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Literacy for Life

Understanding and defining literacy

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'Understanding and Defining Literacy': Scoping paper for EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006

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Terms of reference

The terms of reference for this paper start from international debate concerning the meanings of literacy, 'a subject that informs educational, human rights and development discourse'. The paper is required to 'map the main strands of this debate and identify sensible lines of enquiry for the 2006 GMR'. In doing so, it should take account of other scoping papers under the headings: 'Measuring and monitoring literacy'; 'Strategies and policies for literacy'; 'Literacy and human development'; and 'Pedagogical approaches to literacy 'effective literacy learning and programme designs'. The point of starting this process with a consideration of the 'meanings of literacy' is that the discussion should not be pre-empted by policy considerations but rather that policy debates should be grounded in rigorous intellectual definitions and knowledge of what constitutes the field of enquiry.

This scoping paper, therefore, lays out the major intellectual currents that have directed literacy debate, outlining the different disciplinary traditions that inform them and detailing the significant changes that they have undergone in recent years. What counts as 'literacy' – or as 'literacies' as some traditions would have it – underpins all of the other considerations outlined for the GMR – how to measure 'it', what policies to adopt, what significance, if any, 'it' has for 'human development' and how to teach 'it'. Those intellectual currents also lie beneath the surface of the better known themes and labels under which literacy debate in international circles has been conducted – 'functional' literacy (cf Verhoeven & Snow, 2001, Verhoeven, 1994) 'critical' literacy (Muspratt et.al, 1997) and 'Freirean' approaches (Freire and Macedo 1987; Freire, 1985); and more recently 'community literacies' (Chitrakar et.al., 2002) etc. Again this paper does not focus on those traditions in themselves but rather attempts to elicit and outline the deeper currents of thought that inform them. The aim of such a scoping paper is neither to arrive at a synthesis of views on the meanings of literacy nor to recommend a particular view, but rather to expose

policy makers and those concerned with particular sub areas of the field to the main strands of debate in the field, in order to put them into perspective and to facilitate the identification of 'sensible lines of enquiry'.

'Meanings of Literacy' in Different Traditions

The meaning of 'literacy' as an object of enquiry and of action – whether for research purposes or in practical programmes – is highly contested and we cannot understand the term and its uses unless we penetrate these contested spaces. I will suggest four major traditions or areas of enquiry that, despite inevitable overlaps, provide a heuristic by which we can begin to understand different approaches and their consequences. These four I term: Literacy and Learning; Cognitive Approaches to Literacy; Social Practice Approaches; Literacy as Text.

Whilst attention to reading has traditionally been seen as the main thrust of literacy work, and attention to cognition has driven many academic and policy claims for the 'consequences' of literacy, recent social and sociocultural approaches and adult learning theories as well as the impact of multimodal studies and discourse analysis have broadened what counts as literacy and challenged claims for its consequences. The authors cited here represent a variety of responses to these changes: some, like Adams (1993) and Snow, (1998) privilege a more decontextualised account of the learning process; others like Cole and Scribner (1978) attempt to link cognitive processes with social practices; others are moving to locate the teaching of literacy within broader social and political contexts and to be more sensitive to the variety of backgrounds and language styles that learners bring with them, rather than imposing a single standard on all (Street & Street, 1991; Rogers, 1992); and others locate literacy within other semiotic means of communication, such as visual and gestural 'modes', thereby focussing on 'multi modality' or on 'multi literacies' rather than on just 'literacy' which they see as less central to the communicative needs of a globalising world (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Cope and Kalanztis, 2000). All of these authors, some more explicitly than

others, address contested issues of power and social hierarchy as they affect both definitions and their outcomes for practice..

Following these four sections, detailing different approaches to literacy, I then provide a brief final section entitled 'Literacy and Development' that considers how applied literacy work in international contexts and the particular policy and practice adopted can be seen to be rooted in any or a mix of the four perspectives. I justify such an explicit, 'academic' rendering of the underlying assumptions on which literacy work is based on the grounds that if, as policy makers and practitioners, we fail to take account of such perspectives and their implications, we might be putting our energies into unproductive directions and could be seen as acting without control and knowledge of the field in which we are engaged – an outcome that would be ironical since that is the reason why many claim to be bringing literacy to the 'unenlightened' in the first place! If we want literacy learners to acquire literacy because it will help them to become more critical, self aware and in control of their destinies, then we need to apply the same arguments to ourselves as we struggle with alternative approaches to literacy work itself.

Literacy and Learning

For many, use of the term 'literacy' evokes the question of how children learn to read and this, then, is what the concept has been taken to mean . As we shall see, a similar metonymy is evident in adult literacy circles, where reference to an interest in 'literacy' is taken to be an interest in how to overcome 'illiteracy' by teaching adults how to *read* (even though for many a major motivation in entering literacy programmes is to learn how to write). For purposes of the present paper, it is important to note here that some of these assumptions may underlie the topics chosen for the GMR and the way these topics are expressed. Once we have looked more closely at other questions and other traditions of enquiry it will become evident how this focus on 'literacy as reading' marginalises many other meanings of the term.

