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WRITING WRONG: CONUNDRUMS OF LITERACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The EFA *Global Monitoring Report* of 2002 contains two interesting paragraphs:

The meaning of the word literacy has developed radically Conceived now in the plural as ‘literacies’ and embedded in a range of life and livelihood situations, literacy differs according to purpose, context, use, script and institutional framework. But its *conceptual advancement* has not been matched by the priority accorded to it in policy. (GMR, 2002, p. 17, my emphasis)

The Dakar goal covers a kaleidoscopic area of learning, with close links to the goal on literacy and continuing education for adults. A comprehensive picture of what is happening worldwide is not yet possible, in part because there are *unresolved conceptual issues*. (GMR, 2002, p. 18, author’s emphasis)

The edifice of the EFA campaign, the weightiness of its reports, the machinery of its advocacy and research and the marshalling of its facts and figures, all belie what we can learn about literacy provision from the space between those two phrases – the positive assertion of ‘conceptual advancement’ and the tentative ‘unresolved conceptual issues’. In this article I aim to explore what lies between those phrases, in order to put forward some ideas about the role and future of literacy and its relation to human rights. In this I hope to show the continuing importance of adult literacy work and the fact that it cannot be disregarded if the ideals of EFA are to have any reality. I will address literacy and adult basic education separately.

The idea of ‘writing wrong’ has been introduced purposefully. ‘Wrongs’ in the sense of the denial or absence of human rights are inscribed deeply and pervasively into the very structure and fabric of our world. Every time we engage in writing and reading, we are exercising the rights and freedoms that we have cumulatively had access to during our lives, and the shadows in our inscriptions are the wrongs on which our rights have been built. Crying out from the words, figures and pages of the 2002 *Global Monitoring Report* is the evidence of searing inequality, built on worldwide divisions and injustices. But wrongs can be turned into rights, rights can be lost or gained, wrongs and rights are written into history and our understandings of these are rewritten over time. As Appadurai (2000) states:

It has now become something of a truism that we are functioning in a world fundamentally characterised by objects in motion. The objects include ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques. This is a world of flows. It is also of course a world of structures, organisations and other stable social forms. But the apparent stabilities that we see, under close examination, are usually our devices for handling objects characterised by motion.

As we write and read words and texts that are recontextualised and recirculated across time and space, we rewrite and read anew our own ideas and those of others – one person’s right is often another person’s wrong.

Conceptual Advances – Uses and Acquisition of Literacy

In line with the first quotation above, the perspective taken here is strongly rooted in what have come to be called the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1990; Street, 1993, 1995, 2001) which pioneered the conception of ‘literacies’, the notion of literacy as variable according to context, and the view of literacies as inextricably embedded in life situations. I will briefly outline some of the key conceptual advances that have been made in this field with regard to literacy.

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Until recently, literacy has been seen as the ability to read and write, to encode and decode print, and therefore the building block for doing other things; literacy therefore stands in some linear relationship to ‘other things’, acting as an independent variable bringing about effects with its intrinsic power. The advances made within the NLS have enabled researchers and practitioners to see that, as Lankshear (1998) puts it, “literacy can only be meaningfully understood in relation to the social practices and purposes that are mediated by semiotic texts, and where texts are produced, distributed, received, exchanged and negotiated as an integral part of pursuing the practices or purposes in question”. Further, the purpose of “making people literate” (Lankshear, 1998) is not so that they can deal with texts, it is to enable them to take part in the practices and accomplish the purposes within which the texts are embedded. It is therefore less important to consider literacy *in context* (as many of the more progressive literacy pedagogies have been trying to do); it is more valuable to view it *as context*. Like language, it “provides the architecture of social behaviour itself” (Blommaert, 2001).

I therefore take literacy to mean the whole range of practices that surround and give effect to written language. The acquisition and development of capacities in reading and writing develop and draw on a repertoire of resources within social roles (I draw from Green (1998), Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) and Luke (1992) here) which enable people to:

- *crack the code*, including what sounds are represented by what letters or groups of letters, what punctuation marks signify, what the conventional design and format of texts signify, what graphic symbols represent in different technological and social texts. The role here is that of *code-breaker*.
- *participate in the meanings of text*, including understanding and composing meaningful texts, using selected forms of written language to understand and build meanings appropriate to their context. This can be understood as *semantic competence*, and the role here is that of *text-participant*.
- *use texts and other forms of literacy functionally*, including the different social functions of different types of texts and how these functions shape the way texts are structured and the forms of language used. This can be understood as *pragmatic competence* and the role is that of *text user*.
- *analyse texts critically*, including how different types of texts are shaped by particular social interests and being able to ask questions about positioning, power and control of a text. This involves *critical competence* and the role involved is that of *text analyst*.

