Practical knowledge and research knowledge of the adult literacy process

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This paper concerns the relations of practical knowledge and research knowledge in adult literacy. Addressed more to researchers than practitioners, it is an extended reflection on the possibility of a rapprochement in this relation. By calling it a “reflection” I mean that it is not empirical research and not a literature synthesis. Rather it is an attempt to pull together a coherent way of thinking, arising from both experience and reading. This reflection aims, metaphorically, to “map” the territory of practice and research. It is a fragmentary map. There is less attention to the mountains that divide research from practice, than to the valleys where movement back and forth is possible. After discussing practical knowledge and research knowledge, the paper finally suggests a theoretically-informed research process that can have a rich dialogue with practical knowledge.

Practice and research

Literacy workers do not wait on research to know things. There is good practical knowledge in literacy work. Practitioners often subtly know what-to-do, how to take precise and well-timed steps to support or scaffold people’s development of new activities of reading and writing. There is also reflective knowledge about literacy work. Practitioners articulate patterns in the ways that people’s lives lead them to study, in effective methods for teaching, and stages and barriers in learning. Furthermore, research in a sense is a normal part of ordinary good practice: people pose and attempt to come to terms with their problems, experiment with materials, analyze learning processes, and observe how programming arrangements work. There is also a strong impulse towards the creation of (more) knowledge. This is evident in the energized talk that regularly occurs when literacy workers meet without an agenda and talk about their work.

All this is part of “indigenous discourse of literacy work,” discourse both in the actual work and in reflective talk and writing about it. To strengthen the field, indigenous discourse should be elaborated as a form of knowledge in its own right, and reckoned with by policy and research discourses (Darville 2002b). However, the articulation and the force of indigenous discourse are often unrealized possibilities. Why? Practitioners have too little time and opportunity for discussion, writing, and publication. When program activity is written up, it is largely oriented to “accountability” — articulating the work to administrative and policy categories, and crowding out accounts of the work for those involved in doing it (Darville 2002a). Finally, indigenous discourse often lacks an analytical language to articulate literacy work across its many settings.

Participatory or action research is the most-discussed strategy to realize the possibilities of knowledge development rooted in practice. It is research done by practitioners, reflecting on questions that arise within everyday work or celebrating its accomplishments. Programmatic
statements (e.g., Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993; Lytle 1996; Quigley and Kuhne 1997; Quigley 1999; Zeichner 2001) claim several virtues and consequences for participatory research:

• It can pose and solve particular problems in teaching or in program operation.
• It can enliven those engaged in it, making them more curious, active and innovative.
• It can gather evidence on the beneficial effects of inherently valuable forms of literacy work, to justify them to administrators and policy makers.
• Finally, it can build a knowledge of literacy and literacy work that is radically alternative to traditional policy or academic research — that is counter-hegemonic.

These claims are often joined to an emphatic assertion that research questions must arise in practice itself, not “prior” to it, not “outside.” This is usually taken to separate practitioner research from academic or policy research. Distinctions about whose questions are asked are indeed important. It is also important not to be lured into a false distinction between formal research that is conceptually informed, and practical knowledge and practitioner research that are not. As Freire noted, any deliberate teaching is theoretically informed. Likewise, any measurement, observation or description is organized conceptually, or clarified in conceptualization. At a basic level, questions and findings are formulated in language. Further, at many points in practice and in practitioner research, questions of conceptualization, even of explicit theory, arise.

• Concepts are the tools that let us hold on to gains in understanding of teaching and program organization.
• To make what has been learned demonstrable to others, especially to others in different settings, an analytical language is needed that, while grounded in the particulars of a situation of practice, also finds abstraction that is usable across settings.
• Clear conceptualization is needed to understand the circumstances in which discovered effects hold true — so that they do not turn into ideologies imposed stupidly.
• To persuade policy makers of the value of innovative or unconventional work requires conceptual forms that will translate benefits on the ground into a language understandable by those responsible for governing literacy work from a distance.
• Even more demanding, to create a counter-hegemonic movement out of the discoveries of individuals in their local situations requires conceptualization that both articulates the goals and means of an alternative project, and fundamentally critiques the hegemonic terms being displaced.

Let me review the argument so far: Practice is already knowledgeable. Good practice includes research of a kind. Practitioner research extends these strengths, and it is necessarily conceptual.

