Policy, accountability and practice in adult literacy work: Sketching an institutional ethnography

Richard Darville - Carleton University

This paper, aspiring to a kind of research that is in dialogue with the working experiences of adult literacy workers and learners, opens up questions about relations between policy and practice in adult literacy — in particular how the immediate practice of literacy work is shaped to address terms of policy.

Both research studies and writings from the field recognize clashes between dominant conceptions of literacy, often embedded in policy, and actual literacy. One seminal theme of practice-oriented literacy research is that centralizing conceptions obscure the variability and the social character of actual literacy practices and “needs” (e.g. Barton and Hamilton 1998). Paralleling this, tendencies to participatory teaching in adult literacy work respect the complex particular actuality of learners, the literate demands they encounter and the opportunities they pursue (Auerbach 1993; Darville 1995). Practice theory also recognizes that unitary conceptions of literacy are aligned with power relations — expressing dominant views of ordinary people’s illiteracy, not people’s own understandings of literacy. Within literacy work, there are parallel recognitions of participatory initiatives inhibited by conventional conceptions and standardized accountability mechanisms.

This paper builds on the attention to policy that arises from practice theory in literacy studies, and participatory themes in literacy work. The paper isn’t a polemic, but opens up, to empirical investigation, the relations of actual literacy work to policy conceptions and accountabilities. What is and can be done between teachers and learners is shaped not only by teachers’ knowledge and beliefs, but also within a large array of managerial conditions — funding rules, credentialling requirements, student eligibility, curriculum specifications, and so on. I am concerned here particularly with the terms in which students’ learning is reported on or “accounted” in relation to managerial processes. The paper looks from the experience of literacy work (particularly in Ontario) to the institutional conditions within which the work is done — it inquires into the relations of policy, and accountability and practice.

Institutional ethnography

Institutional ethnography, initiated in the work of sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1987; cf. G. Smith 1990; Campbell and Manicom 1995; Grahame 1998; DeVault 1999) is one method for investigating the institutional conditions of experience. Like any ethnography, it is concerned with describing particular situations, and how people's action and interpretation make those situations what they are. But in contemporary society, situations are not free-standing. Institutional ethnography unfolds the ways that everyday experiences are shaped by and worked up for ruling within encompassing institutional processes of government, business, media, professions, etc.

Conventional research procedures connect particular action to institutional processes by tying “micro” description to “macro” theory. Institutional ethnography proceeds differently. Although it is always tailored to the situations it investigates, there are common strategies. (1) Institutional ethnography explicates local activity and experience, with particular attention to language as a coordinator of attention and action, and holder of forms of knowledge and social organization. (2) Starting from local experience as a vantage point, institutional ethnography
adopts the concept of “social relations” to direct attention to sequences or chains of action, in which what is done at one place and time connects to (depends upon or aims to produce) what is done at others. So specific situations are attended to as segments of extended courses of action, conjoined across locales. (3) Institutional ethnography recognizes that the coordination of dispersed events in our kind of society is routinely effected through uses of texts and documents, distributed across locales or passing from place to place. These uses of texts are immensely varied, but two “conceptual practices of power” (Smith, 1990) are of general significance. (a) At the front line of many institutional arrangements, there is a transposition of whatever actually happens in people’s lives and in work processes, into abstracted categories that conceptualize what happens in a form that makes it administrable, that articulates it to the ruling institutional process. These categories are embedded, for example, in case reports, report cards, application forms, tickets, etc. (b) At a different level, public and policy discourse, a generalized language for describing and explaining the society, its problems and solutions, is articulated. This discourse, in the form of editorials, news coverage, policy research reports, position statements and discussion papers, cuts across specific organizational settings.

Research interviewing for institutional ethnography is conducted in conjunction with discourse and documentary analyses (McCoy and DeVault 2002). Interviews and documents are taken as “specimens” of institutional processes. Like botanical specimens, they can be analyzed to reveal their internal structures. But they also are organized by and for their connections to other moments of institutional activity, and are analyzed for that, too. The interviewer attends to “how they speak” — how people’s talk is woven into the action and situation of which it is part, and displays its order. The researcher also “follows the talk,” tending to how bits of what is said hold its connections or its sequential relations to other moments of action. Similarly, documents are not simply read for “information,” treated as telling about what they report, but are analyzed as elements or constituents of the action into which they fit. The concern is for how they are taken up in organizing that action — for how people orient to them, interpret and apply them.

Institutional ethnography has been used to investigate processes, in schooling, public health, and social work, as well as adult education and training. Here I begin to sketch its use for study of what can be called the adult literacy policy process or “literacy regime” — those interpenetrating discursive and organizational (especially governmental) processes, conducted at diverse times and places, that promote, coordinate and regulate adult literacy work.

The literacy regime

The adult literacy “issue” emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. What had been a miscellany of community and local school board or community college programs, affiliated with supportive civil servants, often informed by the democratic impetus of contemporary social movements, was pushed by advocates and pulled by other concerns into the thick of social and labour market training policy and policy-oriented discourse.

