

Schooling

Disconnects between learning literacy and learning work in an employment preparation program

I work in a program that made a transition from a predominantly academic model of literacy delivery, in which students prepared to enter further education (usually high school), to an employment preparation model in which students prepared to enter jobs. As an instructor

then assessor in the program, I began to realize that the ways I had learned to understand adult literacy development under the previous program model were somehow missing the mark when it came to helping students with employment goals. Before making the transition¹ to employment preparation, our program followed an academic or schooling model in which literacy activities, such as spelling and paragraph writing, resemble the kinds of activities found in elementary schools, rather than the kinds of activities that are directly connected to the ways in which students actually use literacy at work, at home or in the community. Although the program had made many changes in program delivery, including the incorporation of a work experience setting (coffee shop) and job placements, we were still using the same academic approach to teaching literacy. Our approach to literacy education was in many ways disconnected from the employment preparation needs of the students. What exactly was happening?

The program and its students

The employment preparation program balanced job search, education, job training, and unpaid work experience. This is considered to be the most effective program model in helping adults with low literacy enter the workforce (Imel). The students were engaged in learning and literacy activities in three distinct settings: a classroom, a coffee shop located in the program, and a job placement of their choice. The eight students who participated in the study (one male and seven females) faced multiple barriers to employment, such as mild developmental and psychiatric disabilities; sole support parent status; little, no, or negative paid work experience; either low levels (less than Grade 8) or modified (special education) levels of formal education; and low levels (IALS Level 1) of literacy. In addition, all but one of the students relied on some form of social assistance (general welfare or disability support). Compounding these issues were the diverse ethnocultural backgrounds of most students. Although students who had come to Canada as adolescents or adults also encountered many of the same employment barriers related to literacy and education as Canadian-born (usually white) students, they also

¹ Making the transition to employment preparation in adult literacy education is an uncommon approach in the field. St Clair) notes that the combination of employment preparation and literacy education is unusual and not widely supported in Canada, despite suggestions that this approach is an ideal way to meet the employment, learning and literacy needs of students (Hull; Imel; Martin).

vs Doing:

by **Christine Pinsent-Johnson**

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Learning on a job placement (bakery department)

Many of the students said they had parallel goals of finding work and continuing to attend a program to improve their literacy skills. None of them said work would help them improve literacy skills or that literacy skill development would help them find work. Like other students, Stacey highly valued what she learned in the classroom, including computers, but did not see how these activities connected to work. Stacey ended up not applying for a position at the bakery because she felt she needed to return to a program to improve her reading skills so she could read labels on the various products. Although her teacher explained that the program could support her while she learned this skill on the job, she didn't agree.

faced societal judgments and barriers based on their ethnocultural differences.

Questions, methodology and theoretical contexts

How in the world would I even begin to look at the program to answer some of the questions I had? I wanted to know what exactly was happening in each of the program's three distinct learning settings: the classroom, coffee shop and job placements. What were students learning about literacy, work and themselves? What influenced their learning and what did students value about what they learned? Who or what supported or detracted from their learning, and how or why did this happen? I had many broad questions so I settled on a case study approach

(Merriam) that would enable me to gather information from several different sources: observations, individual and small group interviews with three instructors and eight students, a group interview with the students, an analysis of documents (planning materials, curriculum, and student writing), and a reflective journal. I ended up with an overwhelming amount of material in the form of taped transcripts, narratives of interviews, field and journal notes, and collected documents.

I had to somehow make sense of this material and, at the same time, wanted to ensure that I was interpreting the information within a context that connected to the thinking of others. I needed a language and common way of understanding so I turned to evolving theories of situated learning (Lave and Wenger; Wenger) and literacy as social practice (Barton and Hamilton;

Hamilton) to guide how I would think, understand, and write about the program. These two ideas are very similar; both view literacy and learning as inherently social- and context-bound activities influenced by the people, setting, intentions, and expectations found in the learning and literacy situation.

