Adult Literacy as Social Relations: A Democratic Theorizing

Richard Darville
Carleton University

Abstract: A theory for democratic literacy — not studying literacy workers and learners but explicating literacy as what they work in the midst of — can build on a conception of literacy as social practices and relations, always in motion.

This paper attempts to articulate the shape of a theory for democratic adult literacy work. I do not mean “democratic” only in a distributional sense, viewing literacy as a social good that should be equitably distributed. I mean it also in a strategic sense — aimed to develop people’s capacities for conscious participation in society. This democratic aim is a continually animating force in literacy work — although the mandate of the regime promoting literacy is the development of “human resources,” i.e. people’s capacities understood as resources for the operations of dominant institutions.

I do not mean “theory” here as categories and formulae that conceptualize what we’ll find, prior to going and looking, but as a set of orienting concepts, directing our attention, telling us how and where to look in order to see how it works. Theory for democratic literacy work will stand, distinctively, among people, as a knowledge for learners, literacy workers, and other democratic activists, not about them. It will be in dialogue with their own knowledge of literacy as what they’re working in the midst of, and working to develop. It will offer not a set of findings, but a way of finding, a method for discovery. I offer here a selective reading (not a synthesis or exegesis) of several forms of theory, to cull from them tendencies useful for this democratic project.

Since democratic theory seeks dialogue with people about and in the literacy they do, it will consider literacy as how people do, and what they do through, uses of written material. This starting point in the activity of actual individuals is crucial for thinking in a way that is aligned with people’s own development. Since individuals do not do literacy alone, democratic theory will recognize literacy not merely as individual capacities but as social — both as social conventions that people acquire, and also as actions that they do together, or to coordinate with one another, in courses of social action. Theory will deal with the two-sidedness of this “participation” — with literacy that serves as people’s own resource, to carry their knowledge and projects; and with literacy that carries other people’s power, and so stands apart from people’s own aims and shaping.

Democratic theory must orient to different “levels” of literacy. There is the scribal level of activities on and with written words. There is a level at which people interact over texts, or about their content. There is a level at which texts are elements of processes of communication and knowledge that operate across situations. All the levels arise in and bear upon literacy work itself. Different theoretical resources shed light on different levels.

Skills Theories
The dominant theory in the regime promoting adult literacy formulates literacy as skills. Its core conceptual procedure, rooted in psychology, objectifies literacy. It cuts out procedures of reading or writing from actions people take, and treats these as an entity consisting of decontextualized (usually “mental”) processes having uniform characteristics, underlying diverse particular contexts. This kind of theory, abstracting literacy from contexts, is often called “autonomous,” in Street’s influential term.

Skills theories are dominant in public policy and in program accountability in two senses. In the regulation of programming, literacy is seen as a graded attribute of individuals — underlying what they do and transferable between milieux. Skills theory also fits into an array of discourses concerned with the governance of training and the labour market. Skills theory takes for granted some domain of institutional social relations — whether economic or scholastic — and “skills” then appear when it is asked whether people have abilities to perform the tasks required in this domain. The pinnacle of current skills theory, in the International Adult Literacy Survey, is tailored specifically to policy making for adult literacy within the developing “competitiveness” of global capitalism (with its rapid changes in both markets and methods of organizing production). The (IALS) information-processing metaphor for literacy is informative about the dominant literacy of institutions as a shunting back and forth of information, which individuals can step into and perform. But it doesn’t provide tools for discovering or showing what social processes one enters when one processes information.

**Practice Theory**

Practice theory, concerned with literacy in actual use, is the alternative usually articulated to skills theory. It originates in critical reaction against any overarching definitions of literacy. Practice theory realizes that literacy is not a thing, autonomous from occasions, and not unitary. There is a *multiplicity* of “literacies.” Practice accounts may entirely abandon the concern with “ability” as a graded attribute of individuals, used to designate what they “need” and to manage its learning. Rejecting boundaries between more and less able, practice accounts insist on attention to however people relate to texts. However, it is not the point of practice theory to deny that individuals have abilities, but rather to make visible that abilities as they are used are constituents of actions that people take. Skills are only ever embedded in circumstances — purpose, emotion, familiarity or strangeness, hostility or cooperation, and so on.

Practice accounts ordinarily focus on “literacy events” as occasions within which people use written materials. Events are organized by “literacy practices,” recurrent forms of activity through which individuals work scribally with written materials, interact with one another during or after reading and writing, and accomplish varied tasks — get an application filled out, send news to a friend, complain to a politician. Practices include ideas and judgments about the morals, ethics and politics of reading and writing, incorporated into their regulation within events. These “ideas” can include participant categorizations that assign different activities to different event participants, and can include “values” such as attitudes of deference or criticism, or orientations to collaborative or individuated interpretation.

