Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 21 | Issue 2 Article 4

June 2017

Conceptual and Empirical Advances in Adult Literacy

Nelly P. Stromquist
stromqui@umd.edu

Conceptual and Empirical Advances in Adult Literacy

Nelly P. Stromquist

This article examines the current status of adult literacy, discussing the various theoretical and practical concerns expressed by individuals in academe and those in charge of implementing literacy programs. There have been important contributions by various scholars working in fields such as sociolinguistics, anthropology, cognitive psychology, and education. These contributions have highlighted the complexity, social embeddedness, and variety of uses of adult literacy. Nonetheless, there are still numerous aspects pertaining to the design, implementation, and impact of adult literacy programs that remain untreated by systematic research. To date, there has been limited overlapping of the concerns expressed by academicians and practitioners. This, coupled with the low status of adult literacy as a research field in most universities, accounts for the low productivity.

Cet article examine l'état actuel de l'alphabétisation des adultes et traite des différentes préoccupations théoriques et pratiques telles que perçues par les théoriciens et par les responsables de la mise en oeuvre de programmes d'alphabétisation. Il y a eu des contributions universitaires importantes dans des domaines comme la sociolinguistique, l'anthropologie, la psychologie cognitive et l'éducation. Elles ont fait ressortir la complexité, le maillage social et les différentes utilisations de l'alphabétisation des adultes. Néanmoins, de nombreux aspects comme le design, la mise en oeuvre et les résultats de l'alphabétisation ne sont pas abordés de façon systématique par la recherche. A date, il y a peu de points de rencontres entre les thèmes traités par les universitaires et ceux traités par les intervenants du champ. Cet état de chose, associé au faible statut de l'alphabétisation des adultes comme domaine de recherche dans la plupart des universités, explique le peu de résultats obtenus dans ce domaine.

The world of literacy work is wide and diverse. It comprises academicians and investigators in universities and research centers, practitioners managing literacy programs and other forms of adult education, and officials from various government sectors. Individuals working in academe include professionals from such disciplines as anthropology, social psychology, education, and, more recently, the cognitive sciences. Those involved in the administration and implementation of literacy programs range from educators with formal teaching credentials to individuals with far more practical experience than formal training.

Different actors in literacy bring to the field different conceptions of what aspects need to be understood and changed. In this article I highlight the contributions of several disciplines to literacy and identify the areas that remain to be investigated. In doing so, it contrasts the views of two sets of actors in literacy: practitioners and academicians/researchers. Although each of the two groups is far from being homogeneous, there are important differences between them in problem definition and approach that merit highlighting. This study relies on the existing research literature as well as

presentations made by academicians and practitioners at four major international conferences. For reasons of economy of space, speakers in these conferences are identified by last name only. The Windhoek and Guanajuato conferences were attended mostly by practitioners; the Philadelphia conference was attended by academicians and some representatives of international agencies; Hasselby had a combined representation of academicians and practitioners.

Defining and Measuring Literacy

An important concern within academe is the need for a precise and complete way to define literacy. Some academicians have been critical of the attempt to separate people into literate and illiterate, arguing that illiterates are individuals to whom print is closed but who are not necessarily ignorant. They consider the term "illiterate" inappropriate inasmuch as it conveys an on/off situation. Challenging the importance given to literacy, anthropologist Street maintains that literacy is being used to create an unnecessary distinction between people. In his words, "The great divide has been re-established by the appeal to literacy, apparently without the offensive appeals to inherent cultural and intellectual superiority that discredited its early phases" (Street, 1989, p. 60). Social historian Graff (1986) makes a similar point when he attacks the conceptual dichotomies between literate and illiterate, written and oral communication, and print and script for not capturing the complexities of actual circumstances.

Street (1991) contends that the theory of the "great divide" leads its advocates to assert that "ways of thinking, cognitive abilities, facility in logic, abstraction, and higher order mental operations are all integrally related to the achievement of literacy" and that conversely "illiterates are presumed to lack all of these qualities, to be able to think less abstractly, to be more embedded, less critical, less able to reflect upon, for instance, the nature of the language they use or the sources of their political oppression" (p. 165). Street makes a contribution in underscoring that literacy does not create automatic cognitive transformations; yet, many of those who advocate literacy do not consider the illiterate a tabula rasa. Also questionable is the implication that illiterates, insofar as they manage to survive in their social milieu (and there is plenty of evidence that they do), do not need to be the concern of educators or policy makers.