I also used Stein's (1998) interpretation of situated learning, developed within the context of adult education instruction, to develop the research questions and present the study's findings. Stein outlines four elements of situated learning—content, context, community of practice, and participation. These elements related directly to my questions. The first element, **content**, connected to my question about what the students were learning. **Context** referred to both the seen (equipment, room, posters, etc.) and unseen (expectations, power issues, personal values, etc.) and related to my question about what influenced what the students were learning. Finally, the closely linked notions of **community of practice** and **participation** (the idea that learning occurs through active engagement in socially defined groups) related to my questions about what supported or detracted from their learning.

To understand literacy, I used Lytle and Wolf's (1989) definition of literacy as skills, tasks, practices, and critical reflection to guide this section. Literacy as skills refers to the notion that reading and writing is a set of discrete skills that can be learned and then applied in a variety of situations. Literacy can also be viewed as the ability to carry out and complete specific tasks, such as filling out a form or

addressing an envelope. Literacy as practices emphasizes "our pluralistic culture and the many different social contexts in which literacy is used" (Lytle and Wolfe p. 10). Intrinsically linked to a literacy-as-practices view is the idea that literacy is critical reflection and action, in which context becomes the subject of analysis and reflection, and meanings are thought about in relation to the ways societal structures and understandings can marginalize those who are not part of the dominant culture. An all-encompassing definition proved helpful in understanding, without assigning value judgments, the nature of the literacy activities in the program.

Making sense of the findings

When I used the framework of situated learning to examine the employment preparation program, I noticed a disconnect between the work settings (the coffee shop and job placements) and the class setting, and subsequently between the notions of learning literacy and learning work. I came to understand four key issues that led to this disconnect:

- the funder's vision supported learning literacy **for** work, not learning work;
- literacy was viewed as **schooling** (i.e., students talked about learning literacy within a traditional academic and skills-based framework) and learning work was viewed as **doing** (i.e., they talked about learning work in a much more immediate and practical way);
- a new literacy practice emerged from the coffee shop, not the classroom; and
- the original intentions of the program were



Learning in the classroom computer lab
Stacey (not her real name) used computers as part of her classroom activities. She learned basic typing skills, used educational software, and used the word processor to write letters and practice her spelling. The learning and literacy activities that occurred in the computer lab, like the classroom, were divided by subject (spelling, grammar, math). The students did not think the classroom activities were connected to the activities of the coffee shop and job placements.

different from its results.

Another important issue arose, outside the framework of situated learning, but central to the students' experiences. That is, the students' backgrounds and socioeconomic conditions impede their goals of gaining sustained employment. The only jobs the students are likely to obtain will be low paying and insecure, with no benefits or potential for advancement. They share the same barriers as the 16% of Canadians in such jobs: most are women with low levels of education, are sole support parents, and of visible minorities (Saunders). This raises questions about the limitations of employment preparation programs.

The limitations of the employment preparation program

The profiles of the eight students illuminated a key issue that needs to be highlighted before discussing the disconnects between learning literacy and learning work because of its impact on the students, and the extent to which the employment preparation program can actually effect socioeconomic change in their lives. A reality that all but one of the eight students faced was their struggle to obtain employment that could allow them to support themselves and their families. They all wanted to find work, but without credentials or work experience, with minimal levels of literacy and formal education, with children and childcare responsibilities, and disabilities, they faced multiple challenges and barriers. In addition, most of the students were visible minority women and faced additional societal barriers. In all, it was highly unlikely that the students would ever be able to support themselves through employment no matter how much 'preparation' they received in a program. Six months after the initial data collection three students were supporting themselves with part-time employment and social assistance, one found a position as a volunteer, two returned to educational programs, one entered a welfare-sponsored training program, and one was pregnant. If self-sustaining employment is not a realistic goal for the students, then what is the role of an employment preparation program? What can a literacy program that emphasizes employment look like if the only employment available does not offer a decent living standard, benefits or job security?

