occupying the *both...and* space while remaining true to themselves. They have interpreted prescribed curricula creatively, they have found ways of mapping learner-centred, creative work onto prescribed curriculum frameworks, and they have found ways of always including the deeper curriculum (literacies/critical literacies) with pieces of functional-literacy work. They have, above all, sought to develop the learner voice. In the battle for resources, they have even employed the models and myths of the policy-makers on the grounds that though some policy-makers may be wrong-headed about literacy, their general desire and commitment to open up opportunities for students should be supported.

For some practitioners, this professional way of operating has been draining. They see adult learners who identify their own priorities and want to find out how to learn and on the other hand they have official policy which tells them to fit people into certain boxes if they want funding. Others have viewed it as a creative challenge to maintain a learner-centred curriculum in the face of this and have risen to that challenge (see *RaPAL* Bulletins*). Others, still, would see this as an unfortunate but necessary route to accreditation for their students. The space has been more or less comfortable depending on your position and power within your work context.

Tightening up the space?

The current policy framework for England and Wales appears to have tightened up this space considerably. Although we have had several decades of development work establishing the elements of good practice on all fronts, we now, for the first time, have a policy for literacy, numeracy and ESOL (English for speakers of other languages). The policy tries to cover all the bases in all adult learning contexts, and with ongoing evaluation of everything: prescribed core curricula; standards; national tests; inspections; teacher training course levels and standards; research and development activity. This comprehensive, managerialist approach has reflected a clear political determination to make a marked difference in standards of literacy attainment.

We have yet to see where all the spaces and flexibility are in the new framework. The curricula

themselves appear to be highly structured versions of levels of literacy acquisition and yet I know experienced practitioners who have no difficulty in mapping a learner-centred curriculum onto this. The priorities of both students and policy-makers can be met in this way. My own recent experience working within new-teacher training courses in two British universities has also involved a free hand to develop 'criticality' within the prescriptive standards framework for teacher training.

And the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) advisory group on dyslexia, on which I have served for almost two years, has shown a remarkable willingness to listen to experienced practitioners. Having made the inadvisable decision to separate the policy for literacy and dyslexia, it has since sought to ensure that all literacy practitioners are aware of dyslexia and its implications. It has recently funded some action research that will assist literacy practitioners in engaging with the broader debates about dyslexia and literacy (DfES/NIACE/LSDA Dyslexia Research Project 2004). In a nutshell, and from where I am standing, the policy frameworks have not completely prevented creativity, analysis and questions and there is dynamic space within what appear to be tighter policy structures.

However, much more research is needed inside the new practice. The space may prove to be insufficient and the new practitioners who often welcome the more structured curriculum may be least able to use what is there. Some problems have emerged within the classroom/learning situation, especially when the national literacy test has to be taken. This is a multiple choice, functional-literacy reading test that has been challenged by many (Jane Mace at conference interventions, Heath 2003). If the literacy learning targets for colleges and other learning contexts are related in any way to test results (this seems to vary enormously in practice), and funding follows these results, then a very tight corner is created for literacy workers. They are aware of the limitations of the test in recording literacy progress, yet are under pressure from funders to use it and may also want to support students in their desire for accreditation. This is an important area for research in practice. We need to be able to track what is really happening with the implementation of the core curriculum and its relationship with the national test. Our small research-in-practice project, The Experience of Implementing the Core Curriculum is focusing on these issues. The project at the University of

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Wolverhampton is funded by the Learning and Skills Council and involves fifteen practitioner researchers over two years.

The real problem?

At root, simply working around the most recently prescribed frameworks cannot satisfy us. I think we have to return to the question of why policy-makers want to work with very simple narratives about literacy and why ideological models seem to them to be too complicated to underpin policy. The reason cannot be that writers do not address this question. Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic and others have long suggested how social models and concepts of literacies could inform policy (2000).

I suspect that there is some disjuncture to do with phases and prerequisites at the heart of the problem. I do not think it occurs because policy-makers are only capable of thinking about literacy in a technicist way, though this may well be true for some. I think they may have a view about learning the stuff of literacy first—letters have to be known/recognised before any meaning is attached via context (Kress 2000). This view is a kind of first-stage autonomous model narrative: basic skill tuition comes first; full autonomous models, functionality and criticality come afterwards. Policy-makers are not concerned what literacy practices people engage in, provided they have the skills which the economy needs.

This position can feel reassuring to policy-makers. If resources are scarce, they can believe they are dealing with the greatest priority. Why would they change if they see themselves as giving people the technology (the context-free tools with which they can create their own public and private literacies) and as upgrading the skills in the workforce? Well, we know that technology can never be seen as context-free and unproblematic (Coyne 2001); and ethnographic work has shown just how distorted this view of literacy is—how much it just does not see; how much it does not accredit; and how much the supposedly simple, basic, building blocks approach can exclude. Yet, from my perspective, despite the groundbreaking activity of many researchers, there is still much more work to do in creating convincing general narratives about literacy/literacies that translate into policy terms. Perhaps there will be some way of creating a new *both...and* narrative in which a building-blocks approach is subsumed within the familiar, multi-layered literacies.

Conclusion

Several examples of both and and have emerged in this discussion: coexisting models of literacy; and the creative spaces within prescribed curriculum frameworks and policy processes. The both...and focus is useful for making sense of the relationships between theory, policy and practice, and for research in practice in relation to current policies in England and Wales. It is not an excuse for sloppy thinking; that is, as long as prescription is accompanied by flexible spaces somewhere, all will be well. Rather it provides a demanding invitation to look within particular models of literacy for new connecting narratives, and ones that include a broader visual communications dimension. ∎

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