People are seen to become literate as they “engage” with literacy practices, not developing literacy in cognitive isolation, but rather *taking in* practices in which they *take part*, practices which they witness or in which they are guided. “Engagement” also suggests that different
individuals learn different aspects of literacy practices — depending on what parts they play in literacy events.

This way of thinking about literacy is immensely useful. It allows observations about the conduct of literacy as it happens — both for scholarly endeavour, and for the attention to knowing one’s way around inside that conduct that is relevant for literacy work itself. It conveys respect for people’s activity, and offers an orientation to participatory pedagogy. But practice accounts have limitations. I will discuss three. (1) Although the seminal concept of “literacy event” is a conceptual breakthrough that lets literacy be seen in its non-autonomous particularity, it can also be a conceptual prison. Its situational and interactional emphasis can obscure the scribal detail that is often focal in literacy work. Viewing the event as an occasion on which reading or writing is done can fail to treat the reading and writing itself as something that happens. Furthermore, literacy practices don’t stop with the individual or the occasion, but organize and are organized by social action across place and time. Literacy is never merely local, but is shaped in, by, and for the social relations it enters into. (2) Practice accounts are useful defensively for literacy work, drawing attention to gaps between official standardizing descriptions of literacy and realities known on the ground. But the polemical animus of practice theory against autonomous accounts can deflect analysis of autonomous concepts as themselves literacy practices — as organizing elements of action in the literacy regime — veering off instead to a merely moral critique, denouncing those theories as implicated in social inequities. (3) Although some elements of practice theory insistently start with the definite activities of actual individuals, occurring in time and space, and the organizational conditions of those activities, there is some tendency in practice theory to objectify practices, treating them, for example, as instances of an abstractly formulated “culture,” or treating “practice” merely as an analytical abstraction rather than actual occurrences.

Freire

The theoretical juxtaposition of skills with practice leaves behind the liberatory impulse of adult literacy work in the 20th century — in particular Freire’s contributions to understanding “the adult literacy process as cultural action for freedom.” As is practice theory, Freire is concerned to free literacy from ideas established to dominate it, particularly ideas that consign people to memorization, and otherwise to silence. Again like practice theory, Freire recognizes literacy as people’s actual activities. This appears clearly in his pedagogical and political insistence that becoming literate is inventing literacy. Famously, he argues that in teaching, teachers don’t make “deposits” into students, but must dialogue with them about the world they both seek to know.

Freire’s work displays the invention of literacy and ways that it can be dialogically supported. He shows that “generative words” can demonstrate how letters, as stand-ins for sounds, are combined and recombined to create new words. He further insists that generative words must reverberate powerfully in learners’ lives. He says that reading is not just “walking on the words,” and “authentic” reading is not limited to getting what a text says, but that word-reading is preceded by and intertwined with world-reading. Freire sees illiteracy as an expression of injustice, and literacy work as political. He shows that literacy’s invention challenges silencings that injustice would impose, and requires ejecting the internalized oppressor — those self-limiting
ideas that inhibit people’s readings of the worlds they know and act in.

For theorizing literacy for democracy in advanced capitalist society, much of this is profoundly helpful. But there are various contextual limitations to Freire’s work. Here I want to dwell on one general issue. Freire’s portrayal of “literacy as cultural action for freedom” assumes that the theorist of literacy is affiliated with a political mobilization that make authentic reading possible. He writes to advise a democratic, indeed a revolutionary leadership, albeit in intellectually very sophisticated ways. It is not always evident, in Freire’s writings or to his readers, just how (much) this theorization resonates with its political context. So would-be Freirians here can have inflated hopes for “empowerment” and become frustrated, withdraw into hopeless cynicism, when it does not come; or may develop analyses of oppression that have little informative to say about literacy itself. The literacy-empowerment nexus in advanced capitalist society is neither inevitable, nor an act of will, but a local engagement with extended relations of power. Not every invention of literacy challenges injustice, and those that do don’t all do so in the same way. So it can be fruitful to salt Freirian theory with practice theory’s recognition of the multiplicity of literacy practices (many of which do not aim at contesting domination). But democratic theory still needs analysis of power relations that are themselves literacy-mediated, and of empowerment in the face of them. Freire importantly urges that in authentic literacy people are “subjects of” acts of reading, but in our print-saturated society people are also pervasively “objects of” (or “subject to”) literacy. More than pedagogy is in question.

**Literacy-Mediated Social Relations**

Theory to inform inventions of literacy will be concerned with literacy as it happens — always as action in local events and practices, but also as engagement in relations extended beyond the local. Theory for democratic literacy work needs resources for coming to terms with the society in which literacy happens, and that it is after all the point of literacy to connect with. Literacy as ongoing creation emphatically does not stop with the individual, or with local events, but continues on to other individuals and events, connected by the material text that passes between them, through which they communicate and are coordinated.