The issue of how children learn to read has been highly contested in recent years and those debates have implications for how adult literacy is conceived. The distinction between a focus on 'phonic' principles on the one hand (Adams, 1993) and on 'reading for meaning' on the other (Goodman, 1996) has led to what is sometimes termed the 'reading wars'. More recently, researchers have argued for a 'balanced' approach that is less divisive and that recognises the strengths of each perspective (Snow, 1988). In many circles, still, the term 'literacy' is interpreted to refer to 'reading' and more particularly to the learning of reading by young children. Adams (1993), for instance, herself a key figure in US National Commissions on literacy, begins an overview of the literature on 'Literacy' with the claim:

> The most fundamental and important issues in the field of reading education are those of how children learn to read and write and how best to help them.

The piece from which this comes was included in a book entitled <u>Teaching Literacy Balancing Perspectives</u> and offers an introduction to some of the key terms in the field of reading eg 'phonics', 'whole language', phonemic awareness' etc. It also makes claims about what 'scientific' research now tells us about learning to read. There is now a requirement in some countries for 'scientific-based' approaches that can provide sound evidence of which methods and approach is superior and that can claim to 'soundly refute' some hypotheses in favour of others (Slavin, 2002). Adams' response to these requirements, based on a year reviewing the literature on the 'reading wars' and looking for alternatives, is that there has been a coming together of different disciplinary strands, that different perspectives are beginning to agree on what counts: the whole language view of learners engaging in a 'guessing game' (Goodman (1967) or that the spellings of words are minimally relevant to reading (Smith, 1971) have been rejected in favour of attention to 'phonics'. The key to improvement in literacy, especially amongst the 'economically disadvantaged', is 'phonic instruction … word recognition, spelling, and vocabulary'.

If one were only to read such accounts, then the picture would seem clear enough and the task of increasing literacy – not only within the USA as in this

case, but across the world, for adults as well as children, as is the concern of EFA – would be simply a matter of putting these principles into practice. However, once you read other authors, then other views of what counts as literacy begin to emerge – and these authors speak with as much authority, for instance about 'what research tells us', as does Adams. Ken Goodman, for instance, who is largely seen as the leading international figure in 'whole language' approaches, refers like Adams, to 'what we have learned' and to 'scientific knowledge' – but in this case that requires a different 'knowledge', namely 'of language development, of learning theories, and of teaching and curriculum' (Goodman, 1996), not just of 'spelling-sound relations'. For him learning literacy is a more 'natural' process than described in the phonics approach and he likens it to the way in which humans learn language: 'Written language is learned a little later in the life of individuals and societies, but it is no less natural than oral language in the personal and social development of human beings' (Goodman, 1996).

Whether language and by analogy literacy, are 'taught' or 'learned naturally' represent extreme poles of what, for most educators is a 'continuum': as Goodman states 'while I separate *learning* reading and writing from *teaching* reading and writing, I can't do so absolutely'. What is evident from these accounts, then, is that underpinning approaches to literacy are theories of learning. These too need to be taken into account in both defining literacy and in developing policies for the spread of literacy, especially with respect to adults.

Learning

Like theories of literacy, theories of learning have themselves been opened up more broadly in recent academic debate. Social psychologists and anthropologists such as Rogoff, Lave and Wenger (cf Rogoff and Lave,1984); Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 2003; Lave and Wenger 1991) have invoked terms such as 'collaborative learning', 'distributed learning' and 'communities of practice' to shift the focus away from the individual mind and towards more social practices. To cite just one example, Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues, in their

discussions of informal learning, have distinguished between 'the structure of *intent participation* in shared endeavors' and '*assembly-line preparation* based on transmission of information from experts, outside the context of productive activity':

> 'Intent participation involves keen observation of ongoing community events with the anticipation of growing participation in the activity at hand' (Rogoff, B.,et. al., 2003)

Intent participation involves a collaborative, horizontal structure varying in roles, with fluid responsibilities, whereas assembly-line preparation employs a hierarchical structure with fixed roles. In intent participation, experienced people facilitate learners' roles and often participate alongside them; in assembly-line preparation, experienced people are managers, dividing the task often without participating. The learners' roles correspond to taking initiative to learn and contribute versus receiving information. Along with these interrelated facets of the two processes are differences in motivation and purposes, in sources of learning (e.g., observant participation or lessons out of the context of productive, purposeful participation), in forms of communication, and in forms of assessment (to aid or test learning).

This account links closely to Rogers' work in adult education. Drawing upon Krashen's classic distinction with respect to language learning between 'acquisition' and 'learning', Rogers refers to 'task-conscious' learning and 'learning-conscious learning'. For Rogers, these forms of learning are to be distinguished by their methods of evaluation (task-conscious by the task fulfilment, learning-conscious by measurements of learning). Whilst this may at times appear to differentiate adults strongly from children, Rogers and others argue that both children and adults do both – that in fact they form a continuum rather than two categories.   Whilst adults do much less of formal learning than children, the difference, he suggests, really lies in the *teaching* of adults (i.e. the formal learning) and in the power relationships, the identities built up through experience, and the experiences adults bring to their formal learning. Much of learning theory in the discipline of psychology has failed to address these features, so that aspects of the more traditional literacy learning of children (including 'assembly-line preparation' and 'test learning') are used for adults, as

evident in many adult literacy programmes; adults are encouraged to join younger age groups, to take tests, to decontextualise learning and ignore their own previous knowledge; etc.