Anthropologists introduce a number of relativistic concerns, raising the question of whether there are other ways of inculcating the language and knowledge existing in any society. In the view of some anthropologists emphasis should be placed first on examining the communication practices of a particular society. They contend that perhaps print literacy is not the predominant means; that poetry, songs, and other cultural practices function as the common and effective alternatives.

Literacy as a Complex Cognitive Act vs. a Maldistributed Good

Cognitive psychologists accept the distinction between literacy and illiteracy but seek a broader definition of literacy, one in which other forms of transforming and conveying communication, i.e., other forms of "interpretation and manipulation of symbols" are considered (Lawrence, Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990; Steiz, 1981). Developments in cognitive science are serving to formulate learning theories with implications for literacy. For example, Bereiter (1990) identifies three emerging types of learning theories: those at the physical level, known as neurological theories of learning; those at the design level, which he terms "the characteristic level of psychological theorizing"; and those at the intentional level, at which more humanistic or philosophical theories may be found. Such theories seem to have expanded the kinds of questions about processing and interpreting information that are being raised. Thus, literacy research questions among cognitive scientists today range from "how are we able to identify the letter 'a' in its infinite variations?" to "how are we able to understand text?" (p. 607). Cognitive psychologists also see literacy as a complex representation system and increasingly seem to be combining neurological and psychological theories of learning. A common concern held by such professionals is represented in the assertions that, "We need to understand better the processes by which the brain manipulates symbols, signs, and various kinds of stimuli to produce information" and "We need to understand more the processes of cognition involved in reading/writing" (Stevenson, Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990).

For their part, sociolinguists assert that, "To write is an action understood much before the act of reading" (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990), thus underscoring that the attribution of meaning (reading) follows, rather than precedes, one's own production of meaning (writing). Sociolinguists also consider that literacy is a difficult cognitive task. Ferreiro (1990), a well-known scholar in Latin America, describes writing as "a very complex representational system" (p. 10). While Ferreiro's work has addressed mainly young children, she maintains that the cognitive process is the same for children and adults. In her view, "It is important to accept the knowledge they [the students] bring with them to the school, without imposing upon them the burden of a common, preconceived standard of ignorance at the beginning and applying a unique standard of performance at the end" (p. 11). Ferreiro advises that we need major conceptual changes to produce a more solid understanding of literacy process. She deplores the fact that in recent years literacy has become less of a pedagogical subject and more of a political, sociological, and anthropological subject (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990).

In academe there is no consensus as to whether the literacy acquisition process of adults is similar to that of children. Some, like Ferreiro, consider that divisions of literacy into child, young, and adult are "not useful." Others, however, contend that literacy demands of children are different from those of adults, who face tasks such as reading exit signs while driving on a freeway at 55 miles per hour or reading subtitles on a foreign film—tasks which do not require higher levels of comprehension but demand reading speeds beyond those attained by the average fourth grader (Venezky, 1990, p. 2).

In contradistinction with the view that literacy is a complex cognitive process that calls for careful definition and measurement is the view that illiteracy is fairly recognizable and that it is the product of accumulated social inequalities rather than individual failure to master complex skills. This view, held by many practitioners, is usually accompanied by the belief that adults and children approach literacy in very different ways. Many practitioners affirm that adult illiterates, moreso than children, are not totally illiterate: Most adults who cannot read and write can do some decoding, such as reading signs or recognizing a friend's signature. Also, practitioners maintain that among adults one finds a much greater heterogeneity in ability than among children (Flecha, 1990), which produces substantively different learning rates. Further, they contend that the adults' individual experiences (not just the socialization of their group, as sociolinguists propose) must be utilized in any process of adult education.

Practitioners often link the attainment of literacy to empowerment—the individual and collective capacity to affect his or her own destiny (Guanajuato Proceedings, 1987; Windhoek Proceedings, 1990). The practitioners' emphasis on literacy as an act with political implications reflects the strong influence of the work of Paulo Freire, whose notion of "conscientization" clearly shifts literacy from the neutral category of skill development and information acquisition to one of challenging the information given to the poor and engaging them into "writing and rewriting the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35).

