

New and old perspectives on the professional expertise of adult literacy practitioners

Sam Duncan

UCL Institute of Education

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A time to look and think again?

What is it that an adult literacy practitioner *needs to know/understand and be able to do*? And how is this expertise developed?

And what or who *is* an adult literacy/literacies practitioner?

Contextual factors

- Work patterns and conditions (including voluntary/paid)
- Location of literacy/literacies provision in relation to other forms of teaching or community work
- Teacher education: requirements, opportunities, costs, contexts
- The wider context of expertise – which are our *'shelves in libraries'*?

The aim of this project (in progress)

- To provide a series of ideas to stimulate and influence discussion
- To support those developing forms of teacher education (rather than pushing for a particular form)
- To support practitioner networks
- To remind us all that this is an ongoing conversation
- To lead, perhaps, to larger-scale, collaborative work

Teacher education: some pictures from the past

(Scottish) Professional Development Award in Tutoring Adult Literacies (2011-2013 onwards)

3 units: tutoring adult literacy, contexts of adult literacies in Scotland, tutoring numeracy in adult literacies

The 'specific aims':

- 1 Develop specific knowledge of planning for adult literacies teaching and learning
- 2 Develop specific teaching strategies in literacy and numeracy
- 3 Develop awareness of relevant context and policy in Scotland
- 4 Improve professional effectiveness in assessment and educational guidance
- 5 Use technology within learning and teaching contexts
- 6 Develop group work skills and confidence
- 7 Develop the skills required of a reflective practitioner
- 8 Promote the use of the social practice approach to adult literacies learning

City and Guilds L4 Certificate for Adult Literacy Subject Specialists (9485)
(England) (2004)

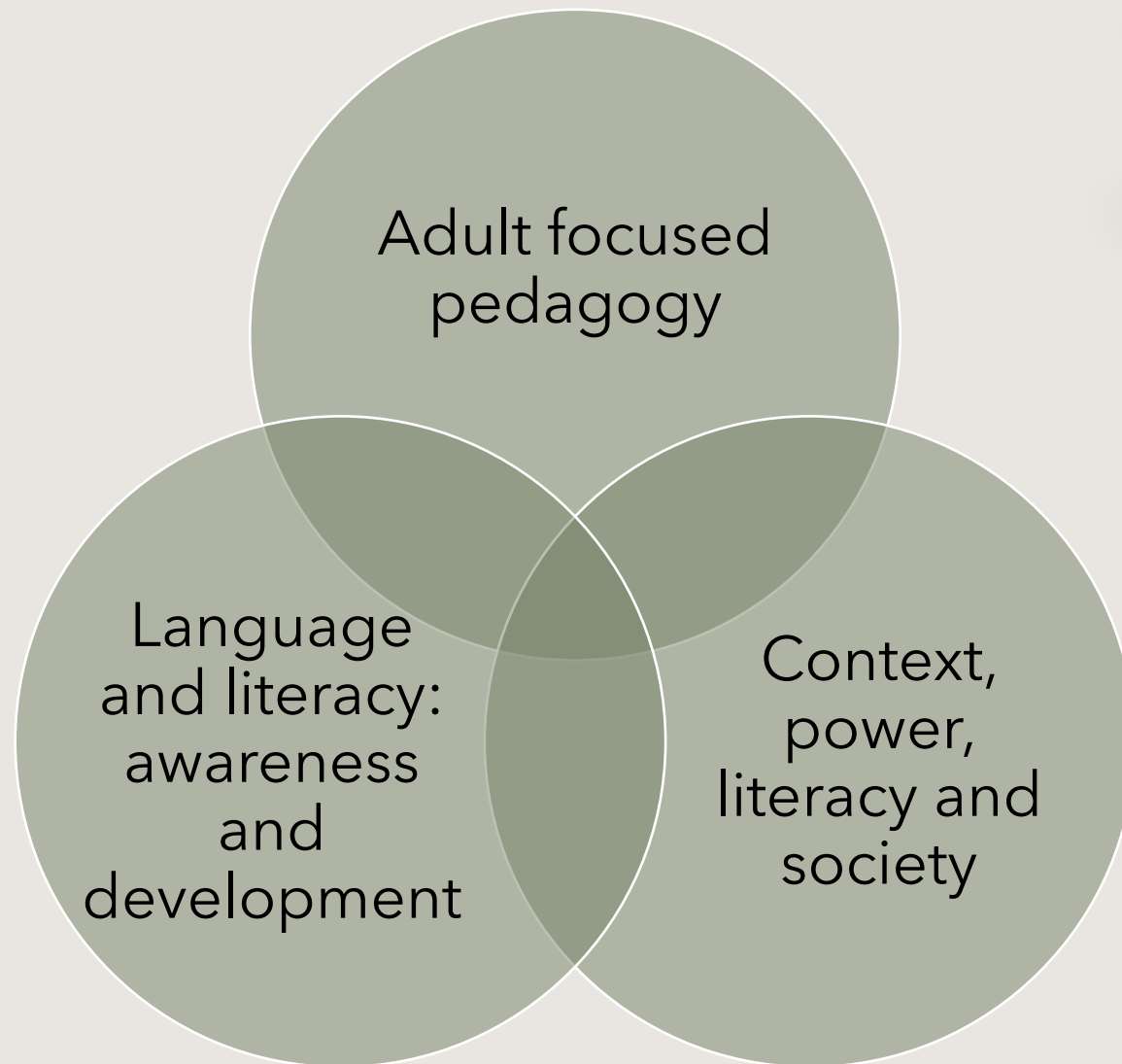
7 units:

1. Theoretical frameworks and language
2. Factors that influence or shape language or literacy use
3. Language and literacy learning and development
4. Speaking and listening
5. Reading
6. Writing
7. Teaching practice