These debates, like those specifically addressed to literacy learning and to reading, have radical implications for how adult literacy programmes might be designed and run. Whilst many adult literacy programmes have built upon the theories of learning that underpin more traditional schooled literacy work, such as those cited here from Adams and others, recent accounts suggest that literacy programmes may do better to focus on the ways of learning evident in everyday life rather than borrowing the formal learning methods of school. That would have major implications for programmes, leading to different emphasis, for instance, with respect to use of curricula and text books and/or the use of 'Real Literacy Materials' and with respect to assessment as formative and/or summative (cf Black and Wiliam, 2000).

Cognitive Approaches to Literacy:

Many of these theories of literacy and of learning have rested on deeper assumptions about cognition and in particular regarding the 'cognitive consequences' of learning/ acquiring literacy. A dominant position, until recently, was to apply the idea of a 'great divide' - originally used to distinguish 'primitive/ modern' or 'underdeveloped/ developed' - to 'literates' and 'non-literates', a distinction that implicitly or explicitly still underpins much work in and justifications for international literacy programmes. Anthropologists, such as Goody (1977) and psychologists such as Olson (1977; 1994) have linked the more precise cognitive argument to broader historical and cultural patterns, regarding the significance of the acquisition of literacy for a society's functioning. These claims often remain part of popular assumptions about literacy and have fed policy debates and media representations of the significance of the 'technology' of literacy. Whilst rejecting an extreme technological determinist position, Goody for instance does appear to associate the development of writing with key cognitive advances in human society – the distinction of myth from history; the development of logic and syllogistic forms

of reasoning; the ability of writing to help overcome a tendency of oral cultures towards cultural homeostasis; the development of certain mathematical procedures, such as multiplication and division (for further discussion of the debates in mathematics see Street, Baker & Tomlin, 2004); and – perhaps the key claim for educational purposes - that 'Literacy and the accompanying process of classroom education brings a shift towards greater "abstractedness"'. Whilst he is careful to avoid claiming an' absolute dichotomy between orality and literacy, it is partly on the grounds that his ideas do lend credence to technological determinism that he has been challenged, through the experimental data provided by Scribner & Cole (1977; 1980) and the ethnographic data and arguments by Street (1984) and others (see Finnegan, 1988 ; Maddox, 2004). Goody himself has criticised many of these counter arguments as 'relativist', a term that might be applied to much contemporary thinking about literacy (and social differences in general) and has considerable implications for the design of literacy programmes.

During the 1970s the social psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole conducted a major research project amongst the Vai peoples of Liberia in order to test out the claims of Goody and others about the cognitive consequences of literacy in a 'real life' setting. Their accounts of the outcomes of this research (Scribner and Cole, 1978; 1981) represented a major landmark in our understanding of the issues regarding literacy and cognition that we have been considering here. They quote Farrell, as a classic example of such claims (1977, p.451): "the cognitive restructuring caused by reading and writing develop the higher reasoning processes involved in extended abstract thinking" and they argue 'Our research speaks to several serious limitations in developing this proposition as a ground for educational and social policy decisions'. They address the limitations of these claims in both empirical and theoretical terms. For instance, many of the claims derive from abstract hypotheses not based in evidence, or the evidence used is of a very specific form of written text, such as use of western scientific 'essay text' literacy as a model for accounts of literacy in general (cf Olson, 1977; Street, 1984). Many of the assumptions about literacy in general, then, are 'tied up with school-based writing'. This, they believe, leads to serious limitations in the accounts of

literacy: 'The assumption that logicality is in the text and the text is in school can lead to a serious underestimation of the cognitive skills involved in non-school, non-essay writing'. The writing crisis, to which many of the reports and commissions cited above under 'Literacy and Learning' refer, 'presents itself as purely a pedagogical problem' and arises in the first place from these limited assumptions and data.

Scribner and Cole, instead, test out these claims through intensive psychological and anthropological research of actual practice, taking as a case study the Vai peoples of Liberia, who have three scripts – Vai (an invented phonetic script; Arabic and Roman – each used for different purposes.

> 'We examined activities engaged in by those knowing each of the indigenous scripts to determine some of the component skills involved. On the basis of these analyses, we designed tasks with different content but with hypothetically similar skills to determine if prior practice in learning and use of the script enhanced performance' (1977, p.13).

The tests were divided into three areas: Communication skills; Memory; and Language analysis. On the basis of the results, they argue that all we can claim is that 'specific practices promote specific skills': the grand claims of the literacy thesis are untenable:

> 'there is no evidence that writing promotes "general mental abilities". We did not find "superior memory in general" among Qur'anic students nor better language integration skills "in general" among Vai literates. … There is nothing in our findings that would lead us to speak of cognitive consequences of literacy with the notion in mind that such consequences affect intellectual performance in all tasks to which the human mind is put (1977, p.16)

This outcome suggests that the metaphor of a "great divide" may not be appropriate 'for specifying differences among literates and nonliterates under contemporary conditions. The monolithic model of what writing is and what it leads to … appears in the light of comparative data to fail to give full justice to the multiplicity of values, uses and consequences which characterize writing as social practice'.