Some of the extended relations that literacy hooks into are relations of power, in our society’s dominant institutions. These produce much of the demand for literacy, both by individuals and in policy mandates. A democratic literacy theory requires some sociological method for understanding how texts and documents are implicated in the organization of contemporary societies, and for speaking to how literacy practices are parts of, or connect us to, power. Without reviewing all possible theoretical resources, I want to work here specifically with the feminist sociology of Dorothy Smith. Smith’s work is a sociological investigation of how domination is exercised, under the distinctive social forms of contemporary capitalism. The dominant institutions through which governing is organized — corporations, bureaucracies, and professions — order and coordinate, define and limit, manage and administer, lives and actions in our society. They govern at a distance from what they govern, and their governing practices centrally rely on texts and documents. So this form of inquiry addresses the social organization of knowledge. It examines practices of ruling as textual practices. This examination is part of a commitment to understand the social world as produced through coordinated human activity.

Smith shows that just as language in general mediates and organizes knowledge and
action, so writing, the freezing of forms of words, especially in print and digital technologies, allows the organization of knowledge and action across time and space. Writing allows forms of words to be disseminated as forms of governing, in laws, procedures, work organizations, arguments in public discourse, and so on. And practices of inscription allow particular individuals and events to be transposed into the form in which they are dealt with by institutions, in reports, applications, licenses, case histories, and so on.

The social organization of knowledge is unusual among social theories in working with a clear understanding of language and of text. It is also distinctive in its capacity to explicate the ways that particular activities are embedded in and construct social relations — extended sequences of action through which activities in diverse sites are brought into relation with one another. Texts, as they are activated through procedures of reading and writing, are seen to operate as constituents of social relations, which they “hold” or “carry.” The schema that are brought to texts (conventional reading theory’s “background knowledge”) are seen not as merely individual knowledge, but as operative features of institutional and discursive processes — active both in the shaping of writing and in the reading of texts for their intended meaning. Analytically, then, documents and texts are treated neither as mere “meaning” nor as simple sources of information, but as themselves moments of social organization.

This theoretical work, although it doesn’t start out to be a treatment of literacy and certainly not of learning, provides useful resources for democratic literacy theory. It lets us see any literacy event as one node of an extended social organization coordinated through texts, as a “moment” of a larger process, an action in a sequence of actions. Once we see literacy as linking people across settings dispersed in space and time, we can also see literacy practices as articulated to one another, shaped for one another, across settings. We can see the interactional organization of a literacy event, at a node of an extended social organization, as one part of a larger organization of action — whose other parts are conducted in different literacy events. Thus engagement with literacy that is at one level scribal activity, is at another level an interactional engagement, and at third level an engagement in social relations. The detailed work of reading a sentence, and reading as an element of societal power relations, are the extremes of a complex multi-leveled process. At least on principle, a conception of literacy as social practices and relations in motion provides a way to encompass these extremes, seeing in readers’ or writers’ approach to a sentence or a text, their approach to the institutional or discursive relations which produce a text, or into which a text goes.

Conjoining Freire’s recognition of the active invention of literacy with practice theory’s attention to the detailed accomplishment of events of literacy, with the social organization of knowledge’s resources for explicating the workings of text-mediated social relations, lets us see literacy as the active ongoing invention and production of individuals’ engagement with text-mediated social relations of action and knowledge. It lets us to see the invention of literacy and its practice in local events as engagement with extended textual and documentary knowledge and action — sometimes as fitting in, sometimes as rejoinder, sometimes as renderings of experience outside the terms of governing.

**Afterword**

Space limitations prevent a detailed discussion here of relations between these theoretical
observations and various specific aspects of literacy work. Instead I end with a note on relations between theory and literacy work. Literacy workers know many things about working with scribal techniques as actual practices, in motion; about the interrelations between learning and social relationships both in the classroom and in learners’ lives outside the classroom; about the coherence between people’s interest in literacy learning and their actual and foreseen engagements with literacy-mediated relations in work, community, religion, politics, and so on. This knowledge is not merely literacy worker know-how, but is itself substantial knowledge, has theoretical significance. But it is seldom written, and worse yet, it is routinely suppressed — in part by status differences between literacy workers and policy people or academics; in part by those conceptual practices that define any knowledge other than objectifying knowledge as “mere anecdote;” in part by increasing pressure on literacy workers to adopt the language of institutional accountabilities; and in part by the absence of theoretical forms that can begin to pull fragments of local knowledge into a mosaic of understanding of literacy as what we are working in and working to develop. Literacy work’s embodied knowledge is often caught in the telling of teaching stories, in that form of exchange of experience that follows the contours of experience as unfolding sequences of events. The work in this paper looks for concepts that are capable of holding diverse particular experiences. This isn’t to give those experiences an academic home, but to hold out the possibility that theory and research can break away from objectifying practices that seek to subsume literacy under theoretical constructs, and instead provide ways of thinking that are informative resources for local practice.

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