The Power of Literacy

Among academicians there is some doubt that literacy brings about cognitive changes in reasoning, logical processes, and abstract thinking. Though these skeptical views frequently cite Scribner and Cole (1981) in their support (see, for instance, Street 1991), the contextual limitations of this study are usually not mentioned (e.g., the fact that the data used by these researchers was anchored in a non-Western society with limited access to print and thus not readily generalizable to other settings where the printed media is in much greater use). There is a tendency for those who endorse Scribner and Cole to be critical of the findings of Luria (1981) regarding cognitive changes among Soviet neoliterates, basing their criticism on the assertion that Luria's data was too embedded in a revolutionary context in which many opportunities emerged for marginal groups thus confounding the impact of literacy with many other concurrent factors.

Skeptics also doubt that literacy may play a role in individual social mobility. Notable among these contributions is the study by Graff (1979), whose study of the role of literacy in Canada in the 1900s found that literacy helped some individuals but did not create changes for deprived classes and ethnic groups. Graff asserts that literacy was used to solidify social hierarchies, empower elites, and ensure that people lower in the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites (cited in Gee, 1988, p. 205). In a subsequent review of the literature, sociolinguist Gee cites evidence from the United States and Britain which corroborates the findings noted by Graff in Canada that literacy which serves as

> a socializing tool of the poor, was seen as a possible threat if misused by the poor (for an analysis of their oppression and to make demands for power), and served as a means for maintaining the continued selection of members of one class for the best positions in the society. (Gee, 1986, p. 734)

Gee (1988) also contends that, "where such evidence does exist, the role of literacy is always more complex and contradictory, more deeply intertwined with other factors, than the literacy myth allows" (p. 196).

Literacy has been afflicted by impossible dreams. As Gee (1988) effectively summarizes the situation, it was expected that,

> Literacy [would] lead to logical and analytic modes of thought; general and abstract uses of language; critical and rational thought; a skeptical and questioning attitude; a distinction between myth and history; the recognition of the importance of time and space; complex and modern governments (with separation of church and state), political democracy and greater social equity; economic development; wealth and productivity; political stability; urbanization; and contraception (lower birth rate) (p. 196).

Clearly, no single skill or amount of knowledge by itself can accomplish all these objectives.

Many researchers are deeply aware that methods of learning literacy skills and functions of literacy vary considerably across societies. Thus, they distinguish between its functions (what literacy can do for individuals) and its uses (what individuals can do with literacy skills) (Heath, 1986b). Heath deplores the relatively small amount of research that gives us detailed insights into ways in which speakers in different communities "talk about" their language and how their views relate to their acquisition and retention of literacy skills. She says, "In particular we need studies of what happens to basic literacy skills once a formerly nonliterate group attains such skills. How are they extended and interrelated with social needs and functions so that they can be retained" (Heath, 1986a, p. 216; see also Heath, 1986b). She also goes on to assert that, "Much must be known about the psychological and social consequences of both illiteracy and nonschooled literacy before pushing ahead with goals such as UNESCO's mission to eradicate illiteracy in the world before the year 2000" (Heath, 1986b, p. 19).

Some sociolinguists find it appropriate to consider that literacy may be given selectively to a few adults who will then serve others. For instance, Heath (1986b) asserts that "a restricted literate class can increase the range of functions of written language without increasing the size of the literate population" (p. 16). Ferreiro (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990) concurs with the notion of collective literacy—the acceptance that one person in the family or the community with literacy ability can provide literacy services to others.

This view of delegated literacy is wholly at odds with the position of those who see literacy as empowerment. Many practitioners take literacy as a very important resource for every individual. In their view, literacy must strengthen the weak individual so that he or she is not exploited by an intimidating social environment. Likewise, many practitioners would oppose the notion of delegated literacy. To most practitioners, everyone needs literacy.