Scribner and Cole, then, were amongst the first to attempt to re-theorise what counts as literacy and to look outside of school for empirical data on which to

base sound generalisations (cf a recent volume by Hull & Schultz 2002 'School's Out' on literacy in and out of school). One of the main proponents of the 'strong' thesis regarding the consequences of literacy has been David Olson (1977), who has been and is one of the sources for claims about the 'autonomous' model of literacy (cf Street, 1984) and was indeed cited by Scribner and Cole in their account. But in a later book (1994) he, like them, tries to modify the inferences that can be drawn from his own earlier pronouncements and to set out what is myth and what reality in our understanding of literacy. He draws an analogy with Christian theologians trying to put the faith on a firmer basis by getting rid of unsustainable myths that only weakened the case. As he describes the unsustainable myths of literacy he seems to be challenging those put forward by Goody, Farrell and others. In arriving at 'the new understanding of literacy' he describes six 'beliefs' and the 'doubts' that have been expressed about them as a helpful framework for reviewing the literature on literacy.

(1) Writing is the transcription of speech.
(2) The superiority of writing to speech.
(3) The technological superiority of the alphabetic writing system.
(4) Literacy as the organ of social progress.
(5) Literacy as an instrument of cultural and scientific development.
(6) Literacy as an instrument of cognitive development.

He then outlines the 'doubts' that modern scholarship has thrown on all of these assumptions. For instance, with respect to (4) Literacy and social development, the theme that mainly concerns us here, he cites counter arguments from such anthropologists as Levi-Strauss (1961) who argued that literacy not only is not the royal route to liberation, but is as often a means of enslavement.:

> It seems to favour rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind. .. The use of writing for disinterested ends, and with a view to satisfactions of the mind in the fields either of science or the arts, is a secondary result of its invention - and may even be no more than a way of reinforcing, justifying, or dissimulating its primary function. (Levi-Strauss (1961) pp.291-292 cited in Olson, 1977)

With respect to (5) Cultural development, Olson cites the work of cultural historians and anthropologists (cf Finnegan, 1999) who 'have made us aware of

the sophistication of "oral" cultures. .. ' and from whose work it appears: 'No direct causal links have been established between literacy and cultural development '.

Like Scribner and Cole, Olson's conclusion challenges the dominant claims for literacy for adults as well as for children:

> 'the use of literacy skills as a metric against which personal and social competence can be assessed is vastly oversimplified. Functional literacy, the form of competence required for one's daily life, far from being a universalizable commodity turns out on analysis to depend critically on the particular activities of the individual for whom literacy is to be functional. What is functional for an automated-factory worker may not be for a parent who wants to read to a child. The focus on literacy skills seriously underestimates the significance of both the implicit understandings that children bring to school and the importance of oral discourse in bringing those understandings into consciousness in turning them into objects of knowledge. The vast amounts of time some children spend on remedial reading exercises may be more appropriately spent acquiring scientific and philosophical information'. (Olson, 1977, p. 12)

He concludes: ' For the first time, many scholars are thinking the unthinkable: is it possible that literacy is over-rated?'

We might ask, in the light of this academic challenge, what are literacy policy makers and practitioners to do? Does the academic challenge undermine their current work in literacy and development or are there things they can get on with whilst the academic argue? I will address these questions in the final section, on Literacy and Development. Whatever response we make, it is apparent that we cannot ignore such findings. As we shall see below, for many researchers the rejection of the 'literacy thesis' does not necessarily mean that we should abandon or reduce work in literacy programmes: but it does force us to be clearer as to what justifications we use for such work and how we should conduct it. The next section shows how new theoretical perspectives, themselves growing from the debates outlined above, can provide a way of pursuing productive work in the literacy field without the 'myths', over statements and doubtful bases for action of the earlier positions.

Social Practice Approaches

Whilst the concern with cognition and with "problems" of acquisition continue, a recent shift in perspective has emphasised understanding of literacy practices in their social and cultural contexts. This approach has been particularly influenced by those who have advocated an "ethnographic" perspective, in contrast with the experimental and often individualistic character of cognitive studies, and the textual, etic perspective of linguistic-based studies of text. These social developments have sometimes been referred to as 'New Literacy Studies' (Gee (1999), Barton,D and Hamilton,M (1999), Collins (1995);Heath (1993); Street, 1993). Much of the work in this tradition focuses on the everyday meanings and uses of literacy in specific cultural contexts and links directly to how we understand the work of literacy programmes, which themselves then become subject to ethnographic enquiry (Robinson-Pant, forthcoming; Rogers, forthcoming).

In trying to characterise these new approaches to understanding and defining literacy, I have referred to a distinction between an 'autonomous' model and an 'ideological' model of literacy (Street 1984). The 'autonomous' model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself - autonomously - will have effects on other social and cognitive practices, much as in the early 'cognitive consequences' literature cited above. The model, I argue, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it and that can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal. Research in the social practice approach challenges this view and suggests that in practice dominant approaches based on the autonomous model are simply imposing western (or urban etc) conceptions of literacy on to other cultures (Street, 2001). The alternative, ideological model of literacy offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model - it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others (Gee 1990). The argument about social literacies (Street 1995)

suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that 'literacy' can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced or 'added on' afterwards.

