Researching Adult Learners' Lives to Understand Engagement and Progression in Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationships between adult learners' lives and the literacy, numeracy and language learning in which they are engaged. The paper brings together the results of a set of detailed studies of adult learners' lives, summarising common findings from the studies and providing a set of implications for policy and provision. Finally, the paper outlines a model of the aspects of people's lives that are significant for effective language, literacy and numeracy learning. The four part model covers people's histories, their current identities, their current life circumstances and imagined futures.

Researching adult learners' lives

This paper brings together the results of research that has been carried out to develop understandings of the relationships between adult learners' lives and the literacy, numeracy and language learning in which they are engaged. This is research that has been carried out at the Lancaster University Literacy Research Centre under the rubric of *Adult Learners' Lives* and which was funded by the English National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy[i]. The national centre was part of the English government's high profile *Skills for Life* strategy to improve provision and attainment in adult literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages. The strategy began in 2001 and included core curricula with a set of levels, standardised tests, national targets and a framework for the professional development of teachers.

Starting from the perspectives of people attending language, literacy and numeracy provision, the research reported here focused on issues around motivation, participation, persistence and engagement of people on *Skills for Life* courses. The aim here is to examine the common findings of this research and to locate it in broader studies of adults' engagement and progression, primarily other work in England. Part of the research was carried out in colleges (Ivanic et al 2006) but other research, the starting point for this paper, is based upon work in other community-based sites with groups of learners in what has been referred to as provision for the 'hard to reach' (Barton et al 2006) and who can be seen as most marginalised. This included a drug support and aftercare centre, a young homeless project and a domestic violence project. Working collaboratively with practitioners in each of the

sites, the research explored issues of participation and engagement with people who frequently have issues in their lives that impact upon learning.

The current paper examines the significance of these findings in the light of a body of further work. This includes a later overview (Barton et al 2007), further data collection and analysis of a range of studies to examine progression (Hodge, Barton and Pearce, forthcoming), a specific study of homelessness (Barton, Satchwell and Wilson, forthcoming) and practitioner guides that develop a social practice pedagogy based upon this research (Appleby and Barton 2008, Appleby 2008, Satchwell and Barton forthcoming).

Overall, 282 people participated in the main research study, 134 were students and the remainder were teachers, managers and other support workers. The electronic database from the project consists of 403 data files, which include 198 recorded interviews. Where we worked in depth with people in learning programs, this ranged from carrying out several interviews over a six-month period to keeping in touch with the person and their learning for more than two years. The later research returned to some of the same people so there is data from them covering up to four years, and additional people were added to the research. This is detailed qualitative research and it is important to stress, for the benefit of those not familiar with qualitative approaches, that this research is based upon large numbers of people and a variety of methods, outlined below, that provide rich data that can be triangulated. Like Reder, (this volume), we stress the importance of synthesising different approaches to these issues. Part of the aim of this current paper is to demonstrate the common, repeated findings that come from a broad range of studies with different methodologies.

The research is rooted in an approach that sees literacy, numeracy and language as social practices. This has been described extensively elsewhere (including Barton 2007, other authors, this volume). The crucial point for the discussion here is that we see literacy, numeracy and language as activities that people carry out and which relate to and are shaped by all the other activities they engage in throughout their lives, rather than just as skills or cognitive attributes that people have or do not have. This has immediate implications for the way we approach research. We seek to observe people engaging in literacy, numeracy and language practices, within the frame of their lives and sociocultural contexts, and to listen to what they have to say about these practices and the meanings that the practices have in their lives. This broader view of language, literacy and numeracy has proved essential when trying to understand people's participation, engagement and progression in diverse settings, and it leads to the development of a social practice pedagogy.

In developing the methodology, we start from the fact that people are involved in many different activities in their lives and these change over time. Different approaches to studying them can reveal different facets and

relationships, deepening our understandings. We therefore combine methods of data collection, and have been developing responsive ways of gaining insights into the meanings people attach to their experiences. These methods include: observation, in-depth and repeated interviews, group work, photography and video. In most sites, such as a homeless shelter, one researcher was responsible for the site. There were around 20-25 visits to each site, at least 50 formally recorded interviews, and many more informal interviews and other activities. Initially, the researcher negotiated access and began by getting to know the people and the site and the kinds of language, literacy and numeracy provision that took place there. This was followed by extensive observation that was recorded in field notes, along with informal and semi-structured interviews with a broad range of people. The research developed differently in each site and was negotiated with the participants. At a homeless shelter for young people, for instance, the researcher worked with a story teller to develop a photo project where young people took photos related to their lives and wrote and spoke about them. These were then used as the basis for a display, group discussions and individual interviews. Each site involved a variety of methods and these are described in more detail in the references to specific studies given above. Recorded interviews were transcribed and field notes were digitised, with due attention to issues of confidentially, and these documents formed the basis of the data for analysis.

