

Neoliberalism and literacy: A personal reflection

by Maria Moriarty

■ I think I first heard the term “neoliberalism” in a talk by Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians about the commodification of water, in which she described a possible “neoliberal” world in which everything would be owned by someone. At the time, I saw the issue as related only to globalization, international finance and transnational corporations. I did not think about the ideology behind the drive toward the commodification of natural resources. However, a seed was planted and I began to notice that activities of world stock markets had become daily news. Over a relatively short time, we all became “taxpayers” rather than “citizens.” The language of the market was becoming ordinary, normal and natural.

I began to wonder about the connections between neoliberal economic theories and the language of government and policy-makers about literacy learning. Why is it that adult literacy only ever makes it into the media when organizations and corporations such as the Conference Board of Canada or the TD Bank raise the issue, or when international statistical studies tell us there’s a problem? Then I wondered why it was necessary, and apparently so easy, to abolish the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS)—with little or no protest. Why did at least some of the functions of the NLS pass to the newly named Office of Literacy and Essential Skills? Why did adult literacy in Ontario become more or less subsumed under Employment Ontario (Crooks et al.)?

This essay is a record of some personal observations and reflections on how what may appear to be an arcane economic-political theory has apparently had such an effect in shaping the public discourse about adult literacy in Canada and in binding the purposes of adult literacy learning to employment.

What is neoliberalism anyway?

In a nutshell, neoliberalism is a set of economic theories propounded by international institutions

such as the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank where “*the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical belief*” (Treanor).

According to neoliberal theory, the operations of the market should not be impeded by too much regulation, and government should more or less restrict itself to the development of policy (in support of the market) and the protection of private property rather than the delivery of goods and services. In essence, the “*economic interests of individuals should not be fettered by considerations of social equity*” (Ungerleider).

I have always insisted that literacy, thought of in terms of reading words, must necessarily be preceded by the reading or “deciphering” of the world around us. Learning to read and write is tantamount to “re-reading” the world of our experience (Paulo Freire, interview with Marcio D’Olne Campos).

What does it have to do with literacy?

It seems to me that neoliberal ideas and the policies that flow from them are having a profound effect on our language and ultimately on our thinking and understanding of adult literacy and literacy work.

The language of neoliberalism is the language of the market—it is language that reflects the values of the market, of trade and commerce. As one critical commentator describes it, the language of neoliberalism is “*a language stripped of nuances*” (Freire) that does not leave room to describe or discuss the complexities of adult literacy teaching and learning. Terms like customer service, client satisfaction, value added, cost/benefit, marketable skills, accountability, deliverables and measurable are now commonly used in the adult literacy field, and remain largely unexamined. To an astonishing degree we have absorbed this language: we have adapted to the language of the market and often use it as a kind of shorthand.

From the ideological perspective of neoliberalism, education serves as a means to train people to work within, and to accept, a globalized economic order. This seems to me to be what Paulo Freire describes

as “the transference of knowledge for industrial productivity” (Freire p. 77). Learning and literacy are essentially in the service of the market and their primary and “legitimate” purpose is to develop the skills deemed necessary in the labour market rather than for learning or self-development, or the development and encouragement of any critical examination of the social and economic order.

Although the word “partnership” is often used to describe the relationship between funders and agencies, in fact those relationships are actually hierarchical, based on the contractual obligations that agencies must undertake in order to receive funding. These contractual obligations involve “*information systems; an emphasis upon contracts and markets; performance measurement, and an increased emphasis on audit and inspection*” (Evans). The funder is in charge, dispensing funding based not on a right or a sense of obligation to fund programming but on the “business model” understanding of contract and obligation.

An “advocacy chill” has set in and agencies receiving government funding are discouraged from advocating or are specifically not permitted to advocate on behalf of their clients or the needs of their agency or sector (Scott). In this sense, adult literacy is viewed as a “special interest” and not as a right of citizens that is the responsibility of government to promote, support and fund.

The language of neoliberalism

Oppressive state language—that is, currently, the language of neoliberal government—is more violent than its bland, rather absurd surface might lead us to believe. It is at work here, busily containing what we can do, what we can understand. It is the language in which the auditor is king. It is a language that destroys social responsibility and critique that invites a mindless, consumer-oriented individualism to flourish and kills off conscience (Davies).

It all seems so sensible. Why would we **not** be concerned with skill development, why would we not be concerned about how money is spent and what the results are? But in actual fact what has happened quietly and inexorably is that the values some of us espouse, the values of social justice and critical pedagogy, have been overwritten, written out by the values of the market. Literacy as learning is

decontextualized, marginalized as “romantic,” an impossible dream. Literacy learning is reduced to preparation for work.

It is now quite acceptable to calculate the potential return on investment in literacy. The literacy field has to show **quantitatively** that what we’re doing is worth the price. It appears that no matter how eloquent we are or how compelling our accounts of literacy practice and literacy learning—it literally doesn’t count.

Literacy and employment

Literacy problems are seen to be produced/caused by particular economic conditions as dominant groups effectively shift the responsibility for these conditions onto those who lack skills, and in particular, literacy skills (Black).

