

Literacy as practices, teaching as alignment: A message in a bottle

by Richard Darville

■ I've been in and around literacy work for nearly 30 years. That has included advocacy and research, but the centre has been in teaching. I taught literacy in a community college for seven or eight years, and briefly in a federal prison. All that time I was learning—even doing research in practice, although the term hadn't yet been invented. Teaching for nearly 20 years in university, I have tried to help students get a feeling for literacy work's artfulness. I've ended up with a way of looking at both the detail and the big picture of literacy as well as some slogans for holding onto this way of looking. Now not far from retirement, I am (like Battell et al. 2004) moved to jot down a message on my way out (as much message as 3000 words can carry) and stuff it into a bottle, for those who will continue on.

There's a lot to be said for noticing and reflecting on what's happening in front of your nose—unfolding experiences of teaching/learning work, and placing them within an understanding of literacy as a whole. Many literacy workers thus learn from the work itself, and make accounts of how it is actually done. A certain kind of theory can strengthen careful observation—theory that tells how to look from inside literacy work, rather than trying to explain from outside. I have found this kind of theory in Freire (e.g., 1985), whom I read with other teachers (and as I've written this I've been surprised at how often he appears); in the sociology called institutional ethnography (Smith 2005) from which I learned to think about our text-saturated society; and later, very helpfully, in the social practice conception of literacy (e.g., Barton and Hamilton 1998). These and other resources are scattered throughout this essay.

Freire writes about learning literacy as a difficult apprenticeship in naming the world. My own difficult apprenticeship in learning literacy work began with a journey often undergone (but rarely written about). I nervously began teaching with conventional ideas about literacy as skills and rules, and spent many late-night hours boning up on phonics and spelling patterns, and trying to understand grammar. Although I had read somewhere that literacy was power, my behaviour

was shaped by the standard ideology of teaching as stuffing the rules into individuals' heads.

But I also kept paying attention to what learners were doing and where their difficulties were. And I was blessed with comrades-in-teaching to work and talk and cry and argue with. With them I learned to appreciate Freire's wisdom that some teachers see themselves as having gifts to bestow on those below them, while others aspire to dialogue with students about the world we all live in and what we are doing. All this made it possible to begin to see that although individuals do have abilities, or have them to learn, it's not necessary to see abilities preserved in the bell jar of test results or skills hierarchies. They can be seen in the oxygen of their actual use, as parts of people's lives, parts of larger activity that is worth doing, or that has to be done. A slogan: literacy learning involves both "how you do it" and "what you're getting into."

This is exactly the shift of attention made by a "social practices conception" of literacies. This conception directs attention to people's literacy practices—to whatever they do as they use or orient to texts. Practices are not latent capacities somehow "in the mind." Rather they always happen in "literacy events," those moments when texts are oriented to. Looking at literacy-as-practices fits with, and is powerfully constructive for, literacy work. To see just how, it helps to turn the kaleidoscope to see how practices of literacy and their teaching and learning appear differently from this angle and that. Here are a few of those angles.

Teaching is aligning

Once literacy workers outgrow the stuff-skills-in-heads model, they often come to see that what they must pay attention to is very broad—including poverty, violence and oppression, that don't at first glance involve reading and writing. But literacy workers also come to recognize that the way to get to abilities of reading and writing is to keep in view the sense that they make in people's lives—my focus here.

When teaching begins with the sense that literacy makes for the learner, the teacher seeks to align with

learners' practices, as they learn "how to do it" and work out "what they're getting into." Sometimes aligning means, as Freire put it, giving testimony: embodying, for learners to witness, what it is (at least one way it is) to be one who reads, gives voice to a text, is informed or moved by it, questions and criticizes. But most often a teacher aligns with learners, works with literacy as social, by reading the same text simultaneously, recognizing what learners are doing and devising ways to support, direct, challenge, or confront it.

Literacy is social all the way down

It's not that there's skill (a merely cognitive process), and then a social context. Literacy is social all the way down. It is social to shape the letter "a" and associate it with certain sounds. It works for a learner because and in the same way that it works for you and me. We all learn "the mechanics" by participating in them with others. Psychological functions like reading—as Vygotsky (1978; 1986; cf. Ramirez 1994) very helpfully shows—exist first between people. They are co-conducted before they exist within individuals. Another slogan: People take in what they take part in.