The rigour in this approach is in the richness of the data, in the level of detail and in the range of sources of data. Throughout this research we sought to find ways of working collaboratively in data collection and interpretation, and to communicate with participants about the results of the research and how they can be disseminated. This is particularly important when working with groups that include people in positions of social inequality who have experienced marginalisation throughout their lives. The aim has been to represent people's voices fairly and in consultation with them. It is the learners' perspective on these issues that particularly adds to earlier findings in this area.

Examples of people in the study include Sophie, a young woman attending a shelter for young homeless people. She had had an unsettled upbringing, was expelled from school and became homeless at age 15 and now dipped in and out of college. Her everyday literacies included reading novels and writing Haiku poetry. She was part of the research study for three years and at the end of the study had just had a baby girl and was about to go back to college. Another example is Jason, a man in his 30s who had stopped attending school at the age of 12, had become a labourer and was later unemployed after an accident and suffered from depression. He volunteered at a tenants' association and participated in the study for three years. At the association he helped to set up and run the computer and internet, as well as keeping the accounts. He also enrolled in a college course but attended

erratically. The people studied were participating in literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses at different levels. They covered a wide range of ages and circumstances. Detailed profiles are given in the fuller research reports, especially in Hodge, Barton and Pearce (2008).

Key findings

As a way of providing an overview of the research these are the key findings about adults' lives. This is a list that was developed from the results of the research in community settings, and which is adapted here to take account of the further research:

- Many people brought highly-developed skills and competencies; these included literacies unrelated to the curriculum, such as song writing or poetry. Uncovering people's existing knowledge and skills and drawing on and building upon it is basic to a social practice pedagogy. Teaching needs to take account of people's skills, competencies, passions and talents. However, in a skills-based pedagogy and curriculum, people's existing knowledge outside the confines of the curriculum may not be uncovered. Similarly, people without qualifications are assumed not to have the appropriate knowledge and skills.

- The majority of people we spoke to across the different provision had very negative previous experiences of education, and negative previous experiences with authority. This did not apply to all groups, but was common in the marginalised groups in our community-based studies. With students in ESOL courses, this varied and was more prevalent in particular groups according to ethnicity and migration history.

- People carried histories of violence and trauma which affected their learning but which were not always open and visible. Again, this was particularly true with people in community settings and some groups of ESOL students. Experiences of living with ill health both in the past and present were common, as were experiences of bullying whilst at school. The issues of health and of bullying arose far more than had been expected at the beginning of the research.

- People had different reasons for being involved with these settings: for some it was about safety and survival; for others transitions and moving on were central; whilst other people came with more specific learning goals. This variety was noted across a wide range of groups of people and forms of provision. In our later work on progression it was clear that some people were interested in course completion and moving on to further courses or as a route to work. Other people had a broad range of their own motivations, unrelated to course or

work progression, such as personal development or social participation.

- People experienced a range of constraints on engaging in formal learning situations, including physical, mental, social and emotional constraints. Social circumstances meant that many experienced turbulence and unpredictable change in their lives. People needed to feel when it was the 'right time' for them to engage in learning and change in their lives; this was something they had to identify for themselves.

- Feelings and emotions shaped people's experiences of learning; for some this made engagement, particularly in more formal, structured learning very difficult; other people talked about formal learning provision as a safe haven from other overwhelming issues in their lives. Again, we saw people's quite different responses to learning provision. Related to this many people in community provision talked in different ways about seeing themselves as having been positioned outside a world of 'normality', for example, very young people forced to live independently due to family breakdown and becoming drug dependent. Feeling very different had put people off participating in learning in the past and attending college.

- People had a range of aspirations common to most people, such as a safe, settled life, a good home, good family relationships, good work, good health. This point, about the entirely conventional aspirations of supposedly disaffected people, was also found in a study using a different methodology (Calder and Cope 2003). This study, based on interviews with 900 people from disadvantaged backgrounds, found people's aspirations to be very similar to those of a control group: to have a family, an interesting job, and enough money to support their lifestyle; and to have a nice house, good friends and be in control of their own future. The issue for them was not that of not having the aspirations, but rather that of not knowing how to go about achieving them.

- People had many roles, responsibilities and commitments; they had shifting priorities and circumstances that led to dipping in and out of learning. Often immediate priorities had to take priority over formal learning. Sometimes people prioritised the needs of family members rather than their own individual needs. Goals were flexible and changed as circumstances changed, sometimes very unpredictably. There was often a gap between people's short term and long term goals.