NALA's 'Getting started in adult literacy and numeracy: A tutor training resource pack' (2008)

- A. Introduction to Literacy
- B. What do we mean by Literacy?
- C. Causes and Effects of Literacy Difficulties
- D. Adult Learning
- E. Introduction to reading
- F. Writing
- G. Spelling
- H. Assessment and Planning
- I. Introduction to Mapping the Learner Journey
- J. Evaluation: what I have learned?
- K. Material development
- L. Involving Learners
- M. Training Methods
- N. Interculturalism
- O. Special needs
- P. Numeracy

Overall, variations of -



Judy Kalman *Discovering Literacy: Access Routes to Written Culture for a Group of Women in Mexico* (2005)

p. 139:

1. "Educational actions must consider the context in which learners live and carry out their daily activities;
2. The starting point for educational interventions should be learners' existing knowledge and know-how; and
3. Educational projects must recognise and respond to learners' heterogeneity"

Interviews (so far 6 adult literacies practitioners and/or teacher educators in Wales, Scotland and England)

Do you consider yourself to be an adult literacy/literacies practitioner?

What do we need to know or be able to do as adult literacy/literacies practitioners? What is our expertise?

How is this developed? (with prompts around training and networks)

Interviews

(so far 6 adult literacies practitioners and/or teacher educators in Wales, Scotland and England)

Shared preoccupations -

- The idea that the identity/networks/specialist expertise of adult literacy practitioners is under threat or fragile
- The fears of expertise lost – related to employment and policies
- The idea of developing expertise from experience and colleagues
- The idea that a teacher ed programme fits into a wider reality of the complex development of expertise
- The sense of different cultures at play which bring different priorities and ideas of expertise
- The sense that the most important expertise is *working with and from learners*

Notable differences -

- One-to-one vs group, national contexts, employment and qualification expectations
- Different relationships with wider institutions, qualification, accreditation or other structures

Interviewer: 'would you consider yourself to be an adult literacy teacher?'

Interviewee: 'Absolutely... against all the odds'

'On the surface my role is supporting [learners] with their literacy and numeracy [...] whatever the way they want to do that, and whatever goals that they have [...] but for me it's probably as much, if not more, about supporting them to become more confident [...] to be more confident in the things that they can do rather than focus on the things that they can't do.'

'I've almost been trying to make a parallel between ESOL and [adult] literacy and is there perhaps really no parallel because what literacy is, is a social project [...] it's actually much more complex. Isn't it almost entirely a social project? It wouldn't exist if society was equal. Do you know what I mean, is it entirely about trying to empower people? and it's not a curriculum subject.'

‘that expertise thing, it’s more about who you are than the qualifications that you’ve got’

‘I think it’s really something to do with having an understanding of who our students are, and the particular issues that arise, not just with literacy, but for them as people in their world, in their community.’

‘people have often done initial teacher training [...] but in my experience, it [expertise] kind of develops, you know, in the team.’

‘good quality teacher education, good quality tutors, good quality education, it takes time and practice’

What is the expertise of adult literacies practitioners?

- Understanding what learners want, communicating, listening
- Building confidence, highlighting and working from what learners can do
- Supporting learners in expanding or developing what they can do or what they think is 'for them'
- Careful (forms of) assessment (human, not tools)
- Experience using, adapting and creating a range of resources/materials
- Ability to work with colleagues and learn from others – including learners
- Experience of different learners and different learners needs/desires
- Experience/knowledge of different reading and writing practices, goals, challenges
- Political/social justice drivers/wider context and power relations
- Understanding how language works, how words work, how text works, how literacy works
- Knowledge of how people have been taught to read and write, and a range of other ways this can be done
- Awareness of when own expertise is limited and when to ask for others' help

And how is this expertise developed?

- Through experience, our own and others'
- Through other forms of education or learning
- Through trying things out, watching, talking, listening
- Through experience working with different learners, in different contexts and different....etc
- Through the passing on of expertise, colleague to colleague, through teacher education or professional networks
- *Forms of teacher education are important but not the whole story*

Messages so far

- Adult literacy practitioner expertise is developed before, during and after teacher education programmes, and throughout careers/lives.
- What 'literacy' or 'literacies' means or involves is fluid and evolving – and includes ideas around context/the socio/cultural
- Knowledge of language, literacy development and pedagogy is important but not everything
- This is about understanding *an idea of education centered around the individual* and what they want and feel they need. Linguistic expertise then comes into play in reacting and guiding.
- This approach is core to both the 'traditional' adult lit culture in England and Ireland, and the Scottish Social Practices approach (and reflected in the teacher education documents of each) BUT is arguably under threat in each context as courses, provision, careers etc. are more precarious
- Networks (local, national, international) of practitioners (and with links to researchers and teacher educators) are very, very important. This is key to the development of expertise on the individual and communal levels.
- Forms of teacher education – whether one larger programme or a series of staged smaller ones – need to take the above into account, including acknowledging the expertise which is developed outside of formal teacher education.

3 points for more thought...

- How expertise around language (and specifically literacy) relates to expertise around understanding where learners are coming from, what they want and why (this relationship seems to be absolutely crucial – and the former needs to be strong *precisely because* the latter leads)
- ‘Needs’ vs ‘rights’ - on an individual and social level (organising teaching and justifying provision etc) (*see analysis of Judith Rose, PhD upcoming*)
- Trying out Shove et al’s* ‘materials, meanings and competences’ conceptualisation of social practices

* Shove, E., Pantzar, M, & Watson, M. (2012). *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. London: Sage.

Next stages...

- More interviews, more analysis, more examination of documents?
- But also more collaborative work, examinations - whether this is about more research or discussions or creating something. I would love to work with all of you, please get in touch.

sam.duncan@ucl.ac.uk