In observing closely just how reading works "between people," there's a lot of pay-off—since the more clearly you see how it works, the better you can do it. At one level, as you read alongside a learner struggling at the how-you-do-it level, you observe how she or he tries to sound out words or piece together sentences. If you think that her trouble with a long word is that her eyes don't know how to focus sequentially on its parts, you guide her eyes and attention with your words (asking what the first letters and sounds are), and with your hands (using your index fingers to frame the first syllable, then the second).

At another level, part of being able to read is knowing that you can read. People often learn that they can read by being with others who treat what they're doing as reading. I eventually was struck by this small epiphany thanks to learners who, although they appeared to be reading well, said, "I can't read," or, "I can never remember what I read." I came to see that not as a memory problem, or a mistaken conception that reading is memorizing, but simply as people missing the confirmation that what they do counts as really reading.

Savvy teachers align with learners at many levels. "Comprehension questions," whether written on an

exercise sheet or asked in discussion, can go beyond evaluating understanding, to guide attention to aspects of a text that might not yet be clear. Selecting reading materials and writing activities can itself be alignment, as from diffuse dialogue with people, and experimenting with texts and tasks, you (and they) find what will resonate with their energy for learning.

Literacy doesn't end in a single event

Literacy is not just scribal activities, and is not limited to what goes on in any one place and time. Reading and writing are hooked into social action and relations. As one reads or writes, one engages *through texts* with communication or organization. What inspires people to learn is their desire to be able to take part in something. Both the being able and the taking part are crucial. And of course certain kinds of literacy development hinge on more encompassing social, political, cultural, economic development. If people aren't plausibly engaged in social relations that include opportunities or demands for literacy, then they won't see, or there won't be, any point in their learning.

Learning practices of reading and writing doesn't just hook us together with others. It changes how we relate to our own capacities and how we want to be known—our "identities." It changes our relations to the whole realm of communication and action that literacy enables and coordinates. Freire called this transformation, this change of stance, the "adult literacy process." I saw learners become different people as they became more literate. In passing classroom moments, they tried what they would once have shied away from. As they got new words from texts out of their mouths, they seemed to pull new confidence in. They junked self-limiting ideas (all the "I don't think I can") associated with being school failures, or immigrants, or "just" whatever. So they could claim literacy for their own.

Reading is not reading is not reading

Working in alignment with learners led me to realize, in ways I hadn't expected, that reading is not reading—at least being good at one form of reading doesn't necessarily make you good at another. One of my early stupid mistakes in teaching perhaps primed me to see this. I had brought into class for reading a pamphlet of the sort then distributed by the Royal Bank; I forget the topic, but it must have related to

something that came up in class. The discussion was painfully sticky, until one woman savingly spoke up and said, "This isn't written for people like us." I was prodded then—and I've been grateful ever since—to think about what it means for texts to be "for" people, or for some and not for others.

As I taught, I saw learners sometimes give fluent readings and engage in insightful discussion, but at other times stumble and clearly not understand. They became inexplicably not-very-literate. After some initial bewilderment, I noticed a pattern (Darville 1995). A text more easily mastered might be a personal or fictional story. A more forbidding text might be health advice that didn't simply say what happens in one's own body, but starts out with some explanation of human biology. Or it might be an ordinary news item reporting that decisions in New York meant job losses in British Columbia, an account that just assumed an understanding of how corporate power is exercised.

People had trouble not with the words and sentences as such, but with genres of texts, that is, with (more or less) recurrent practices with vocabulary, syntax and text organization that serve recurrent practices of communication and action (e.g. Freedman and Medway 1994). What made some texts accessible and others hard was the "what you're getting into," the different social organizations of which they were part.

As I've come to put it, "experience-telling" texts were more accessible than "institutional" ones. In "experience-telling" forms, descriptions or accounts aim to tell lived experience. In "institutional" forms, descriptions or accounts are framed in institutional terms. They are lodged in a vantage point outside of what people do and aimed to explain or regulate it.