A number of individuals, particularly practitioners, readily identify as a critical outcome of literacy its psychosocial impact, which includes empowerment for negotiating better control of their social environment and a critical view of their society. Many practitioners—particularly those in developing countries—would put literacy in its immediate socioeconomic and political context. Moreover, practitioners would link literacy to a model of development where collective action is seen as desirable for structural change. Their interest, therefore, would not be limited to the progress of individuals. In some cases, such as in South Africa, literacy is seen as important because it is linked to the task of liberation, as a means to organize the mass movement (Leroux & Kholekile, Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

Many practitioners are driven by a strong belief in the power of literacy to produce autonomous individuals (Hall, Picon, & Kholekile, Windhoek Proceedings, 1990; Vio Grossi, Cadena, & Fals Borda, Guanajuato Proceedings, 1987). Because of this position, many of the practitioners' actions tend to be guided by a responsiveness to their clientele rather than predicated on pedagogical concepts. Thus, many practitioners would consider it perfectly reasonable to let the people decide whether they want first to acquire literacy skills or to engage in an income-generating project. This concern for new readers to be transformed as soon as possible into agents of social change would prompt practitioners to prefer research that is participatory in nature and that uses qualitative methodologies such as participant-observation and life histories. In this position, there is a strong congruence between literacy practitioners and feminists, both of whom consider that each individual must play a role in the changing of his or her conditions and those of society.

Contributions from Research and Reflection

Literacy research regarding children ("early literacy") is well accepted in academic circles and takes place under labels such as "reading" and "writing" (see pertinent review by Steiz, 1981). This is a product of the priority given to

formal education and the concern with future rather than current generations. In contrast, research on adult literacy has a secondary status in academe, judging from the fact that few academicians engage in it. Further, adult education or literacy programs exist in only a handful of universities. The Directory of Inter-American Universities (1991) in a list of about 340 North and Latin American universities identifies three such programs. Literacy as a label per se is appearing increasingly in some academic sources, but its focus on adults is still absent. A case in point is the recent work, *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Literacy Research* by Beach et al. (1992). For their part, practitioners receive limited funds to study the programs they design, most of the support going instead to program implementation. They tend to possess, or perceive themselves as having, limited research skills. Hence, they seldom produce research studies.

The research on literacy that has taken place in academic circles has been very limited in comparison to other educational subjects and issues. Nonetheless, it has covered a wide range of foci.

The studies by Heath have brought attention to "literacy events" (transactional/dialogical acts) and to the need to interpret them in relation to the larger sociocultural process which they may exemplify or reflect, such as patterns of care-giving roles, use of space and time, and age and sex segregation (Heath, 1986b; Gee, 1986). Sociolinguist Gee (1988) notes that, "One does not think for oneself; rather, one always thinks for (really with and through) a group—the group which socialized one into the practice of thinking" (1988, p. 209). Hence, since the literacy practices of social groups "are always fully embedded in their whole repertoires of social practices, going well beyond language and literacy per se, we must study these groups as wholes" (p. 210).

Another contribution of importance by academics has been the clear realization that any study of literacy needs to be grounded in the understanding of language and cognitive development. As Gee (1986) puts it, "Language and literacy acquisition are forms of socialization, in this case socialization into mainstream ways of using language in speech and print, mainstream ways of meaning, of making sense of experience" (p. 742). Gee also recognizes that literacy is often confused with essay-text literacy, a form of making sense that is associated with mainstream middle- and upper-class groups and is best represented by the ideology, and sometimes the practice, of academics (1986, p. 731).

Within academe, Eisemon is one of the few researchers conducting investigations on the impact of literacy upon information processing. In an investigation conducted with Ratzlaff and Patel (1990), Eisemon concludes that if literacy is to become functional, texts and tasks for the development and the measurement of literacy should be more naturalistic and include the teaching of procedures, not just narratives. In a study of neoliterates in Kenya, Eisemon

and Nyamete (1990) discovered that the decoding skills alone were not sufficient to follow instructions in the use of pesticides for small-scale agriculture. They found that literacy skills need to be accompanied by proper knowledge, in this case scientific knowledge about how chemicals operate on plants.

The work of educators in academe has concentrated on describing, analyzing, and evaluating literacy programs, particularly literacy campaigns (Mehran, 1992; Arnove, 1986; Arnove & Graff, 1987; Bhola, 1984). Some work has also focused on the politics of adult education, which includes discussion of how the state responds to literacy needs of marginal populations (Torres, 1990). Overall, this research has shown the relative advantages of coherent and politically-motivated mass literacy campaigns over incremental programs and the tendency of many states to be sensitive to literacy needs only insofar as their actions provide them with a modicum of legitimacy.