For these reasons, as well as because of the failure of many traditional literacy programmes (Abadzi 1996; Street 1999) academics, researchers and practitioners working in literacy in different parts of the world are beginning to come to the conclusion that the autonomous model of literacy on which much of the practice and programmes have been based was not an appropriate intellectual tool, either for understanding the diversity of reading and writing around the world or for designing the practical programmes this required which may be better suited to an ideological model (Aikman, 1999; Heath, 1983; Doronilla 1996; Hornberger 1997, 2002; Kalman 1999; King 1994; Robinson-Pant 1997; Wagner, 1993). The question this approach raises for policy makers and programme designers is, then, not simply that of the 'impact' of literacy - to be measured in terms of a neutral developmental index - but rather of how local people 'take hold' of the new communicative practices being introduced to them, as Kulick & Stroud's (1993) ethnographic description of missionaries bringing literacy to New Guinea villagers makes clear. Literacy, in this sense, is, then, already part of a power relationship and how people 'take hold' of it is contingent on social and cultural practices and not just on pedagogic and cognitive factors. This raises questions that need to be addressed in any literacy programme: What is the power relation between the participants? What are the resources? Where are people going if they take on one literacy rather than another literacy? How do recipients challenge the dominant conceptions of literacy?

This approach has implications for both research and practice. Researchers, instead of privileging the particular literacy practices familiar in their own culture, now suspend judgement as to what constitutes literacy among the people they are working with until they are able to understand what it means to the people themselves, and which social contexts reading and writing derive

their meaning from. Many people labelled 'illiterate' within the autonomous model of literacy may, from a more culturally-sensitive viewpoint, be seen to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts. For instance, studies suggest that even non-literate persons find themselves engaged in literacy activities so the boundary between literate/ non literate is less obvious than individual 'measures' of literacy suggest (Doronilla, 1996). Academics have, however, often failed to make explicit the implications of such theory for practical work. In the present conditions of world change such ivory tower distancing is no longer legitimate. But likewise, policy makers and practitioners have not always taken on board such 'academic' findings, or have adopted one position (most often that identified with the autonomous model) and not taken account of the many others outlined here. These findings, then, raise important issues both for research into literacy in general and for policy in Adult Basic Education and Training in particular.

Key concepts in the field of New Literacy Studies that may enable us to overcome these barriers by applying these new conceptions of literacy to specific contexts and practical programmes include the concepts of *literacy events* and of *literacy practices*. Shirley Brice Heath characterised a 'literacy event' as 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' (Heath, 1982, p. 50). I have employed the phrase 'literacy practices' (Street, 1984, p. 1) as a means of focussing upon 'the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing', although I later elaborated the term both to take account of 'events' in Heath's sense and to give greater emphasis to the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (Street, 1988). David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and colleagues at Lancaster University, have taken up these concepts and applied them to their own research in ways that have been hugely influential both in the UK and internationally (cf. Barton and Hamilton 1999). The issue of dominant literacies and non-dominant, informal or vernacular, literacies is central to their combination of 'situated' and 'ideological' approaches to literacy.

There has, however, recently, been a critique of this position in turn: Brandt & Clinton (2003) refer to 'the limits of the local' – they and others (cf Collins &

Blot, 2003) question the 'situated' approach to literacy as not giving sufficient recognition to the ways in which literacy usually comes from outside of a particular community's 'local' experience, a feature common in adult literacy programmes. Street (2003) summarises a number of these texts and the arguments they put forward and offers some counter arguments from an ethnographic perspective. More recently, Maddox has attempted to bring together the 'situated' approach with that of 'New Literacy Studies', using his own ethnographic field research in Bangladesh to explore the relationship. For instance, he critiques NLS for its 'reluctance … in examining the role of literacy capabilities and practices in progressive forms of social change and the production of agency'. Like Brandt and Clinton, he wants to recognise the force of 'outside' influences associated with literacy, including the potential for helping people move out of 'local' positions and take account of progressive themes in the wider world. The 'desire to keep records of household income and expenditure' was not just a technical issue but one of authority, gender relations and kinship – literacy (and numeracy) could play a catalytic role in such women's breaking free from traditional constraints. He wants, then, to 'shift away from the binary opposition of ideological and autonomous positions that has dominated … debates in recent years' and develop a 'more inclusive theory that can link the local and the global, structure and agency and resolve some of the theoretical and disciplinary tensions over practice and technology'. Stromquist (2004), in a recent paper for a conference on Gender and Education, also critiques aspects of the 'social' perspective on literacy from the perspective of someone wishing to build upon literacy interventions for equity and justice agendas. She accepts the arguments put by NLS against the strong version of the cognitive consequences of literacy but does not believe that means entirely abandoning recognition of where literacy and cognition are associated: 'Understanding the contributions of literacy does not mean that one needs to see literacy functions as the only way to develop cognitive ability and reasoning powers, but rather that there be acknowledgement that literacy does enable people to process information that is more detailed, deliberate and coherent than oral communication''. For instance, 'Litercay enables people to participate in modern life processes such as reading newspapers and maps, following instructions, learning the law, and understanding political debates'.