There are two key points here. First, in social practice people will draw on some of these roles and not on others. Factors influencing which roles they draw on are not necessarily related to their abilities to code-break or not. Second, development of capacities in these four roles is not staged and sequenced, especially among adults. I have written extensively on adults who play the latter three roles convincingly without being able to play the former role (Kell, 2003).

Further insights gained from the research and theory of the NLS include the following.

Literacy as social practice. The common understanding of literacy influenced by school teaching practices and understandings is that literacy is an individualised capacity and a solitary activity. In practice, particularly among people with limited exposure to schooling, literacy is often a collective and shared event, with multiple social actors performing different social roles depending on their skills and location. Rather than the model of knowledge and skills as residing in individuals, the more contemporary metaphor of the distributive system is appropriate, where effective performance does not require the equal skilling of all its parts but the effective performance of the system as a whole. The sharing of literacy capacities across people with different experiences of schooling is the norm in social practice.

People without schooling can play a meaningful role in textually mediated social practices. A body of work now has focused on the concept of literacy mediation. My own research has shown how people without schooling can play an important role in their communities by drawing on the literacy skills of those around them and by reciprocating with the use of other valued skills. Important networks can build up around these delicate social processes and members of such networks can attain status and satisfaction. Usually success in these mediated processes depends on access to a wider set of discourses, resources and contacts, and literacy is not necessarily required for such access to occur. Such resources may lead to the acquisition of aspects of the four roles and competences described above, but the acquisition of literacy-related skills does not necessarily lead to access to the resources.

People have different orientations towards schooling and learning. In the 'Social Uses of Literacy' project undertaken in South Africa (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996), cultural and ideological orientations away from schooling were prominent, particularly among older men, while older women felt that their learning years had passed them by and expressed scepticism about the value of schooling. Younger people accepted modernist discourses around schooling, and would not resist it for cultural, historical and ideological reasons. However, many did indicate that they would not attend classes if they were offered, perceiving an incompatibility between going back to school and pursuing

strategies for survival in an era of structural unemployment. The oft-cited 'barriers' to adult learning like transport problems, child-care arrangements and dangerous living conditions did emerge in the data but interestingly only among those who already had positive orientations towards schooling.

Literacy skills can, but do not necessarily, confer a sense of empowerment, identity and social competence. Again, in the 'Social Uses of Literacy' research, the data were convincing on the variable effects of literacy in relation to context. In studies with farmworkers, men 'without literacy' were powerful and achieved economic benefit from their skills as well as a strong sense of identity. On the other hand, women 'with literacy' occupied less-valued jobs and exercised less power and control both in the workplace and in their families. In some cases, people achieved a strong sense of identity from attributes such as masculinity and leadership. Furthermore, my own research has shown that the arrival of the night school in an informal settlement actually made people self-conscious about what they saw as a lack of literacy and schooling, which they had not necessarily perceived before.

Surveillance and control can be pursued through the medium of literacy. Literacy practices are often linked to surveillance, where people are forced to inscribe their actions or behaviours into standardised textual formats that carry sets of relations from outside the immediate context into the context of inscription. Research has shown that people either comply with this, resist it or ignore it. On the other hand, people sometimes develop their own forms of text involving the inscription of their actions or behaviours into non-standard or very idiosyncratic formats. They do not necessarily see this as literacy, and are often required to hide these from public scrutiny.

Literacy skills can be acquired informally and tacitly. Research in the NLS approach has shown that people often apprentice themselves to others formally or informally to acquire skills needed in the four roles described above. Apprenticeship processes are context-specific and analogous to craft learning, often involving guided participation or legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.