Within the neoliberal discourse, literacy is narrowly defined in relation to skills for employment. Within this discourse, “employability” is a moral duty. Each individual should focus primarily on entry to and usefulness and success within the labour market (Treanor p. 10). Literacy and learning are to be undertaken in pursuit of the development of skills that are considered of value within the labour market and to prepare the student to become a compliant, flexible and grateful worker and consumer. Literacy skills are promoted as technical skills that will lead to productive employment and will contribute to the economy (Black p. 3).

This is particularly true in Ontario where adult literacy programming is now funded through Employment Ontario and the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills and there is an ever-increasing

Common-sense untruths

Most people... are unaware that their beliefs, and especially those involving literacy, form part of a discourse which has ideological and therefore political implications. This is largely because... these beliefs have become “naturalized”; they are taken for granted, common-sense understandings which have become accepted by most people as apolitical “truths.” The more dominant and popular the beliefs, the more natural and commonsensical they appear, which of course is the situation with the relationship between literacy skills and economic wellbeing (Black p. 5).



emphasis on literacy as a means of entry to and success in the labour market.

The connection between adult literacy and employment has been forged through successive studies, reports, pronouncements and statistics from employer groups and government. Business leaders, through The Conference Board of Canada, have consistently made the “business case” for literacy in the interests of the economy. The TD Bank has raised the alarm about the negative impact of low literacy on the economy in its study *Literacy Matters*: “*This is unacceptable given the evolving structure of the global economy. At risk are billions of dollars in lost productivity, investment and economic opportunity.*”

This one-dimensional, functional approach to literacy has not been seriously examined or contested within the adult literacy community, although, clearly, how literacy is perceived, funded, provided and valued is deeply affected. Ultimately, under such a scheme, adult literacy becomes a form of training, in which technique is privileged over content and it becomes easier to develop short-term, time-limited programs with specific employment-related intent—that will, of necessity, exclude many people and will result in a validation of the “train the best and ignore the rest” policy.

A more multi-dimensional view of literacy in which learning is viewed as encompassing aspects of self-discovery and self-development, and in which there is room and encouragement for reflection and examination of the broader social, personal and economic contexts in which the learner locates herself, is not considered.

Accountability and counting

How we do our work is as, if not more, important than what we deliver
(Evans, Richmond and Shields p. 85).

Within the governance structure that arises out of neoliberal theories about the superiority of the market as the arbiter of all human activity, the increased emphasis on audit and inspection has resulted in an astonishing increase in the “accountability” requirements of funders.

Over the past several years, I think it is safe to say that any of us in the literacy field who have received any funding from government, or indeed from private foundations, have noted the ever more stringent reporting and accountability requirements.

In 2003, the Canadian Council on Social

Development released the Funding Matters report detailing the changes in funding models and reporting requirements and the effect on the nonprofit sector in Canada. Funders were less and less willing to fund administrative costs (which may include rent, supplies and employee benefits) and funding provided was for shorter and shorter periods and was becoming less predictable. But in adult literacy we know all this. We've been living with it for years; it has become our new normal.

The impact of increasing accountability demands on adult literacy programs and practitioners is clear and unambiguous in the just-released Field Review as part of the Connecting the Dots: Accountability and Adult Literacy Project (Crooks et al).

Here's how one literacy worker eloquently describes the impact of accountability requirements in her program:

I would suggest that by the time we collect data, record data and report data, respond to the latest ministry initiative through various sources, we have spent at least 15 hours a week out of a 35-hour week (42 per cent). And we do not have a large number of students or a lot of money! This does not include the hours spent researching other funding sources and submitting applications to them or reporting to them if we already have their money. That entails another 40 per cent of the co-ordinator's time. I don't know how programs with a staff of one have any time for learners.

Conclusion

The recent collapse of financial markets, the credit crisis in the US and the need for the national governments of many countries to step in to "rescue" financial services companies, banks and corporations does call neoliberal economic policy into question. This fiasco may also somewhat undermine the neoliberal argument for the withdrawal of the state from the public sphere, the ethos of small government and the heavy emphasis on individual responsibility. But these ideas have become deeply embedded in our thinking about the role of government and the public sector and we may well inherit some of the ideological debris of neoliberalism.

The language, ideas and policies that focus on literacy for employment and on rigid accountability

and reporting requirements may be here to stay for a while. The reductionist idea that learning is skill development, and that the idea of education as a vehicle for critical thinking is a luxury that we cannot afford, the idea that only what can be counted counts and that targets and continuous improvement systems based on quantitative measures and metrics are the necessary and superior methods to demonstrate success and achievement may be part of the learning landscape for the foreseeable future.

But maybe, just maybe, in this particular moment, when neoliberal ideology may be under fire, we can begin to contest these ideas and the policies that flow from them. Maybe now is the moment to re-engage politically, to work collaboratively with adult literacy students so that their knowledge, experience and voices are heard and listened to. Maybe now we can connect with allies, such as social and labour activists and academics, to move away from persuasion about the "goodness" of what we do to a systematic critique of ideologically driven public policy that reduces us all to cogs in the wheel of the market, and to encourage ourselves and each other to continue to read the world. ■

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