Some recent work on literacy, not based on empirical investigations but rather on profound reflection of the role of literacy in society, has been conducted by a group of educators, sociolinguists, and sociologists such as Macedo (1992), McLaren (1988 & 1992), and Giroux (1989 & 1992). Their work examines literacy in the context of cultural politics, treating literacy as socially constructed forms of cultural and communicative practices that embody a substantial amount of domination by powerful segments of society. These scholars advocate "critical literacy," which they define as a cultural process that creates both an awareness of the ideological manipulations of knowledge as well as an understanding of the possibilities for social transformation. Their work, clearly inspired by the contributions of Paulo Freire—one of the few individuals who seems to cut across the academic-practioner boundaries—alerts us to consider literacy beyond basic decoding skills and to consider it as a cultural practice that can be used not only for liberation but also for "stupidification" (Macedo, 1992).

Outside academe, research on adult literacy has focused on program description and evaluation. A worthwhile piece, stemming from an initiative of various development agencies, has been the work by Lind and Johnston (1990). It provides a comprehensive review of literacy programs in developing countries, exploring such issues as the concepts of literacy, state objectives for engaging in literacy, approaches to literacy and their implementation, individual motivation for participation, and the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in literacy programs. An earlier effort, also initiated by development agencies, sought to "test and demonstrate the economic and social returns to literacy" and to evaluate the connection between literacy and economic development (UNESCO/UNDP, 1978). Both works underscore the importance of contextual conditions, i.e., the supportive role of economic, political, and cultural dimensions in enabling literacy to emerge as a persistent social practice. The UNESCO/UNDP study found it extremely difficult to

undertake a comparative study of the long-term effects of literacy, particularly when implementation often lagged behind intended objectives.

Careful evaluation of literacy programs is scarce and usually limited to reporting completion rates and skill achievement. An exception to this pattern is the recent work by Comings et al. (1992) assessing a national literacy program in Nepal. This study is unusual in that it looks at the retention of literacy skills and factors that tend to explain literacy achievement. Their findings indicate that even after short interventions, adult literacy tends to be retained, although more so for reading than for writing. Multivariate analysis of factors promoting literacy achievement found that teacher-related variables (classroom teaching behaviors, age, and opinions about the program) accounted for 38% of literacy achievement scores (language and numeracy). Teacher-related variables were slightly more powerful than individual-related variables (which accounted for 31% of the variance), a finding of significance given the major obstacles adult illiterates, being poor and subject to a host of socioeconomic and emotional problems, have to face at the individual level.

An Unfinished Research Agenda

Notwithstanding the above contributions, there remain numerous aspects within adult literacy yet to be researched. To begin with, while it is highly probable that adults learn differently from children, studies are missing regarding how the learning process affects adults or what teaching methods are suitable for them. While several practitioners have observed that a more productive learning sequence among adults would be to engage first in numeracy and then move into literacy, no investigation has examined this proposition.

Second, there is the question of the population to be served. Practitioners would also like to obtain more knowledge about the adults they are serving or seek to serve. What are the characteristics of literacy program participants? What physical, emotional, and cognitive needs do they have? What obstacles do they face regarding attendance and performance in literacy programs? Many literacy programs attempt to understand their "target" audience before implementation, but these efforts are usually brief and superficial.

An important concern with implementation derives from the difficulties of providing literacy to poor adults who face significant problems in health, food procurement, and access to printed materials. Program implementors also realize the limited possibilities of success of programs provided to individuals under unstable political and social conditions (e.g., refugees, migrants, homeless). For instance, a common problem regarding women revolves around the issue of how to combine literacy with the development of other skills so that it becomes more appealing to them. The practitioners' own experience has taught them that the combination of health and literacy is particularly attractive to many women. A similar argument has been made for the combination of income-generation skills and literacy.

Linked to participation and given the fact that the majority of illiterates across the world are women, much work remains to be conducted on the gender dimension: How does the sexual division of labor differentially affect participation and literacy acquisition by men and women? How do notions of sexual control affect women's physical and psychological space? What obstacles emerge during the various stages in the life cycle of the women participants? One additional concern that has emerged in the last five years is that of the likely negative impact of structural adjustment policies on education provision, particularly literacy. Given the role of women in family survival, it is likely that their availability for literacy programs will be seriously affected.

