

Reflections on the place of adults with low functional literacy in the communicatively integrated community

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Abstract

Governments in both NZ and Australia have been concerned about low levels of literacy among adults which are in turn associated with unemployment and social disconnectedness. Interviews with those in adult literacy training programmes in Wanganui reveal a series of barriers to full and equal participation in mainstream society. Further those with low functional literacy expressed a need for communication skills even more than for traditional literacy skills. We examine these findings in the light of theories about communication and community.

Introduction

Our interest in how well people of low literacy are engaged in their societies stems from our three and a half year longitudinal research programme in the city of Wanganui, population around 45,000. From this study investigating low adult literacy and its social and economic concomitants, we have been finding increasing indications from our research that a condition of low functional literacy in English creates substantial barriers to full and equal participation in society. Our research has also demonstrated the overlapping nature of concepts of 'literacy' and 'communication' (see for instance Olsson & Comrie, 2005) and the self identified need for communication skills among adults undertaking literacy training.

An overarching goal of the New Zealand government's Adult Literacy Strategy *More than Words* (2001) is that New Zealanders should enjoy a level of literacy which enables them to participate fully in all aspects of life, including work, family, and the community, and to have the opportunity to achieve literacy in English and Te Reo Māori. This then illustrates a perceived connection at governmental level between functional literacy and participation in society. A belief in the relationship between functional literacy and social participation in turn creates an impetus to increase the number of people of low literacy in English who are participating in adult literacy training.

Political concern about adult literacy levels and consequent Government strategy stems from results of New Zealand's participation in the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which covered 24 countries. While

New Zealand performed relatively well, with scores on all three literacy areas (prose, document and numeracy) slightly above average (Statistics NZ, 2003), 48% of the population was estimated as at literacy levels one and two, out of a range of one to five, where level three is considered to be adequate for participating in today's employment world. The IALS, which influenced the development of government literacy policy, outlines links between functional literacy and social participation evidenced through voting habits and participation in voluntary work.

Literacy, Communication and Community

The IALS defines literacy as:

The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential (OECD, 2000, p. x).

This 'functional' approach views literacy as consisting of cognitive-based, generic, transferable and measurable skills, and these skills are often expanded to include wider competencies including 'communication'. However the other major approach to literacy views it as social practice. Here, literacy is seen as the result of the social context or practice which it is within. Therefore, literacy becomes 'literacies' or "plural and complex, multifaceted social and cultural practices" (Jackson, 2004, p. 4). Indeed, Olsson and Comrie (2005) argue for the similarities between social practice approaches to literacy and communication

research, noting that multiple forms of communication are now considered to be elements of literacies.

Relevant to our interest in low adult literacy and social participation are the perspectives on possible linkages between communication and “community” (e.g. Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2001; Kwak, Shah, & Holbert, 2004). These authors have enquired into whether, and if so in what forms, various manifestations of interpersonal and mass communication may produce community, or the “communicatively integrated community” (Friedland, 2001, p. 358).

The difficulty of locating or identifying that “community” within which people communicate is itself challenging. As Stoecker (2005) has observed:

It is interesting to me how reluctant people are to talk about the question of who is the community. Some don't want to talk about it because they fear that the conversation will be divisive. They would prefer to think about us as all one big community, and to talk about the community as separate from those of us trying to help will reinforce divisions and cause conflict (Stoecker, 2005, p. 45).

Yet an understanding of what community is and means, and its meaning for whom, is an essential element within the examination of community participation. If “the community” is reified as a single entity rather than as multiple in its forms, then presumably this will lead to a blurring of what it takes to produce quality forms of participation within the various manifestations of community.

Participation in community (however defined) is often associated with citizens' active knowledge and discussion of political affairs. These discussions are the link to the formation of public opinion. In the view of Price:

members of the public form their perceptions, ideas and opinions not in isolation but within the context of much broader collective processes. Public opinions depend critically upon the social and communicative surrounding in which they are developed (p. 221).

However, as (Katz, 1995, p. xxx) points out:

We know all too little about the extent of political talk in contemporary society and the conditions that nourish it ... even focus group methodology can tell us only about how people talk about something when asked to, not whether and how they actually do so.

Further, just what those "collective processes" referred to by Price might comprise are not yet well known. It has become evident to us that adults of low functional literacy may be relatively more excluded from the normal interactions of discussions related to participation, on the basis of what appears to be their withdrawal from interaction with others. That is, not infrequently there is an avoidance of forms of communication following people's anxieties that such may reveal their lack of competence in functional literacy.

Peters (1995) argues that when it comes to an understanding of where public opinion derives from, then active discussion of political events in the community should no longer be understood as the basis for public opinion:

Public opinion research makes the public a demographic segment or data set rather than a realm of action. Citizens do not themselves produce public opinion today; it must be generated through the machinery of polling. The power to constitute the public space, then, falls into the hands of the experts, not the citizens (p. 20).