Grapho-numerical symbols, icons and images are becoming more and more tightly integrated with alphabetic/ideographic scripts. Alphabetic written language does not carry the same load of meaning that it has in the past, as it has come to be integrated with other technologies, symbol systems and modes of representation. Even literacy in the narrowest sense of code-breaking needs to be a much broader undertaking in the contemporary period, and if taught as a set of conventions in restricted scripts may run the risk of missing key communicative functions. Taking the Roman alphabet as an example, it is no longer appropriate to say that there are 26 letters for learners to learn, and the same may well be true for other scripts. The ubiquity of texting has led to the

reduction in importance of vowels. Writing in the texting environment is no longer a matter of knowing the letters of the alphabet but of understanding letters as bits of information in a spatial arrangement co-ordinated through numbers (for example, an 's' is conveyed with three clicks on the number '7'). Punctuation marks play an ever-increasing role in written communication, in their traditional role of demarcating meaning, but more and more in the role of carrying affect and short-circuiting meaning-making. Smiley faces are now an integral part of online written language. Icons operate internationally, and the influence of the spatial logic of the 'screen' is replacing the linear and temporal logic of the page. Such changes are hugely important and have led people like Kress (2003) to suggest that the linguistic mode of communication is finally in decline after being dominant for centuries, to be replaced by the visual.

Castells (2000) has claimed that the technological revolution has integrated the "written, oral and audio-visual modalities of human communication into a single system for the first time in human history. The implications of this for literacy education amongst adults are far-reaching, and it may be possible that traditionalist approaches may actually disadvantage adult learners who already have familiarity with some such modalities."

Unresolved Conceptual Issues – Teaching of Literacy

These are some of the conceptual advances that have been made in relation to understandings of the uses of literacy. Each of these understandings has implications for policy and provision of literacy among adults. In addition, there is a proliferation of schools of thought about the teaching of literacy, very few of which are able to take account of the above understandings.

I will generalise some of these implications into four main points. The first and overriding implication is the knowledge that *literacy does not 'come by itself'*; it always carries extrinsic meanings and is vested in a range of discourses and practices surrounding those extrinsic meanings. Even when it is at its most stripped of those extrinsic meanings, what is evident is that it then usually carries meanings that are specific to the educational context or the discourses and practices of schooling. I will return to this point.

Second, the social nature of literacy practices, their embedding in broader social purposes and the role played by apprenticeship and mediation in such practices and purposes, have the effect of "questioning the long-standing and unexamined homology between schooling practices and literacy learning" (Morphet, 1996). *The 'technology' of the school* as it currently stands as 'institution' *cannot provide for adults* to be apprenticed into and participate in textually mediated purposeful processes (other than, obviously, those of schooling itself). Again, I will return to that.

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Third, *adults without schooling are moving targets* when it comes to policy development and provision. Orientations to and take-up of education shift dramatically across life-span, gender, social purposes, access to technology-mediated communication and so on. To assume that the opportunities for learning must be provided simply for their intrinsic value may mean that the targets are simply not there or simply that they are missed. This can lead to wasteful and inappropriate forms of provision.

Finally, *rapid changes 'within the code' are occurring*, perhaps at a faster rate than ever before in history. Literacy theory and practice has traditionally tended to be driven by 'great divide' approaches, which portray the movement from illiteracy to literacy in evolutionary terms. Quite apart from the errors in theory underlying this approach, in practice the timescales are simply wrong! As 'we' try to help people claw their way to literacy, literacy is simply running away from them at a pace. The implication of this is that very creative ways are needed, not for an evolutionary leap forward but for leapfrogging over the outdated conceptions and practices that still dominate in the field.

These are precisely the unresolved conceptual issues that exist despite the advances that have been made. So, even if within EFA there is total agreement about the need to provide literacy and the right to education, there are still no clear answers to the question of how to provide it in effective and efficient ways. This problem is exacerbated when posed against the growing divisions and injustices in the world.

New Orders – World, Work, Words

The work of Castells has recently provided a broad canvas for understanding the scope and impact of contemporary global change, and I will draw closely from his work (2000) in what follows. He claims that the new global economic situation is characterised by three features. First, it is *informational*, in the sense that the capacity of generating knowledge and processing information determine the productivity and competitiveness of many kinds of economic units. Second, it is *global*, in the sense that its core strategic activities have the capacity to work as a unit on a planetary scale in real time or chosen time. Castells claims that globalisation proceeds in a selective way, "by linking up all that has value according to dominant interests anywhere in the planet and discarding anything (people, firms, territories, resources) which has no value or becomes devalued in a variable geometry of creative destruction and destructive creation of value." Third, it is *networked*. The network provides the new form of economic organisation, which is organised on a project basis, whereby networks connect, switching directions to maximise productivity and returns. Labour is

divided into what Castells calls 'self-programmable labour' (which is equipped with the ability to retrain itself and adapt to new tasks processes and sources of information) and 'generic labour' (which is exchangeable and disposable, and can be switched on and off according to location in the network). In the cultural realm, these changes are reflected in a similar pattern of networking, flexibility and ephemeral symbolic communication. Cultural expressions of all kinds are increasingly enclosed in or shaped by the electronic hypertext.