Those building the regime have undertaken two major conceptual tasks. First, they have developed arguments about literacy for public and policy discourse, shaping government mandates and justifying public resource expenditures. These arguments have tied the literacy issue into the broader ruling relations, the interlocking forms of economic, political and other organization and discourse, through which people’s action in our society is coordinated and managed (Smith 1998). Early advocacy and policy statements presented literacy as desirable for citizen participation and illiteracy as associated with issues of public order (criminality) and state finance (dependence on governmental income supports in social assistance or unemployment
insurance). A second wave of research studies and analyses associated literacy more with efficient and “competitive” work organization — avoidance of workplace accidents and errors, and labour force flexibility and trainability. But the earlier emphasis on “costs” has not been abandoned.

Consider the conceptual structuring of these familiar arguments. They render literacy categorically as an individual attribute (a “skill”), autonomous from and “applied” in particular situations, and transmittable (coercively if necessary) from institution to learner. Literacy so constructed is isolated as a policy object, to be measured (as that individual attribute), and associated with and manipulated to affect other policy objects — employment, movement off social assistance, economic competitiveness, perhaps political participation. (Related studies of documents within the policy process — media accounts, the International Adult Literacy Survey, and a wide range of policy processes — include Darville 1998, 1999; Hamilton 2001; LoBianco and Wickert forthcoming).

A second major conceptual task of regime building has been the shaping of a managerial cohesion between government policy and program regulation and organization. There have been steady efforts from the late 1980’s to adapt or devise administrative devices that define what counts as “literacy” and literacy education or training, for purposes of its governance. These include of course organizational forms (school boards, colleges, community programs) whose work can be treated as serving policy goals. There are also — continuously under development — regulatory practices or “accountabilities,” vested in documents (funding requirements and formulas, curricula, tests or standardized templates of “outcomes” for student assessment, and so on) that aim at systematic administration of programming in relation to mandate-given goals. Front-line pedagogical practices, dealing directly with students, are shaped, at least in part, to conform to, to be describable within, the accountabilities, mandates and discourses that organize the regime at “higher levels.”

So, to put it in an overly tidy way, policy is fitted to the overall governing of society, programming fitted to policy, and the actual conduct of literacy work fitted to the accountability practices through which it is regulated. All this is accomplished in the working activities of those (of us) who participate in the regime.

However, the actuality of literacy exceeds its forms of ruling. At the front line, literacy as the policy construction — transmittable skills lodged in individuals, graspable distinctly from other aspects of life — clashes with the actuality that literacy is not individual and separate. The conceptual rendering excludes: all the ways that individuals’ practices are threads in the knitting together of communities or institutions; that literacy learning is informed by people’s determination to transform their lives; and that practices are not transmittable but must actively be “invented.” The clash — between policy object and actuality — appears (often without being noticed as such) in diverse ways — in discussions of “dispositional barriers” to program participation; in repeated discoveries of the effectiveness of learner-centredness and urgings that this effectiveness should be recognized in policy and practice; in the persistently messy boundaries between teaching and social work or therapy or politics.

On the ground, in literacy work itself, there is always an excess of the actual work over its categorical rendering. The question here is how connections are made, in the shaping and winnowing of the work, to policy-oriented accountability. To begin an examination of this, I briefly examine several “specimens” of the regime’s workings.
Training plans and learning outcomes

While there is a broad continuity of themes in policy mandates for literacy, the specifics of documentary regulation vary across Canadian jurisdictions. The accountability system in Ontario is perhaps unique for its penetration into the detail of teaching work. I provide here a bare outline. Ontario government action for literacy is centred in the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Section, within the Workplace Preparation Branch of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The chief aim of LBS is to ensure “employability” for the long-term unemployed, especially welfare recipients, although programs are also open to others aimed to improve job skills or deal with everyday needs. A subsidiary objective program is to ensure “accountability” to government, public and learners in the “provision of literacy services” that are “effective, efficient, and produce measureable results” (Ontario 2000).

Many documentary processes are involved in program coordination — including contracts between LBS and agencies, “regional plans” detailing the roles of different programs, etc. In the system for documenting learner activity and progress, two kinds of documents are used directly by teachers (or volunteer tutor coordinators) and students. (1) On intake, and periodically thereafter, learners are assessed with reference to a Learning Outcomes matrix, with several domains (reading, writing, speaking/listening, numeracy, self-management) broken into five hierarchical skill levels (Ontario Literacy Coalition 2000). (2) Training Plans include both long-term (especially employment) goals, and more specific, attainable, learning goals. Students keep portfolios of their daily work, which should be connected to Training Plan goals. These paper or computer records of the processes and products of teaching work connect to reporting processes to the Ministry in two ways. Individual student changes from level to level are aggregated at the program level, and incorporated into a computerized Information Management System. LBS Field Consultants conduct site visits; in conducting audits examining eight distinctly defined components of “service delivery” and “service development,” they may review training plans and portfolios, and interview students.

These documents (cf. supra) are not treated here as sources of “facts” about learning, or as descriptions of what is actually done in the work. Rather the concern is with how actual working activities are aimed at or constrained by the documents, and with how the documents are interpolated within the regime, mediating between front-line work and policy mandates. I outline here some of what I’ve heard in several interviews and related documents — recognizing that literacy workers often display in their talk, if we learn to hear it, more than they say in so many words about how local experiences are threaded into more encompassing orderings. At the risk of over-simplification, I make three broad preliminary observations.