What place is there then for academic and professional independent researchers? Can they — can’t we — contribute to practical knowledge and practitioner research? After all, we have wrestled with intellectual discipline. We are trained in conceptualizing, connecting and distinguishing ideas, and tying concepts to observations. We have skills; can they contribute?
One possibility for formal researchers is to make practitioner researchers and their activities an object of investigation. There is something to be said for that — at the very least, that it can make an impartial display, for administrators and policy makers, of the program improvement gains to be had from practitioner research (Zeichner 2001 offers a useful description of such work).

However there is another and more profound possibility: doing research that is not merely about practice but for it, that is affiliated with practice, thinking from the same experience and for the same project. Orthodox conventions and institutional restrictions in formal and academic research pull research away from alignment with practice. They make research “prior” or from “outside.” Even though literacy researchers are often drawn to support literacy work, we often end up studying people rather than providing them with useful knowledge. I want here to entertain the idea that we do not always have to capitulate to research conventions and institutional restrictions. We can invent alternatives. To return to the map metaphor: we can look for the a valley that we could build a road through. To do this, we must ask what sort of conceptualization can affiliate research knowledge with practical knowledge. What research orientation can both learn from practice, and feed back into practice?

**Research for practice**

Adult literacy work is and deals with literacy as the activity of actual individuals. This is the activity of those who are learning, colloquially, “how you do it,” and the activity of teachers who demonstrate, explain and guide. Teaching and learning work at the shifting boundary between what people can do already, and what can now be shown to them, or what they can acquire by attending to demonstrations of how it is done. All this activity is social, in the sense that when people learn literacy, they learn conventions and practices that others also use. Furthermore, although abilities to work with texts are exercised and developed in locally situated ways, what literacy is for is making connections between people, across space and time — for communicating, learning, informing, directing. So literacy is social in another sense. It weaves together what dispersed individuals do in their various local forms of activity. Thus literacy work is necessarily concerned with — colloquially again — “what’s in it for you” and “what you’re getting into.”

The tasks and problems of practice concern both “how you do it” and “what you’re getting into” — more analytically expressed, both local practices and social relations. Three relevant traditions now available in literacy studies can be joined in an analytical orientation to the orderly conduct of local practices within social relations (Darville 2001). This orientation:

- draws from practice theory of literacy or the “new literacy studies” (Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Barton and Hamilton 1998) the recognition that literacy technique is inseparable from context, and that literacy always occurs within local “events” — specific occasions of which reading or writing are part, but including the spoken interactions and the other forms of action that occur around text use;
- borrows from sociological institutional ethnography (Smith 1990, 1999; DeVault 1999) the recognition that literacy is more than local practices, that any literacy event is a node of an extended course of social action mediated by texts, i.e., of a social relation;
- adopts, as a way of looking at literacy learning, Freire’s (1985) concept of the “adult literacy process,” with its invaluable recognition that the adult
literacy process is multi-levelled, a securing of technical capacities of literacy that develops simultaneously with a claiming of their powers.

This orientation encompasses the conventions of literacy — from the techniques of the orthography in sounding-out and spelling, to the textual genres and practices that organize and are structured for recurrent courses of action (Freedman and Medway 1994). It further recognizes literacy learning as a transformation in the individual’s relationship to the social world in which literacy operates. The adult literacy process changes both the technical abilities of literacy, and the social relations that literacy enables. Freire’s whole phrase was “adult literacy process as cultural action for freedom,” and he focused on a transformation from passive to active and critical forms of consciousness. Of course, the transformations that people go through are various rather than singular, and not inevitably critical. But any statement of “the process,” not only Freire’s, is more than a mere generalization. It is an aspiration. Judgments of value are inevitable in literacy, even in the interminable battle over definitions of “the reading process” (Heap 1991).

This orientation is not a theory of literacy but a theorized way of looking (cf. Campbell and Gregor 2001) at literacy. It does not aim to create theoretical constructs that can be operationalized and measured, or generalizations through which literacy can be categorized and explained. (These are the conceptual practices that make research seem “prior” or “outside.”) It rather aims to observe and explicate patterns that are already there in that individually orderly and socially organized activity that is also the concern of literacy work. This orientation is arguably the most promising candidate for a research stance that can be aligned with and can dialogue with the practical knowledge of literacy work. It takes as its object of inquiry just that process that is the concern of literacy practice and the knowledge that is part of it.