This work develops and extends conclusions from existing research in this field. A key initiative for work in community settings in England was the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) that ran from 1998 to 2004.

The findings from two studies of this program (McMeeking et al 2002, Sampson et al 2004) resonate with the findings of the work reported here. Many of the learners in the program were dealing with similar life circumstances and events to those in our research. The reports point out that the so-called 'hardest to reach' learners may often have a range of problems, including health, housing, finance, family and crime-related issues, which are more immediate than their basic skills needs. This parallels our findings on the turbulence of life experiences and the need to respond to learners' own purposes. It was also found to be necessary to address practical and financial barriers to learning, through providing for travel costs, materials and other necessary support, such as childcare.

A crucial issue for provision is building and maintaining positive relationships with learners; this is a thread which runs through many of the findings of our research and is a key issue in our study of progression (Hodge, Barton and Pearce 2008). The same is true of the reports of the community program. The social atmosphere of the program and the personal commitment of tutors were critical to learners staying on; and holding sessions in safe, familiar and welcoming places, was important. Another element critical to learner participation was the quality and relevance of the learning program, with the attention to relevance recalling the need for flexibility and responsiveness to learners' individual needs and circumstances found in our research. McGivney's (1999) study of informal learning in the community also highlights the importance of good relationships, intermediaries between people and educational providers, flexible and responsive systems, provision which responds to people's existing interests and needs, and support mechanisms, with the most important factor being the key people involved in development work.

As in our study, many of the learners in the ACLF programs identified negative previous experiences of education and Sampson et al (2004) found that an informal style of delivery, which allowed learners to work at their own pace, and which, critically, was unlike school, was important. Many of the projects offered one-to-one support, enabling individualised provision appropriate to the particular learner involved. Sampson et al also refer to an 'encouraging' proportion of learners moving into mainstream education; moving on to further basic skills classes was the most common form of progression which was reported. There were also important outcomes around personal development, such as learners' self esteem, motivation, team working, time-keeping and individual problem solving. The reports recommend that innovative and effective ways of measuring such so-called 'soft' outcomes of programs be identified and disseminated, so that basic skills programs which have these impacts on these hardest to reach learners are not undervalued.

McNeil and Smith's (2004) work assessing success factors of working with young people in informal learning also raises similar issues, including: the need for practitioners who understand the needs of working with these particular groups, and the associated difficulties in recruiting appropriate staff; the importance of working with people's existing interests to promote engagement; the need for provision to be flexible, individualised and non-academic; and the importance of non-judgemental relationships, and particularly of not being 'like teachers'. Similar issues arose in our case study of working with homeless people (Barton, Satchwell and Wilson forthcoming).

Issues of transition are important, particularly with young people. Cieslik and Simpson (2004) have investigated the importance of poor basic skills as a factor in the relative success or failure of young people's transitions into adulthood. Their work draws attention to the importance of the social relationships and networks people are involved in, to the resources they can access from their own particular life circumstances, and to their life projects and horizons for action, all of which mediate the impact of their level of basic skills on their lives. Their recommendations are similar to ours: that formal provision and learning opportunities overly focused on literacy and numeracy are unlikely to succeed without attention to the people attending, to their life projects and to how these are placed within complex circumstances.

An overview based on extensive consultation and surveying existing research (Bird and Akerman 2005) suggests that successful literacy approaches need to draw upon a strategy which includes engaging individuals and building relationships, meeting learners' needs and interests, and working in partnership. These are all issues that our research has identified as being crucial.

Our research reinforces and pulls together the findings from these other studies and, crucially, offers deeper understandings of the perspectives of learners. Researching this issue from the point of view of learners rather than from that of provision offers a new perspective on certain issues. For instance, some studies talk of attracting and retaining learners as a major challenge. But we can see from some of the work described above that some of the learners whom provision felt had 'dropped out', might have been involved in a 'dipping in and out' process, as they worked out how and where learning fitted into their lives; this is a much more positive interpretation.

Implications for policy and provision

A crucial issue here is the extent to which we can make generic claims about people's engagement in learning and the extent to which any claims and proposals need to be restricted to specific groups of people in particular locations. We believe that there are common principles and they are outlined above. Research by others also supports these principles and provides validity

for them. At the same time, a particular situation, such as working with homeless people, young people or offenders, requires understanding of the specific situation and the adapting of general findings to the specific context. The different educational and social policy frameworks of different countries means that the issues and the responses to them will be slightly different. A study carried out in Scotland, for instance, which has a distinct educational system from England, has found a similar range of issues related to progression but with different implications for provision reflecting the different policy environment (Maclachlan et al 2008).