Although there are several dissertations on the subject of adult literacy, particularly dissertations conducted by United States and European doctoral students, only one study seems available in book form focusing on the participation of women in literacy programs. Entitled *Alfabetizacion y Mujeres* (Literacy and Women), this study was conducted at the request of the NGO implementing literacy programs in Honduras. The study focused on the characteristics of the women participating in these programs, their reasons for taking part in them, and their assessment of program features and usefulness. This study supports previous accounts reporting constraints to women's participation derived from domestic tasks and spousal objections; as with earlier reports, it suggests the need to have women-only literacy groups to facilitate the women's participation in class discussion (Ooijens, 1990). Most knowledge about the participation of women in literacy programs comes from relatively unsystematic accounts presented by practitioners. Several individuals in academe, however, have produced insightful qualitative studies (Rockhill, 1987; Goldstein, 1992) or developed summaries of smaller and disparate studies (Stromquist, 1990; Bown, 1990).

Third is the issue of "points of entry" into literacy programs. This is of particular interest because of the practitioners' desire to know what problems and topics have a strong appeal among low-income, marginal people and therefore can serve as key entry points. Linked to this is a need for a greater understanding of community initiatives in literacy and related efforts to improve the community's socioeconomic condition. How can local community structures and institutions be mobilized to provide and sustain literacy programs? To what extent do men and women organize themselves and for what ends? A common question here also is the relative importance of health and income generation as strategies to introduce literacy.

Hautecour (1989) is an educator and literacy practitioner who has given serious recognition to the problem of low enrollments. He observes that "the population on which an imperative and urgent 'need' has been projected is not coming forward" (p. 130). His experience, which echoes that of many practitioners, is that many organizations fail to attract the desired number of illiterates given the proportion of illiterates in their area. In his native Canada, literacy councils recruit volunteer tutors but do not succeed equally in the

recruitment of volunteers to participate as learners in literacy programs. Consequently the councils are sometimes forced to abandon their literacy programs or even to redefine themselves to operate within a school environment in order to implement illiteracy preventive measures. He notes that in Canada literacy programs reach no more than 1% of the illiterates and concludes that there is a need for greater research on "the conditions which are most acceptable and most desirable for the joint management of supply and demand" (1989, p. 140). The poor enrollment and retention of learners in literacy programs have often been noted by many literacy practitioners; it clearly typifies literacy programs across a wide range of physical settings in the third world (Picon, Brown, & Zaal, Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

Fourth, research on the implementation of literacy programs is an area that needs much greater attention. It is also the area about which practitioners need most help from researchers. Several aspects of the implementation of literacy programs remain to be studied:

* The question of literacy materials: How to develop culture-sensitive materials; how to develop gender-sensitive materials, i.e., how to respect cultural values while transforming some of them; how to develop literacy materials that represent an appropriate transition between basic literacy and advanced literacy (i.e., postliteracy materials and strategies).

* The question of appropriate instructional methodologies. This concern has been identified in reference to the design of "effective lessons." Practitioners observe that sometimes a lesson that could be covered in a month takes three months. Multiple reasons may be at work for this: poor program attendance due to survival demands, limited ability on the part of the adult learner, limited ability on the part of the teacher. Practitioners desperately need research on this issue.

* The question of instructors: How to select them effectively; how to train them appropriately; how to provide them with ongoing support; how to reduce the instability/turnover among them when monetary incentives are so limited.

Fifth, there is a need for more evaluations of qualitative outcomes of literacy programs. Among those who see illiteracy as a consequence of social inequalities, there is a political economy that accounts for the limited attention the state gives to literacy programs. An important research agenda would be to know better this political economy and to identify with precision the spaces for effective work with the state. There is a strong belief that there are extremely successful programs taking place but that they need to be identified and documented. Literacy as empowerment necessitates learners who are active in their acquisition of literacy; this is seen as critical because if learners are to become agents in the process of social change they must prepare themselves for that role. Yet, we know very little about how to involve adult learners in the design and implementation of literacy programs and how to develop methodologies of instruction that are participatory. There are frequent

calls for literacy methods that are "dialogic," "horizontal," "critical," and "participatory." While these principles tend to be widely accepted, their translation into classroom strategies remains uncharted terrain. Literacy as an empowerment process implies a content that enables individuals to understand their current condition and to form a vision of an alternative society. In fact, the limited research that has been conducted by practitioners seems to have concentrated on the identification of key generative words, as reportedly is occurring among literacy programs in Latin America (Picon, Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

Sixth, another important research concern among practitioners, linked to an effective empowering of individuals and collectivities, is that of the transition from literacy to postliteracy. If literacy is to give way to greater knowledge, what strategies can be used to move the neoliterates from simple to complex yet accessible texts? How can literate environments be created in diverse communities?