Experience-telling

Experience-telling often takes the form that William Labov calls "primary narrative," a first-person account of experience lived through. Its core is a sequence of clauses that matches—is anchored in—the sequence of events that those clauses report. Stories allow the exchange of knowledge and wisdom about how lives go and how to live them (and may of course also impart lessons, solicit advice, aggrandize reputations, etc.). Recipes and simple instructions similarly lay out actions in sequence. People know experience-telling genres from taking part in everyday action and interaction. So they are readily accessible to learners.

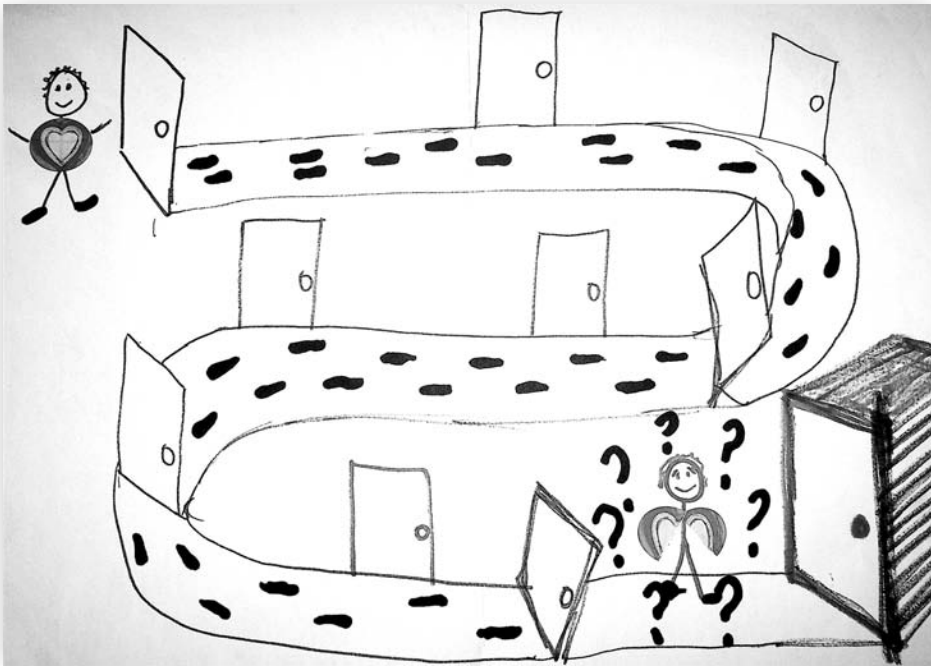
Of course experience-telling is used in the "language experience approach," which makes learners' own stories teaching materials. Since the content is already known, and with a genre familiar from spoken language, people can read in a way they already well know how to listen. They can treat written words as having an already familiar relation to experience and action. So a novice can devote all of her or his conscious attention to the techniques of reading, from decoding to untangling the threads of sentences and paragraphs. Even stories of others' experience, still anchored in everyday events as people live through them, are already familiar in form, and the compelling content in a "good story" makes people want to break through limitations of technique. Experience-telling can also claim a certain kind of power, as people assert their own "voices." Even more: by objectifying experience, "getting it down on paper," experience-telling enables distance and reflection—and can hasten the adult literacy process. (I saw this often as learners read, talked and wrote about harsh school experiences—and those who had doubted, slighted, or just not helped them as children. Naming those experiences, gaining reflective distance from them, broke their power over the learners).

Institutional genres

Institutional genres are very differently accessible and useful. They are concerned not with telling what people experience, but with explaining or regulating it, from a standpoint "outside" what is immediately known—in law, bureaucracy, medicine, or even media.

There are two closely related troubles with institutional texts. First, they are often put together so that their sense is impenetrable for novice readers. All texts assume particular "background knowledge." All aim at some "implied reader." Texts effectively exclude learners when they take someone very different as their implied reader, or simply assume knowledge that a learner doesn't have. These are roadblocks to "becoming literate" that cannot be overcome even by reading more closely, or between the lines. (Indeed there's almost a convention in which the implied reader of many texts about the law, health, even "the news," is someone already privy to professional or institutional knowledge. That convention is of course a target of the clear writing movement.)

The other trouble with institutional texts relates to their power. Through these literacies, people—learners, literacy workers, or whoever—are articulated



SALLY GAIKZHEYONGAI

Sally Gaikzheyongai drew this graphic as part of the Beyond Active Listening project. The final report is available at www.literaciesoise.ca/story.htm.

of “writing for” learners, one new kind of genre.