From this we infer a possible continuum of active and engaged political discussion in the mainstream community. This would comprise experts at one end, then at the other extreme, the most disengaged citizens, many of whom are likely to be persons of low literacy, with the rest of society arranged between the two poles.

If a continuum of this nature exists in respect of political discussion in the community, then perhaps something of the same nature exists for other kinds of social engagement and disengagement in the community as well, for issues other than discussion of politics. In fact it could be argued that political discussion may serve as a kind of touchstone of citizens' engagement in society. If a person appears to be absent for all practical purposes from any apparent processes of social dialogue on the subject of political affairs, then they may also be similarly disengaged from other forms of the public sphere.

One further commentator is relevant to our concerns, Jürgen Habermas, one of the most predominant modern thinkers in the field of community and communication in the public sphere. He has written extensively on the formation of community consensus following public discussion.

In regard to our respondents of low adult literacy, we were interested in what we saw as the possible relevance of Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action. Especially salient for our purposes is Habermas' ideal of equality among communicative partners. This is based on the assumptions that parties in a communication transaction should negotiate both outcomes and processes, that collaboration needs to be seen as a normal expectation of process, and that there should be a focus on meaningful outcomes, along with shared accountability. All of these seemed to us as desirable statements of equality that in an ideal setting should inform relationships between all persons, including those of low functional literacy and others in the community. Yet we question how likely it is these kind of arrangements may ever actually apply in an actual setting.

It seems more likely that persons of low functional literacy may wish to extract themselves from any circumstances of consensus creation in favour of topic avoidance. It seems implausible to us that they generally would be prepared to enter into social engagement and interaction with others with the aim of resolving communicative disputes.

Of relevance to this is the reduced life-world in which many lower-income people live that has been described by Sligo and Williams (1999) in their account of how such individuals were less engaged in community discussion of an important government social policy initiative, and were more non-committal in their views of it. Sligo and Williams describe how lower-income people experience relative disengagement from macro social policy issues, probably

associated with the pressures of day to day existence such as coping with the challenges of putting food on the table and paying the rent.

Project and findings

At the core of our study of adult literacy and employment are the extended qualitative interviews with 80 persons taking part in a variety of adult literacy programmes in Wanganui. As well as discovering the experiences of participants on their courses, we wished to explore certain elements in their family background, including early schooling and learning experiences and some aspects of their current lives. Written transcripts were examined line by line using grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992), to allow categories and constructs, collapsed into codes, to surface from the participants' own words. The intention was to ensure that each code could be supported by comments within the transcripts comprising "extensive amounts of rich data with thick description" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 514). Here we report first on a more quantitative aspect of the interview (voting habits), then on participant's descriptions of barriers to literacy and what they saw as their most important training needs.

We did not attempt to measure social connectedness as such. However, participants in adult literacy training programmes did answer a closed-ended question on voting habits as a potential indicator of such connectedness. We have compared these responses with a group of 40 "non-participants" who covered a wide social cross-section being sourced both from community agencies and as volunteers from a community survey. Thirty seven percent of participants

said they always voted, compared with 53% of non-participants. Similar portions of participants (27%) and non-participants (29%) voted sometimes, or never voted (11% and 9% respectively). Interestingly 15% of participants (compared with just 3% of non-participants) were undecided as to whether the practice of voting was important or not.

As a potential indicator of communication style and confidence we asked participants how they typically reacted when they felt someone was not listening to them. The majority of participants (43%) reported a passive communication strategy, while the majority of non-participants (42%) reported an assertive communication style.

Emerging from participants' interviews about their lives were a number of barriers to literacy coded according to 30 themes. Participants' top perceived literacy barriers are ranked by number of respondents commenting in the table below. The number of comments which recurred throughout an interview may be taken as some indication of 'intensity' of response.

Table 1. Participants' Perceptions of Literacy Barriers

	Respondents	Comments
Health-related Barriers	42	71
Family Environment	39	71
Goal Orientation	38	49
School not meeting Needs	33	53
School Teaching	27	67
School Peer Pressure, Bullying	25	30

Time: Employment Commitments	22	26
Time: Family/Community Commitments	18	20
Attitude or Motivation	17	25
Economic	16	20

The prominence of issues around health was noteworthy in that it drew to our attention structural problems over which most participants would have had little control. More than half the participants (42) mentioned a wide range of physical and mental health problems which had seriously disrupted schooling. Just fewer than half the interviewees mentioned aspects of the family environment as a barrier (including lack of support for learning at home, family violence, a parent dying, divorce, and being removed from school by a parent). Goal orientation was the term we used for participants lacking any or appropriate goals, feeling disempowered, or having no role models.

There followed a cluster of three factors associated with the difficulties that respondents had experienced at school. In many cases respondents described ways in which they felt unable to cope with school, undermined by it, or alienated by how they felt they had been treated there. Disparities between the ways in which people felt they learned best, and what was on offer at school, frequently surfaced. Some respondents told of how they “got into the wrong group” at school, so that feelings of inadequacy as learners were reinforced by others in a similar situation.