Without returning to the now discredited claims of the autonomous model, she and others in the field of adult literacy want to hold on to some of the powers of literacy associated with it.

The positions and arguments outlined here, whether just the privileging of the 'local' evident in some early NLS positions or the recognition of 'outside' and global as well as cognitive influences, as in Brandt, Maddox, Stromquist and others, imply different approaches to what counts as 'literacy' and to how programmes for the extension and enhancement of adult literacy may be conceptualised and designed. From this point of view, then, each of the strands of study outlined for the GMR, needs to indicate which literacies are under consideration, whether with respect to 'Measuring and monitoring literacy'; 'Strategies and policies for literacy'; 'Literacy and human development'; and 'Pedagogical approaches to literacy 'effective literacy learning and programme designs'. The implications of these scholarly debates for these strands are not that we abandon work in this field – despite the occasional tendency in that direction as researchers question many of the supposed gains associated with literacy - but rather that we put it into perspective and recognise the limitations and constraints imposed by the different theoretical positions we adopt. However, before turning to the specific implications of this work for the GMR, I will outline one further position that is turning out to have perhaps even greater implications for adult literacy work in international global contexts – that is the approach to literacy as text, and in particular the focus on new communicative practices, sometimes referred to as 'multi modality' or 'multi literacies'.

Literacy as Text: multimodality and multiliteracies

Linguists, literary theorists and educationalists have tended to look at literacy in terms of the texts that are produced and consumed by literate individuals. Linguists have developed a variety of complex analytic tools for 'unpacking' the meanings of texts, both those that can be extracted by a skilled reader and those that a writer implicitly or explicitly deploys. Educationalists have then applied some of this knowledge to the development of skilled readers and writers. For instance, a movement that began in Australia focused on the

analysis of writing into different 'genres' (cf Cope and Kalantzis, 1993) and became significant in educational contexts more generally (underpinning aspects of the National Literacy Strategy in the UK, cf Beard 2000). Theorists and practitioners working from this perspective aim to provide learners with the full range of genres necessary to operate in contemporary society and indeed treat this as the crucial dimension of the social justice and 'access' agenda. In doing so, they could be criticised from an ethnography of literacies perspective for attempting to genericise 'contemporary society' rather than to particularise it. Similarly building on work by linguists, more radical critics, have focussed on stretches of language larger than the sentence, referred to by socio linguists as 'discourse'. Influenced by broader social theory and by uses of the term Discourse by Foucault and others, they have developed an approach to what Gee(1991) calls Discourse with a big D. This locates literacy within wider communicative and socio-political practices - at times the term Discourse looks very like what anthropologists used to mean by 'culture'. The work of Gee (1990) and Fairclough (1991) represents a central plank of this approach.

Kress and others have developed this position further, arguing that language should be seen as just one of several modes through which communication is conducted (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001): 'We suggest that, like language, visual images, gesture and action have been developed through their social usage into articulated or partly articulated resources for representation'. Individuals make choices from the 'representational resources' available amongst these various modes and a multi-modal perspective enables us to identify the traces of these decisions - of the interests of the parties to a text. This approach sees literacy practices as one set amongst many communicative practices at the same time applying the social, ideological and functional interpretations that have been developed with respect to discourse based studies of communication. It recognises, for instance that many people, including those defined as 'literate' by standard measures, use other strategies to deal with literacy tasks – in determining bus or train times for instance, or in finding their way to addresses, people do not necessarily 'decode' every word or number but instead 'read off' from a range of signs, including colour, layout, print font etc (Cope and Kalanztis, 2000; Street, 1998). Approaches to

understanding such 'multi modality' can also be applied to the work of classrooms - science classrooms employ diagrams, objects, notation systems etc in addition to language itself in spoken and written forms, as means whereby pupils learn what counts as 'science' (Kress et. al, 2000). Similar analyses can be applied to a range of subject areas both within schooling and in adult programmes and less formal educational contexts.

A new book (ed Pahl & Rowsell, forthcoming) attempts to bring together the two fields of study signalled here – new literacy studies and multimodality. The volume is helpful in guiding us away from extreme versions of these approaches. For instance, the term literacy is sometimes broadened well beyond the NLS conception of social practice to become a metaphor for any kind of skill or competence: at one extreme we find such concepts as 'palpatory' literacy (skill in body massage) or 'political' literacy, whilst somewhat closer to the social literacies position we find reference to 'visual' literacy or computer literacy, both of which do involve some aspects of literacy practices but may not be defined by them. From the perspective of multimodality, we likewise find uncertainty about what to include and exclude, what goes with what: do we classify a single mode, say visual literacy, with its affordances, in an entirely separate category from other modes, say writing? How do we avoid a kind of technical or mode determinism? Can we find ways of describing the overlap and interaction of such modes according to context and 'practice'? (cf Street, 2000).