The funder supported learning literacy, not learning work

While the program's funder supported adults in developing the literacy skills needed for employment, the funder did not see itself directly involved in employment training. Herein is a disparity between

the funder's approach to employment preparation, which is seen as the development of skills for jobs, and the contrasting idea that literacy and learning are not just isolated skills, but are integrally tied to social practices. The funder sees its role as helping students become more employable but not to help them become employed; to focus on training readiness, but not to engage in job training; and to teach transferable skills, but not the skills particular to one job (Learning Works: Establishing the Foundation). But here the same disparity arises. That is, if literacy is a social activity that is integrally tied to participation in specific situations, then is it possible to develop literacy separate from the way in which it is actually used?

Learning literacy was schooling and learning work was doing

Compounding the funder's vision of literacy and employment were the students' own perceptions. Learning literacy and learning about work were not seen as synonymous. In fact, the students who participated in this study may see these two as incongruous. Learning literacy is associated with school-like experiences, (e.g., learning to spell), whereas learning about work is associated with doing or performing more practical tasks. For example, when students discussed their learning activities in the different settings, they often spoke about what they **learned** in the classroom and what they **did** in the coffee shop and job placements. One of the students said (the italics are mine),

When we are in the kitchen, we are *doing* the different things like baking, cleaning [and] cash. In school, we *learn* the reading, writing and grammar. [In] the kitchen, we work together like [a] group, like real work.

The class, we learn the reading and writing.

For this student, the classroom, the main setting for literacy activities, was equated with school, and the coffee shop was equated with work, even though activities in the coffee shop also involved literacy, and indeed the classroom also involved 'doing' activities. She **learned academic skills** (reading, writing and grammar) in the classroom, but she did work (baking, operating the cash register, and following public health regulations) in the coffee shop. Contributing to this perception were the students' values and the program approach itself. The predominant approach to literacy education is patterned after a skills-based schooling model (this was perpetuated in the classroom setting), and the students who choose to attend likely value this approach (in contrast to

students who resist attending programs because they emulate schooling models²).

Compounding the divide between learning literacy and doing work was a conflicting vision of the role of the classroom. The instructors felt the classroom activities were to prepare students for activities in the coffee shop, but the students didn't share this view. They thought the classroom activities were quite separate from both the coffee shop and job placement activities. If students perceive learning literacy as schooling and learning work as doing, what can be done to repair this dissonance? Can a social practice learning approach help students to also view learning literacy as doing and to recognize that literacy is an integral part of many work activities?

Literacy skills and literacy practice: a view from the coffee shop

It was in the coffee shop, not the classroom, where students acquired a new literacy practice that they transferred into their home lives (baking by following a recipe). What supported this? Why did the coffee shop become the setting in which a new practice was learned, and not the classroom? The coffee shop had a structure that mirrored participation in a community of practice as described by Lave and Wenger. There was a clear learning purpose in which students were engaged in real activities, such as baking. Newcomers were assisted and trained by old-timers through direct teaching and modeling; there was a safe and supportive environment in which students worked in a collaborative manner, supporting each other and actively **learning** from each other; and progress was measured in a variety of ways. Perhaps a more active, experiential approach to learning, one that incorporates elements of a community of practice, is the best way to support the development of new literacy practices in other realms.

Disconnected intentions and results

There is a significant disconnect between the stated intentions of literacy education (to increase literacy skills in order to help make more productive citizens) and the actual results reported by many programs (very little increase in skills, as we currently measure them, but improved levels of confidence and changed identities). Very few studies have attempted to measure literacy program outcomes using other measures, such as practices. In one that did, the authors found that the more that programs



Learning in the coffee shop

Mariam (a pseudonym) is preparing baked goods to sell in the coffee shop. Although this activity involves literacy—reading a recipe, various liquid and dry measures, labels and ingredient lists—in her mind, she is not engaged in literacy learning; she is simply doing what needs to be done to complete the job. She felt she learned literacy in the classroom, and that she learned about work in the coffee shop and on her job placement. Although she and others felt literacy learning occurred only in the classroom, the new literacy practice that they began to use in their home lives (reading recipes) was learned in the coffee shop, not the classroom.

emphasized the development of literacy practices (not simply skills), the more that students used literacy outside the program (Purcell-Gates, et. al.).