These changes need to be viewed against growing polarisation, and without active policies of intervention and regulation, by the year 2020 "the top fifth of American earners will account for more than 60 per cent of all the income earned by Americans, the bottom fifth for 2 per cent" (Reich, 1992, p. 302). Reich adds that "to improve the economic position of the bottom four-fifths will require that the fortunate fifth share its wealth and invest in the wealth-creating capacities of other Americans. Yet as the top becomes ever more tightly linked to the global economy, it has less stake in the performance and potential of its less fortunate compatriots." Coming from the ex-Secretary for Labour to President Clinton and written in 1992, these are strong words indeed, even stronger if one extrapolates for the global situation. And ever stronger if one takes into account the new world order emerging in the aftermath of September 11. Wrongs and rights take on a different light when seen against this backdrop.

The term the 'new work order' (coined by Gee *et al.*, 1996), derived from close analyses of what have been called 'fast capitalist texts' and qualitative analyses of workplaces, complements Castells' and Reich's (1992) picture. The 'new work order' is characterised by forms of production that are oriented to niche markets through segmented retailing strategies and Total Quality Management. The 'projects' making up these forms of production are undertaken by teams working in flattened hierarchies, where the management of information and symbolic communication are highly valued, and where the generic labour can be shunted in and out to suit the needs of projects. Reich calls the new breakdown of labour [as] the symbolic analysts *versus* the routine production workers.

Lankshear (1998) draws attention to the possibility that the emerging divisions of the network society and the new work order may be reflected in and entrench a new word order. By this, he means a highly stratified population in terms of literacy. In order to accomplish symbolic analytic work, high levels of discursive skills are needed, combined with symbolic manipulation. This is usually taught as 'elite literacies' through high levels of formal education.

A word order in a work order in a world order: the imperative of writing and rights may be more linked than even Freire imagined.

Implications for Literacy Provision

What does this mean for literacy, adult basic education and initiatives like EFA? On the human rights issue, it must be taken for granted that provision is a right. But rights do not exist in a vacuum and there are no clear universals. Adult learners may have the right to *access*, but do they have the right to *success* in terms of learning literacy? Of course we cannot say that, but in the absence of clear guidelines for effective provision, the right to access cannot mean very much. It might simply be the case for keeping second-rate teachers in work, or acting as a sop to distract attention away from the inequalities discussed above, or perhaps for fuelling the growing ranks of aid and development practitioners and bureaucrats who fly around the world.

Brian Street's 2001 edited collection *Literacy and Development* contains two very interesting case studies which together perhaps tell a more positive story about real people, writing and rights. Dyer and Choksi, working with Rabari pastoralists in India, experiment with what may seem, in the new literacy studies perspective, to be an appropriate type of literacy intervention based on an ethnographic analysis – peripatetic provision where increased exposure to and engagement with literacy were linked closely with the cycles and rhythms of migration and animal husbandry. However, this was not satisfying to the nomads who were undergoing 'shattering' changes and threats to their nomadic existence as a result of surrounding programmes of industrialisation and 'modernisation'. The authors address candidly the fact that their intervention was not successful, and that deeper scrutiny of the data and of development theory showed that what the nomads desired and needed was access to economic, cultural and symbolic capital which they saw as being provided by an 'ideology of literacy' (Street, 2001, p. 37), secured and given currency by the institution of schooling. The authors know that this is much easier said than done, and the chapter leaves us presented with this conundrum. From 'our' perspective, the desire for access can seem conservative, even hopeless; but in a context where 'transformation' seems a remote and visionary ideal, the Rabari are trying to gain a foothold in an ever-encroaching 'modernising' world.