One way of tracing a path through this semantic and conceptual confusion is to engage in research on the practices described: labelling the object of study forces us to clarify what exactly we include and what we exclude and what are the links between various modes, a principle that is important not only for research but also for policy and practice. Ethnographic-style methods of enquiry may be particularly appropriate to this endeavour, since they involve the reflexivity and the closeness to the ground that enable us to see more precisely what multimodal practices and literacy practices consist in. Future developments, then, both conceptual and applied, may involve some marriage of the last two approaches signalled here – literacy as social practice and literacy as one component of multi modal communicative practices. This is

sometimes signalled as a relationship between 'texts and practices', an approach that may come to inform literacy programmes more in the coming years.

The broader policy question raised by all of this work is whether the literacies being taught in schools and in mainstream adult programmes are relevant to the lives that learners are leading and will have to lead in the globalised world with its 'new work order' demands of flexibility, multi modality and multi literacies (cf Gee et. al., 1996). In recent years a number of researchers have addressed the issue of the variety of literacy practices evident in workplaces. From a theoretical perspective, Gee et al have considered the new literacies required of workers in the 'new work order' exemplified for example in ethnographic studies of a factory in Cape Town, (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996), a Boston milk depot (Scribner, 1984) and an electronics workplace in the US (Kleifgen, 2003). There are often conflicts between such actual uses of literacy in the workplace and the kinds of literacy skills prioritised in official strategies and campaigns. Chris Holland's (1996) annotated bibliography of this area provides a useful way in to this field and signals materials produced by Trade Unions and NGOs eg 'Workplace Basic Skills Network' (UK) (cf also Hull, 1997; O'Connor.1994)

Literacy and Development

How, then, do the four perspectives outlined above underpin practice in the field of literacy provision? I argued at the outset that the justification for such an explicit, 'academic' rendering of the assumptions underlying literacy work, rests on the grounds that if policy makers and practitioners fail to take account of such perspectives and their implications, then we might end up putting our energies into unproductive directions and could be seen as acting without control and knowledge of the field in which we are engaged – an outcome that would be ironical since that is the reason why many claim to be bringing literacy to the 'unenlightened' in the first place! If we want literacy learners to acquire literacy because it will help them to become more critical, self aware and in control of their destinies, then we need to apply the same arguments to

ourselves as we struggle with alternative approaches to literacy work itself. The implications of these scholarly debates for these strands are not, then, that we abandon work in this field – despite the occasional tendency in that direction as researchers question many of the supposed gains associated with literacy - but rather that we put it into perspective and recognise the limitations and constraints imposed by the different theoretical positions we adopt.   This section offers some indicators of how we might identify these underlying perspectives in different programmes and what the implications might be for policy and practice in the provision of literacy programmes and the measurement of literacy (cf Peterson, 2004 for an account of recent debates concerning the relationship of literacy positions to those in the field of measurement).

It could be argued that the first approach, that which treats 'literacy' as being about learning to read, has underpinned much of the early work in developing literacy programmes. The answer to the question posed by other approaches – namely 'which literacies' should the programme focus on? – is given in this approach as, effectively,' schooled literacies' (cf Street & Street, 1991;Cook-Gumperz, 1986). If you adopt this position on literacy, then that is likely to lead to adult literacy programmes also replete with text books and staged approaches - most evident in the ubiquitous 'primer' - and that, inter alia, treat adults in similar ways to those in which schools treat children. If, on the other hand, you start from a more 'adult' perspective on learning – or, as Rogers would have it from 'task-conscious' learning rather than 'learning-conscious learning' - then the programme would start from what adults know and what they can bring to the learning sessions. This may involve use of 'Real Literacy Materials', gleaned from the everyday environment rather than texts specially written for learning; the programme would perhaps involve pre-programme research on what adults already know and ask them questions about what it is they want from the programme. Whilst in reality even programmes such as this would recognise that adults may not always know what is waiting for them out there, and the facilitator of a course has some obligation to add to what they know, nevertheless the perspective on learning and literacy it offers would suggest different programme design than that evident in the dominant

paradigm. And the implications for measurement in particular would be different under this heading than it will be when we look at social approaches. A traditional 'reading' focus tends to lead to tests of reading 'skills' that are reduced to decontextualised items that can be conflated across localities and countries into national statistics. The development of the other strands of inquiry listed here indicate how specific such an approach is and also indicates the limits as well as the strengths of starting from here in developing adult literacy policy.

Closely connected with this shift in approaches to learning, has been a shift in assumptions about the 'cognitive consequences' of literacy. If you believe that literacy leads to the consequences laid out in the 'literacy thesis' – more 'logical' thinking, facility with syllogisms, ability to separate myth from history and to overcome the tendency of oral cultures towards cultural homeostasis, and – perhaps the key claim for educational purposes - that 'Literacy and the accompanying process of classroom education brings a shift towards greater "abstractedness", views often associated with a shift from 'primitive' or 'underdeveloped' to 'developed' or 'modern' - then it is likely that the design of the programme will not be too concerned with local knowledge and literacy, which will be seen as the 'problem' rather than a basis for the solution. Such an approach has led to top down, often urban centred and ethnocentric programmes that invoke the 'literacy thesis' to justify their dominance. New approaches to literacy and cognition are now being called for (cf Abadzi, 2003; Olson, 1994). On the one hand, as Abadzi (2003) argues: 'Research on literacy is often carried out by adult education specialists who typically lack training in cognition and neuropsychology… There is limited technical understanding about enabling adults to read faster and more accurately. The instructional delivery of adult literacy could be reformulated based on state-of-the-art cognitive findings' (2003, p. 9). On the other hand, if you start from the position outlined by Olson (1994) and related to the research of Scribner and Cole amongst others, then the programme design will be less concerned with memory and speed of reading and will instead be more culturally sensitive and, perhaps, more tuned to specific literacy practices as facilitating the specific cognitive skills being targeted. Again measurement will be different depending

on which underlying position is adopted: a concern with memory skills, speed of reading and fluency will lead to tests that measure these factors; a concern for 'specific practices' associated with such specific cognitive skills as those for which Scribner and Cole tested Vai literate in different scripts - 'Communication skills; Memory; and Language analysis' – will lead to more customised tests.