The sheer practical problems of attending literacy classes while also attempting to hold down employment was a further factor. Solo parents who had to juggle work, literacy learning and home or whānau¹ commitments had a particularly demanding set of challenges. Further, 17 participants mentioned attitude or motivation levels as a barrier. A number of these participants simply said they were 'not interested' in earlier training, others characterised themselves as 'lazy' or distracted by other activities. A further 16 mentioned economic barriers (such as the cost of courses and the need to work).

More often than not, we became aware of compounding effects for example, difficulties at school may have been worsened by the family shifting locations, by health difficulties, or by entering a network of friends who themselves felt disaffected from school or learning.

When participants discussed their literacy needs, despite the fact that they were in training, the traditional literacies of reading, writing, and maths received much less mention than non traditional literacies. Various interpersonal communication skills were the most frequently mentioned need (59 comments). For example, the ability to "talk to others", "people skills", social skills, listening skills, "getting on with others in the workplace", working in groups or teams, negotiating, and cross-cultural communication were outlined by respondents as important literacy needs. Descriptive comments from interviewees included: "If you can't work in a team or discuss a problem as an adult, you may as well stay at home" and, "...like, just walking down to the diary, you know, you...meet all sorts of people on your way there and each one of them takes a different type of

¹ Family, frequently extended family.

skill to converse with that person.” These responses all fell under this category of communication skills that do not involve manipulating text.

The need for interpersonal communication skills was followed closely by computer skills (51 comments²). In comparison, the need for reading and writing skills received 38 mentions (from 26 respondents) whereas life skills and confidence and a positive attitude were mentioned 34 times each. Altogether, communication and life skills combined with ‘attitude’ were mentioned a total of 127 times, compared with 67 mentions for reading, writing, and maths.

Discussion and Conclusion

Indications from our research in Wanganui are that a condition of low functional literacy excludes people in a profound and structural way from full and equal participation in society. For persons of low adult literacy, the barriers to participation in a society or the ‘communicatively integrated community’ can be best illustrated as a nexus of personal, familial, structural, and systemic factors that form barriers to education in childhood which flow on to barriers to education, employment, and community participation in adulthood. Barriers that might be described as psychological, including lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem and self-efficacy, frequently compounded by shame at perceived low functional literacy were noted as both a potential cause and consequence of low functional literacy. Those who are attending adult literacy courses demonstrate

² Computer skills were mentioned by 36 respondents (as opposed to 34 for communication skills, possibly because some participants were involved in literacy training as an outcome of their signing up for computer courses.

a need for broader communication and coping skills and for an improved self concept.

If this is the case, then while Habermas' ideal of complete equality in communication is an attractive ideal, in any practical terms it lacks value. This is because it is not only too dissociated from reality to be helpful, but also because it takes insufficient account of substantial practical barriers in the way of social participation for persons who may be described as deeply excluded from certain aspects of society. Our participants were less likely to vote and also seemed ambivalent about voting as a concept. Yet in general these people are not isolates, they connected to kin and friends and a number were involved in voluntary activities. We were reminded of what Robert Mahuta termed the "curious paradox" of Māori participation: 'The *marae*³ based world of Māori politics is so drenched with discussion, excitement and zest, and yet Māori voter participation in the electoral process indicates what some interpret as apathy' (Farrell 1992: Introduction).

In Habermas' view, consensus-building should be an intrinsic activity of civil society. That is, he holds that it is necessary for societies to pursue a shared conception of a way forward on matters of social import. However, there is no necessary connection between discussion of an issue within society and the formation of social "consensus" on that issue, for the reasons noted earlier. That is, what we take to be "public opinion" tends to be constructed by pollsters rather than being discursively produced within community groups. Goodnight (1997) observed that "public discourse is characterized most fundamentally by

□ Māori meeting house

controversy, not consensus" (p. 274). Therefore Habermas' orientation to consensus as emerging from community discussion should be understood as normative rather than descriptive. Hence we would see discussion-based consensus as characteristic of an emancipated society, probably yet to evolve, which knows how to engage all its citizens.

Habermas clarifies this in his comment that:

Only in an emancipated society, whose members' autonomy and responsibility have been realized, would communication have developed into the non-authoritarian and universally practiced dialogue from which both our model of reciprocally constituted ego identity and our idea of true consensus are always implicitly derived ... (Habermas, 1972, cited in Bubner, 1982, p. 47).

Descriptions of what it takes to be a highly emancipated citizen, such as that promulgated by Habermas, evoke an idealised person who is highly integrated into their community. Thus they do not seem to admit the possibility of multiple communities, each with its own preferences and approaches, occupying the same civic geography but potentially different psychological spaces.

Clearly, then, inclusiveness does not consist of a simple 'train them up' solution. We believe that if we as a society are to understand adult literacy within a context of social participation, our challenge may be to build our own awareness of how individuals understand their own community and sub-communities, and how they see themselves as existing within those entities.

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