The projects reported here have been embedded in a coherent strategy of communication and impact that aims to have a direct effect on practice. There is growing evidence that practitioners are most likely to draw upon research findings that resonate with their own experience and our own work supports this. Throughout the project we have disseminated emergent findings from our work, first locally, and then regionally and nationally, in formal and informal ways. However, in a top-down, centralised system like *Skills for Life*, it is the learner's perspectives that get most easily lost.

There are some key issues for policy and provision thatcan be found in the individual reports. Here I will draw attention to two issues. Firstly, educational policy needs to link up more with broader social policy. For example, provision needs to recognise and respond to people's practical constraints. This is a situation where specialised provision, such as for homeless people, can conflict with the needs of a formal educational system which demands regular attendance on fixed length courses. Language, literacy and numeracy provision for young people and adults needs to be funded to work within the principal purposes of these settings. Language, literacy and numeracy tutors/teachers need to receive support and training to equip them to work in specific community settings; they need time and space to be flexible and reflective practitioners. Being able to work alongside specialist community workers can be important.

A crucial issue, highlighted through our research, is that what is funded and what is not funded can have a significant impact on possibilities for engaging in learning, with such issues as travel and childcare. The sudden starting and terminating of courses for particular groups of people can be incomprehensible for the participants. Funding affects learners in seemingly random ways; we found that often the most vulnerable learners end up with the most insecure provision. A study of community providers (Hannon et al 2003) also identified similar issues. Issues around the difficulty of obtaining funding for development work and core long-term funding were common. Who funds the provision is also important with community organisations frustrated at the ways in which different government agencies make different and sometimes conflicting demands. *Skills for Life* in England started with the rhetoric of supporting two aspects of social policy: economic

development and social inclusion. However, there was quickly a shift to a greater emphasis on the economic rationale. With limited funding this comes at the expense of the social issues and represents the greatest threat to community provision.

A model for learning and participation

To bring this all together, from this work we have developed a model of people's lives which is useful for understanding what people bring to these learning settings. The model enables us to focus on the aspects of people's lives that are significant for effective language, literacy and numeracy learning. The model is rooted in the data on people's lives analysed in these studies. It draws upon a range of theories and approaches and provides a ways of talking about the social shaping of learning whilst at the same time keeping people's lives at the centre. (For more information on the theorising underlying this model, see Barton et al 2007:17-24.) We describe people's lives under four headings: their history, their current identities, their current life circumstances, and their imagined futures. We find it very useful to think of people's lives in terms of these four aspects in order to find a way through complex data and to draw out significant themes. The figure illustrates these four aspects in a simple manner, the idea being that each person has a particular combination of practices and identities, with a history behind them, and an imagined future towards which they are heading, situated within a set of current life circumstances and events.
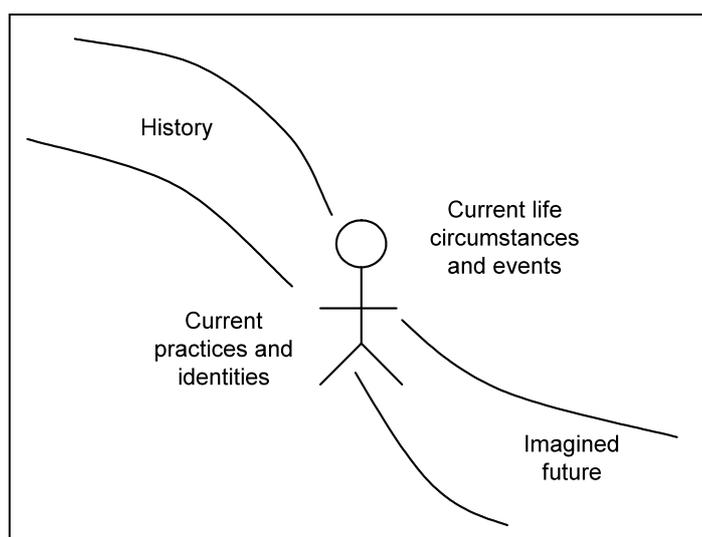

Figure 1. Four aspects crucial for linking learning and lives.

We want to emphasise these four aspects of life: firstly, the importance of individual histories; secondly, how people have there own 'ways of being', the cluster of social, psychological and affective factors that make up their identities; thirdly, the significance of factors they may have little control over; and, fourthly, the importance of people's plans and how they see future possibilities. Of course, these four areas overlap and interact. People's current practices are shaped by their life history, and people's purposes and goals are influenced by their current circumstances. Nevertheless, it is useful to be able to make the distinction here and we believe it helps us understand engagement and progression as crucial to learning.

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