A different, though related set of outcomes is likely to follow if programme designers adopt a social literacies perspective (see Unesco 2003 and DfID 1994 and 1999 for a full account of how these approaches might be relevant to adult literacy programmes). From this point of view, it would be important, as in a more 'social' cognitive approach, to build on local practices and, again, to engage in pre programme research. But the effect would also be to require more tailor made programmes rather than assuming 'one size fits all' and would focus on social practices rather than cognitive skills. This has led, for instance, to 'community literacies projects' – such as the DfID funded project CLPN in Nepal, (Chitrakar et al, 2002) – where the programme becomes a resource on which local groups can call. Women in credit groups wanting support in filling out forms or creating their own; people interested in reading wall newspapers; forestry user groups concerned to involve all users, from woodsmen to animal herders; all have different literacy needs that the programme team then work to support and enhance. Pre programme research may identify specific events - such as form filling at a credit group meeting - and then link these to broader literacy practices – such as design and use of layout to represent amounts of money or tasks - and then build a programme that enhances these practices for the target group.

Similar programmes in S Africa, S America and other amenable sites have married the social practices approach with local philosophies, such as community action or neo Freirean approaches and 'popular education' in S America (Bartlett, 2003). At present a great deal of productive work is taking place based upon these perspectives, as extensions, adaptations and new hybrid forms are emerging (cf Street, forthcoming). Kell (2001), for instance, links much of the work described above with that in the field of 'Development'. She puts work in the tradition initiated by Paulo Freire concerning literacy

programmes for 'conscientization', 'liberation' and 'empowerment' into the broader and newer context of 'social literacies', pointing out that some approaches to Freirean pedagogy have implicitly if not explicitly adopted earlier theories of learning and cognition that have led to more top down, hegemonic programmes. This is a classic example of how lack of attention to the underlying concepts and perspectives of a particular programme can blind its designers and users to hidden implications and unintended consequences: many Freirean activists would not explicitly wish to be associated with such top down programmes and yet the underlying assumptions on which the programme is built may have this effect. The same considerations arise when addressing issues of measurement and assessment of literacy skills: from the social literacies perspective, the traditional test would probably be abandoned in favour of more local materials and situations and participants would be assessed on how well they were engaging in the particular texts and practices, such as recording credit agreements, or keeping minutes of meetings. This approach might also be nearer to Wiliam and Black's (2000) notion of 'formative assessment' than the dominant model of summative assessment evident in the 'reading' and the 'cognitive' approaches.

Finally, the work of Kress and his colleagues in multi modality, of Cope and others on 'multi literacies' and of Gee and colleagues on the 'new work order', suggests that whatever the programme designers think they are doing and which of the three other perspectives outlined above they explicitly advocate, in practice learners are already moving fast in other directions. Learners, whether children or adults, arrive in formal learning contexts with a rich array of skills in for instance, digital technologies, whether computers, cameras or mobile phone systems (cf Street, 2001 'Introduction' on the 'new orders'). They are accustomed to moving across genres and tasks according to context. And they often employ some features of alphabetic literacy – such as text messaging – even though they might not pass a formal test in 'literacy'. It seems more likely that the demands of the workplace and of the lifeworld more generally will tend in this direction than in that of the traditional classroom, with its formal conventions, outdated technologies (chalk, blackboards) and limited views of what counts as literacy. Researchers are beginning to address the question of

the relationship between the approach from multi modality signalled by Kress and colleagues and that from a social practices perspective signalled by Street and others. Exploring the relationship between 'texts' and 'practices' might similarly provide a sound starting point for new approaches to literacy programmes in development contexts as it would for measurement and assessment. The approach would probably require an assessment focus on multiple materials rather than simply on print and would therefore, like the social literacies approach, give up the standard written test in favour of more elaborate 'real' materials in actual contexts – designing assessment for this dimension of communicative skills is likely to be one of the greatest challenges of the next period of work in this field.

These last examples especially make apparent the general theme of this paper – that we cannot avoid the implications of the deeper conceptual frameworks that underpin our practice, in the field of literacy as in other domains. If we want to have some control over the effects of our policy and practice, then we need first to make explicit what these underlying assumptions are and to take cognisance of what research tells us of their implications and of their consequences when they have been enacted in other contexts. Understanding and defining literacy lies at the heart of 'doing' literacy and the new understandings and definitions outlined above are likely to lead to quite different ways of doing in the next phase of literacy work in the international domain.