Possible research

Such a conceptualization might help build a road through one valley between practice and research. It might frame a program of research. This imagined research (here I must credit Guy Ewing; these ideas were developed in rich conversations between us), without seeking to impose theory, would aim at dialogue with practical knowledge. The notion of dialogue contrasts with the standard unidirectional model of “applying research” — as if researchers know and practitioners only do. It also contrasts with the model of practitioner research as simply separated from academic work. It suggests fully respecting practitioners’ own good knowledge, but also speaking to it. It implies that there is both common ground and fruitful tension between practical knowledge and academic knowledge (contested common ground that has been explored in remarkable researcher-practitioner partnerships including Auerbach 1993; and Meek 1983).

A research process might have two broad phases. The first phase would provide opportunities for the articulation of what literacy workers know. It would use observations and interviews to elicit literacy workers’ practical knowledge, and then assemble that knowledge. From experience, we would expect to hear both successes and frustrations or puzzles. These would concern the detailed activity of literacy teaching and learning, and also the changes in people’s lives that lead to or result from literacy learning. The work would aim to tease out the conceptual forms that practical knowledge flows into. It might be compared to the work of professional scribes, not mere dictation-taking, but inventing genre to write clearly and attractively what people say. This first phase would likely itself be transformative, since
gathering and formulating what people know is itself tantamount to their knowing more, and an
impetus to further learning.

Listening to literacy workers would, however, be more than a recording procedure. Practitioners’ knowledge and their puzzles would also be data for a second, analytical, phase of research. To give the briefest account of questions of analytical method: As literacy work engages with the adult literacy process, it makes a partial display of it, from the locations with which it is engaged. So research can attend to practitioners’ working knowledge and language in order to hear how it displays the adult literacy process of which it is part.

What the analysis might say about the adult literacy process, about its local practices and social relations, would likely not coincide exactly with practitioners’ own accounts. Theoretically informed looking might, without challenging practitioners’ own good knowledge of literacy work and how to do it, make discoveries about how the specific occasions of literacy learning operate as moments and aspects of a much more general adult literacy process. So what might research add? It would seem wise to be attuned to two possible kinds of observations — some closer-focused, and some more remote, than are likely brought to consciousness and named in practice.

The first possibility is explication in close terms of the local detail of practices in literacy work, of unfolding of sequences of interaction between teacher and learners. Such explications need to be attentive to the reality that practices found in one setting are likely to be general methods that operate in settings as well (Ramirez 1994 and Himley et al. 1996 are exemplary studies). Substantive topics might be the processes through which savvy teachers deal with students’ resistance to learning or doubt that they can learn, the variety (rather than uniformity) with which skillful teachers guide novice readers in working with correspondences between letters and sounds (cf. Ewing 1994), and teachers’ challenging learners’ often school-based ideas about what reading is and leading them to go beyond “getting what it says” to a broader understanding of what good readers know how to do (cf. Malnarich 1994).

The second set of possible observations concerns aspects of literacy’s workings that are beyond the horizons of local settings, and often not brought to explicit attention. The concern would be with how any literacy event connects to events elsewhere and at other times, and how the organization of literacy learning both shapes and is shaped by the actual social relations of learners’ lives. Many aspects of (and troubles with) reading and writing involve the connections between what goes on in the here-and-now, and other readers and writers, other actors. What is relevant to inquire into about social relations is perhaps just what is relevant to the activity and understanding of the local practices. Attention would likely go to people’s troubles with genres of reading and writing, when the genres are organizers of social relations which are opaque to those people. There might also be concern with recruitment, and with the relations through which people with “objectively” limited literacy actually decide to study.

Still another possibility, which can only be mentioned here, is addressing the relations of hegemony and counter-hegemony in adult literacy. Practitioners’ accounts of their work would indeed display aspects of a counter-hegemonic project for literacy, but would likely also be infiltrated by, sometimes vitiated by, hegemonic terms and methods. Disentangling the two could be an important analytic contribution.

Both the elucidation of what literacy workers know, and analyses of it, would be returned to practitioners, as well as offered for academic review and for consideration by policy makers. Such analyses would not be a theoretical corrective to indigenous views. Neither would they
define an “approach to literacy” that aims to structure how teachers work. They would merely be meant for open-ended dialogue — and perhaps debate — between practice and research.

References


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