(1) In interviews with practitioners, talk often turns to “the burden of paperwork,” even when no questions have directed attention to it. One former instructor recollects “demonstrations for an incredible number of skills,” and the paperwork as “mind-boggling,” “a system run amok.” Another practitioner says that looking for outcomes requires a “schizy,” contradictory attention, both “down” to particular student activities and how to respond to them, and “up” to how activity can be translated to fill a category. So the paperwork consumes time and attention. But its overall sense can be experienced variously.

(2) One program coordinator emphasizes how learners may be involved in writing the Training Plan. They may engage in “detective work” about possible jobs and the skills required for them; this can show them the value of learning, or perhaps lead to a revision of their goals. The Plan “puts students in the driver’s seat.” Some “struggle with the idea of setting goals,” especially those “brainwashed” by the traditional system into wanting to be “treated like a
receptacle.” For teachers it can “take some getting used to” — especially for those in the “traditional mould,” using chalk-and-talk from the front of the room. They “want a curriculum” and “reams off stuff ready to pull out.” You have to “sit down with them ... bring them along.” She says she’s “a tyrant sometimes,” saying to an instructor “No, this won’t do, there’s no evidence of student input. The work looks off the rack.... I asked the student about his Training Plan and he said, ‘What’s a Training Plan?’” So the accountabilities can be used as a kind of retraining device, to structure, even force, a replacement of “traditional teaching,” with a “progressive” process that involves students in conscious goal-setting and monitoring of their learning, and that requires instructors to stimulate and support that process. This practitioner did not discuss Learning Outcomes. But seeing progressive tendencies as consistent with the accountability system is promoted in urgings, for example, that, no matter what standards are “imposed upon teachers, it is possible to start with what students want or are interested in, and then afterwards to map the activity to the learning outcome...” (Ciancone and Tout 2000).

(3) However, the accountabilities can also seem obstructive, when experienced as crowding out different innovations in pedagogy or in connections of literacy to community organization. One practitioner explicitly describes the time required to do paperwork as supplanting time to reflect, do research, and work with learner writing and publishing. Another speaks of the “occupational hazard” of having to book time off to put in order her thoughts about work (her own thoughts thus not being part of the job). The practitioner who saw paperwork run amok speaks with some pain and confusion about talking with students at break-time, hearing stories of common struggles in their lives which call for some (educational) response — yet feeling at a loss for anything to do. Listening for the institutional organization of this “local experience,” I hear how the opening to develop literacy practices rooted in learners’ particular struggles is cut off — by time pressures, the contradictory attention to learner and document, the individualizing force of the accountability system, and the absence of an alternative accountability of the aims and processes of literacy work. Related concerns arise among aboriginal practitioners seeking to develop a “culture-based approach” focused on respect for life, building on oral traditions and aboriginal thought and languages, and aimed at group strength as well as individual freedom (Gaikzheyongai 2000). These practitioners find that “Using the Learning Outcomes Matrix as the basis of evaluating learners and their progress pulls literacy program staff/instructors away from their teaching activities and toward administrative duties.... Administering each component basically requires, in the words of one practitioner, ‘documentation, documentation, and filing more supportive documentation’” (18-9). Native practitioners observe “little room for the design and development of collaborative efforts” and partnerships across the Native community (21). Some describe outcomes models as a “deficits-based approach” that “will never work for Native learners” (29). So in general, the accountability system, with its individualizing force, can be experienced as undercutting innovative and collective work between practitioners and students, and work to develop literacy as an aspect of a community development process.

**Prospect**

The accountability system of Learning Outcomes and Training Plans renders literacy as individual skill, categorized on a hierarchical list of “outcomes,” demonstrated by work in a portfolio which is connected to a Training Plan. All this counts as an attainment of the policy object called “literacy,” whose production is justified as increasing competitiveness and reducing the need for government expenditures. Although the system standardizes accounting procedures, it produces not uniform but contradictory experience among those enacting it.
The present paper only sketches the framework for a kind of inquiry into the literacy regime, and exemplifies it, in preliminary observations on interview and document “specimens” from the regime. There is much more to be done. Explorations of learners’ experience. Explorations of the “accounting” work both of practitioners in different teaching situations, and of Ministry officials. Explorations of accountabilities’ relations to the mandate for literacy articulated in public and policy discourse and in electoral politics.

Institutional ethnography is capable of alignment with actual experiences of literacy work, since it begins in the particular and sets out to find “how it happens” or “how it works” (as Smith says). So it can serve as a tool for literacy workers trying to understand, perhaps to shape, the larger processes that both enable and constrain their own activity. If there is hope for grounding literacy policy and administrative organization in the logic or the discoveries of literacy practice (Darville 1992, Quigley 1997), such research is one resource.

**Select bibliography**


http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/outcome/outcome.pdf


Ontario (2000). *Literacy and Basic Skills Program Guidelines.* Literacy and Basic Skills Section, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.