On the other hand, Aikman's chapter about the struggles of the Harakmbut peoples in Peruvian Amazonia weaves together very complex theoretical themes about development, in an altogether more hopeful scenario. Aikman shows that the Harakmbut peoples can draw on an indigenous self-development discourse in the context of parallel and sometimes opposing, sometimes complementary, development discourses. Aikman brings to the surface a productive pluralising of literacies, languages and most importantly, *developments*. Within this, the Harakmbut participate in implementing a range of *self-development* projects, which provide spaces and possibilities within which their needs and wishes may be exercised if not always met. The more

successful project was the one in which literacy was not prioritised and certainly not pedagogised, but one that enabled the Harakmbut to acquire a facility with literacy by using it in a meaningful context. Indigenous mediators played an important role in this. The history of collective struggles against conquest, the missionaries and the colonisers, intertwined with the rise of the self-development discourse, had positioned the Harakmbut differently from the Rabaris in India; and perhaps because they were already able to mobilise more resources, they did not feel the need to recapitulate the schooling they had not had access to. In the context where ‘development is a negotiated, socially constructed and never-ending interaction between many social actors’ (Street, 2001, p. 118), it may be more appropriate and more hopeful to consider transformation as too much of a grand narrative, with lesser, multiple ‘transformations’ providing smaller beacons on branching paths.

The reason why these two accounts were so gripping I think was because they both do theoretically what Rogers has been telling the literacy field to do practically for years (see, Rogers, 2000) that is, to put literacy secondary to ‘something else’. The ‘something else’ comes first, whether it is development, income-generation or building. If this is done, coherence is gained with the conceptual advances addressed above – it’s not reading and writing in themselves that count, it’s the meanings that are carried in the flow of text as it creates context that count. In both of the above examples, the authors really did prioritise development above literacy and they were thereby able to cast very different lights on literacy itself. The Rabari, I believe, need to be able to enter a system of adult basic education that will offer them currency, even if it takes years. On the other hand, the Harakmbut already have the discursive and social resources to enable them to search out the integrated, literacy-second approach that will suit their needs.

Four important conclusions emerge from all of the above:

1. Literacy provision needs to be separated conceptually from the provision of adult basic education, and different approaches and methods need to be developed. I will suggest some of these below. Systemic links need to be in place for the two types of learning and provision to articulate if desired.
2. We should stop writing and speaking about access to literacy as a human right and about the consequences of literacy – we don’t know how to do it and we don’t know what it does or doesn’t do. Until we do know, let’s not cheapen our work by making claims for it that can’t be sustained. I will make some further suggestions about this below.

3. Access to an adult basic education system can perhaps be seen as a human right, but this is not necessarily the best vehicle for providing literacy especially in the senses described above.
4. Inputs of financial aid should not be measured against outcomes defined as per capita achievement of literacy. No matter how complex and sophisticated our assessment vehicles may become, per capita achievement will always be an imperfect and incoherent measure of improvement in addressing inequities in literacy rates and provision.

The Way Ahead

In a number of documents and submissions in South Africa, I have argued for a three-pronged approach to policy and provision in literacy and adult basic education. I believe that this approach has validity in a wider range of contexts and is relevant to the arguments being made in this issue of *Convergence* concerning adults and EFA.

The first strategy involves *diversifying strategies* for informal promotion and for supporting, scaffolding and sustaining literacy learning within existing contexts of use, in the informal economy, development projects and civil society. This would involve de-linking literacy promotion from the formal system, and setting up explorations into ways in which apprenticeship and mediation processes could be lodged within either local grassroots structures or organisational processes: structures like libraries, advice offices and resource centres, and workplace resource centres, the staff of which could both mediate literacy demands and facilitate diverse strategies for promoting literacy; and organisational processes like development activities (for example, income-generation, building, health care and early childhood development). Articulation could occur between these opportunities and the formal system if necessary. Development workers, project field staff and community organisers can add an awareness of the literacy dimension to their work, mediating, translating (in the widest sense of discursive translation as well as narrower code or mode translation) and scaffolding literacy acquisition in contexts of use and purpose, as was indicated by the example of the Harakmbut people discussed earlier.

The second involves *strengthening the formal system*. This would involve growing the system slowly, resourcing it well, and producing strong administrators, researchers and above all, well-trained teachers, while at the same time recognising that it would not provide quick fixes for the 'literacy problem' and that there are no short-term gains in this. Strong systems can act as anchors for innovation and research into ways of dealing better with the first strategy above, as well as for more formal accredited types of provision and the

articulation between them. Furthermore, there is no alternative to higher education in order for literacy teachers to achieve the kinds of goals necessary if success in adult literacy work is to be claimed.

Finally, literacy is like holding up a mirror to ourselves. Sometimes those of us who have had our rights guaranteed and our literacies developed to high level symbolic analysis can only see it darkly. If we illuminate it clearly, we will need to ask ourselves about whether in our own work we are writing rights or wrongs, and hopefully we will avoid what can only be seen as downright untruth or staggering disingenuity, like 'literacy is the key to health, wealth and happiness.'

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