The construction of literacy as political has led numerous practitioners to link the provision of literacy to the understanding of other social practices. In Latin America, for instance, literacy programs are often tied to discussion of human rights, local development, indigenous culture, and organization. Practitioners, however, do not manifest a blind faith in literacy. Rather, many of them consider it "just one small piece in a general struggle for democracy" (Yanz, Hasselby Proceedings, 1989). The questions that they ask in the path toward democracy are profound and include: how literacy skills can be effectively linked to development of a collective critical consciousness and how can this consciousness be linked to development of a mass movement. A concern underlying the latter question is how to move from a project-level intervention to action of massive proportions. Many practitioners, particularly those working in NGOS, realize that to be successful literacy programs will have to be stable and institutionalized. These programs will also need to be accompanied by socioeconomic development programs. This understanding creates an unresolved tension among many practitioners. They recognize, on the one hand, that sound national literacy policies by the state are necessary; on the other hand, they realize that the state may coopt and distort literacy programs to serve narrow interests such as those of employers, who are seen as interested in developing productive workers rather than workers with critical minds (Marshall & Bakumba, Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

While many academicians take for granted that the delivery agency is the regular school system, practitioners—especially those in developing countries —are more likely to consider the role of nonformal education agencies in the provision of literacy, both in the design and implementation agencies. This occurs because of the practitioners' concern with the creation of oppositional, contested meanings through the written world. Thus, many practitioners would like to develop a deeper understanding of the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the potential they offer for effective literacy

programs. In nations with repressive governments, practitioners seek knowledge regarding types of programs NGOs could develop to create democratic spaces. On the other hand, it is clear that even though NGOs are numerous and carry out extremely important development work, few actually conduct literacy work. Illustrative of this common situation is Pakistan, where there exist 5000 NGOs duly registered with the government but where only 40 to 50 are estimated to work on literacy (Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

Conclusions

While there is diversity both within academe and in the field, researchers and practitioners are pursuing different research agendas, agendas that are shaped by different assumptions and concerns. While academe is making contributions to a more carefully defined and measured literacy, to understanding its functions and applications, and to describing the conditions under which literacy programs have occurred, it is producing relatively little to facilitate and improve the implementation of literacy programs.

In part because of the tradition of examining children's literacy, a significant amount of research does not address issues of power and unequal distribution of resources in society and how these affect the desire or possibility of adults to attain literate status. Often, there has been a tendency to see as successful a literacy program that creates effective and habitual readers. In contrast, a more political view of literacy would see as successful a literacy program that leads a community to become socially aware and mobilized for social transformation.

Clearly, there is a need for more coordinated action between researchers and practitioners. The academicians' emphasis on literacy as a complex act of cognition and one that is embedded in its sociocultural context could illuminate the understanding of learners in literacy programs and thus influence the training of literacy teachers and the pedagogical success of literacy programs. Theories of human learning and cognition do stand to make contributions. The practitioners' concern with literacy as a necessary step in the quest for individuals to understand the political and technological nature of the contemporary world should help to establish a clear link between literacy and politics, which in turn would clarify why the constraints on literacy so often surpass its promise.

Recent developments forecast that the understanding of literacy as a process of social transformation will likely continue to depend on grass-roots efforts. The African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation (Arusha, 1990) defines the literacy rate as "an index of the capacity for mass participation in public debate, decision-making, and general development processes" (p. 31). The endorsement of this view in academic circles would be a major positive step in the understanding and promotion of literacy.

References

Arusha (1990). *African charter for popular participation in development and transformation.* Arusha: International Conference on Popular Participation in the Recovery and Development Process in Africa.

Arnove, R. (1986) *Education and revolution in Nicaragua.* New York: Praeger.