I came to see that if people didn’t know their way around inside the institutional arrangements from which difficult texts arose, then a new kind of text could walk them through. A form of composition—building on learners’ strengths, starting with familiar experience-telling and moving into unfamiliar institutional genres—could help people expand their repertoire of literacy practices. For example, one little book I wrote for literacy learners about contract law (Darville 1992) mixed genres in this way. It started in narratives

to dominant, governing processes. The connection they provide is to the realm of power, to authoritative versions of how things are and how things must be done. Through various bureaucratic forms and procedures, people get benefits and protections, but may also be negatively labelled, e.g. in schooling or social welfare. People get the “news” about society and government through various media, but sometimes in ways that clash with what they already know, or want to know. Job applications, “essential skills” lists, organization charts and so on, regulate work; people want these genres, to have work and do it well, and yet these genres can also embody economic inequities.

Institutional genres can be daunting, for anybody, to the extent that the action of which they are part is fraught with threatening relations of power. They are often intimidating. People may not want to take the standpoint they adopt or serve the purposes they carry. And even when they do, these genres are complex to navigate—not only to get what the texts are saying, but also how to use them, even how to talk back.

What to do about institutional genres

In my own nascent research in practice, part of recognizing the rupture between experience-telling and institutional literacies was seeing something that could be done about it: one way

of ordinary events—finding a lost ring in the street, taking a broken-down truck to a mechanic, starting a job where the boss demanded split shifts. These became legal problems. The narratives’ protagonists then went through questioning, being confused, finding resources, and working together to understand the law. They came to understand how events are constructed from a legal vantage point, and also to assess whether that matches up with their own purposes. So this research in practice invented a genre for writing about the law whose implied reader had a vantage point not inside the legal system, but inside ordinary life.

What it means to “align” with learners facing institutional literacies is complex. That is, the “power of literacy” is complex. Dominant institutions are the creators of many genres of literacy, of “literacy demands.” Institutions use literacy to organize people’s work and people’s ideas for the institutions’ purposes. Yet people beginning to be literate—expressing voice and starting to operate agendas, minutes, posters and other levers of organization, becoming able to see how they can not just fit under but actually make use of institutional literacies—are claiming powers of literacy. But still, people may be baffled by words on the page because they don’t glean the action that those words are part of. And the development of powers that people claim depends upon forms of popular mobilization that

can pick them up and carry them further. So the realities of literacy work call on us, as Freire again said, to be patiently impatient.

As for learners, of course also for us. We claim powers of literacy when we write descriptions and analyses based on our own observation (perhaps drawing in useful theory). But our accounts now seem at risk. There is now a proliferation of devices for organizing and regulating literacy work, imposed from afar—forms of testing and accountability that usually narrow down the understanding of literacy to a set of skills. These betray a lack of trust in people's sense-making about their own lives, as a basis for literacy learning, and a lack of trust in literacy workers who after all must figure out for themselves how to do it. Those regulatory accounts are inevitable. But there must also be accounts-for-us.

Afterword

This is just one testimony about literacy work. Many of us talk, one way or another, about making classrooms and people's lives permeable to one another: a two-way traffic in practices. That's not gift-giving. It's standing beside, reading and writing

beside, sometimes as support, sometimes demonstration, sometimes challenge, sometimes learning-together. The more obvious part involves how you do various practices of reading and writing and otherwise using texts—all of those as social conventions that we all depend upon together. The more complex, and sometimes unnoticed, part, involves standing beside people as they face what they're getting into through literacy—even as at the same time we, as teachers, are part of what they're getting into. Teaching work can involve making a particular sort of discrimination. Sometimes it's savvy to work with people's stories, as a basis for working on techniques and as a claiming and clarifying of voice. At other times, the work to be done concerns institutional genres, carrying processes of power that sometimes we can hitch onto and use, but that always also work to capture us for their purposes. Getting better at literacy work is getting better at working in all these practices and relations. It is also inventing new genres of literacy, genres that support people's learning of literacy and their claims on it. This little essay is of the same stuff. I hope it somehow converses with your discoveries of literacy work. ■



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