The original intention of the employment preparation program was to help students find employment by enhancing their literacy skills. The program was redesigned because we believed that their literacy skills would improve if they were engaged in the kinds of activities found in work settings. Then, as the program evolved, the improvement of literacy skills began to slip into the background, and the development of cultural and personal knowledge related to employment came to the fore. This shift occurred for a variety of reasons: the kinds of jobs that students could get without recognized credentials did not have many literacy demands; students without work experience needed to learn more about work culture and expectations than literacy; students expressed

2 Quigley (1993) reports that adults who resist attending programs do so because they emulate schooling models. Others argue that adults who don't attend programs value learning but not literacy education (Zieghan, 1992).

confusion in relation to work culture more often than literacy; and students talked more about their growing confidence, sense of belonging, and new perceptions of themselves than the gains they had made in specific literacy skills. Most of the students—like other adults who attend literacy programs—sought out a program in order to change what they can do, how they are perceived, and how they perceive themselves in specific social and cultural contexts (Fingeret & Drennon). Their conversations about why they participated and what they got out of the program were closely aligned with Wenger's social theory of learning, in which learning is seen to be belonging, becoming, experiencing, and doing. Perhaps a social theory of learning could provide a more accurate description of program outcomes than the current skills- and task-based measures.

Implications for practice, policy and theory

This study could help programs and policy makers link to theory and research. For programs, it offers an analysis of the role of classroom settings in employment preparation programs, and a discussion of what elements programs need to support the development of work-related literacy practices. For both programs and policy makers, this research offers a clearer conceptualization of ways to develop and support programs based on broader notions of literacy and learning practices. For policy, the study has two key implications: first, it raises questions about the notion of employment as a goal for students who, like those in the study, face multiple personal and societal barriers. Secondly, it points to potential ways that social theories of learning and literacy, particularly Wenger's interpretation, could contribute to developing more effective ways of measuring progress in literacy programs.

The dynamic nature of the program in which students experienced learning and literacy development in three distinct settings made it an ideal environment for applying a sociocultural analysis and making it tangible. Canadian researchers (Darville; Taylor and

Blunt) have argued for the need to understand adult literacy development in this way. These theoretical frameworks reveal what kinds of literacy and learning

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practices occur in programs, and whether or not they are connected to the practices students need to develop to meet their literacy and learning goals.

The following questions arising from my findings could guide future research:

1. Who are the students in programs and what kinds of job opportunities are available to them? Is it more realistic for programs to assist students with social integration, in which employment and volunteerism may play a role, rather than self-sustaining employment?
2. What kinds of practices are students learning in programs and how are these connected to the ways in which they use literacy outside the program?
3. How do we develop programs and learning opportunities that reflect the ways adults actually use literacy outside of school settings?
4. How can social theories of learning and literacy be used to develop the ways we look at assessment and progress?
5. How can the funder's current structure of literacy delivery (e.g., in Ontario this means training plans, outcomes, and demonstrations) be used as a framework to

help students develop literacy practices and not just literacy skills?

Conclusion

This study clearly demonstrates the need to think about adult literacy program development, particularly employment preparation, beyond the traditional schooling-based models of program delivery. Schooling models primarily support narrow, school-based notions of literacy, which makes perfect sense if the adult student plans to use his or her newly acquired literacy skills in other school settings, such as high school or college. Unfortunately, it neglects the needs of students who want to develop literacy for other situations and settings, such as employment. In addition, if programs are attempting to help students prepare for and succeed in keeping jobs, they need to address more than literacy as a set of skills. As demonstrated in this study, many students in literacy programs who have employment goals face barriers other than literacy. Perhaps it is time we shift our thinking, and focus on **learning opportunities for adults with low literacy** rather than simply literacy education for adults. ■

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