Arnove, R. & Graff, H. (1987). *National literacy campaigns: Historical and comparative perspectives.* New York: Plenum Press.

Beach, R., Green, J., Kamil, M., & Shanahan, T. (1992). *Multidisciplinary perspectives on literacy research.* Urbana: National Conference on Research in English and National Council of Teachers of English.

Bereiter, C. (1990). Aspects of an educational learning theory. *Review of Educational Research, 60*(4), 603-624.

Bhola, H. S. (1984). *Campaining for literacy.* Paris: UNESCO.

Bown, L. (1990). *Preparing the future—Women, literacy and development.* (ActionAid Development Report No. 4). London: ActionAid.

Comings, J., Shrestha, C., & Smith, C., (Eds.). (1992). A secondary analysis of a Nepalese National Literacy Program *Comparative Education Review, 36*(2), 212-226.

Eisemon, T. & Nyamete, A. (1990). School literacy and agricultural modernization in Kenya. *Comparative Education Review, 34*(2), 161-176.

Eisemon, T., Ratzlaff, J., & Patel, V. (1990). *Reading instructions for using commercial medicines: When do literacy and numeracy become functional?* Paper presented at the International Conference on World Literacy in the Year 2000: Research and Policy Dimensions, University of Pennsylvania.

Ferreiro, E. (1990). *Schooling and literacy in Latin American children: Growing up in poverty.* Paper presented at the International Conference on World Literacy in the Year 2000: Research and Policy Dimensions, University of Pennsylvania.

Flecha, R. (1990). *Educacion de las personas adultas.* Barcelona: El Roure Editorial, S.A.

Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Gee, J. (1988). The legacies of literacy: From Plato to Freire through Harvey Graff. *Harvard Educational Review, 58* (2),195-212.

Gee, J. (1986). Orality and literacy: From the savage mind to ways with words. *TESOL Quarterly, 20*(4), 719-746.

Giroux, H. & Flecha, R. (1992). *Igualdad educativa y diferencia cultural.* Barcelona: El Roure Editorial, S.A.

Giroux, H. & McLaren, P. (Eds.). (1989). *Critical pedagogy, the state, and cultural struggle.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Goldstein, B. (1992). *Re/learning literacy in the rural U.S.: Adult education for women as students and parents.* Paper presented at the VIII World Congress of Comparative Education, Prague.

Graff, H. (1979). *The literacy myth: Literacy and social structure in the 19th century city.* New York: Academic Press.

Graff, H. (1986). The legacies of literacy: Continuities and contradictions in western society and culture. In S. de Castell, A. Luke & K. Egan (Eds.), *Literacy, society, and schooling.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guanajuato Proceedings. (1987). Latin American Assembly on "Popular Education in the 90s." Guanajuato, Mexico, 9-14 November. Personal notes.

Hasselby Proceedings. (1989). "Women and Literacy: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" conference. Hasselby Slott, Sweden, 8-10 June. Personal notes.

Hautecour, J.- P. (1989). Generous supply, barred demand: The current paradox of literacy. In M. Taylor & J. Draper (Eds.), *Adult literacy perspectives.* Toronto: Culture Concepts.

Heath, S. (1986a). Critical factors in literacy development. In S. de Castell, A. Luke, & K. Egan (Eds.), *Literacy, society, and schooling.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heath, S. (1986b). The functions and uses of literacy. In S. de Castell, A. Luke & K. Egan (Eds.), *Literacy, society, and schooling.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lind, A. & Johnston, A. (1990). *Adult literacy in the third world: A review of objectives and strategies.* Stockholm: Swedish International Development Authority.
Luria, A.R. (1981). *Language and consciousness.* New York: Plenum.
Macedo, D. (1992). *Literacy for stupidification: The pedagogy of big lies.* Unpublished manuscript.
McLaren, P. (1988). Culture or canon? Critical pedagogy and the politics of literacy. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*(2).
McLaren, P. (1992). Literacy research and the postmodern turn: Cautions from the margines. In R. Beach, J. Green, M. Kamil, & T. Shanahan (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives on literacy research.* Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.
Mehran, G. (1992). Social implications of literacy in Iran. *Comparative Education Review, 36*(2), 194-211.
National Conference on Research in English and National Council of Teachers of English. (1992). *Multidisciplinary perspectives on literacy research.* Urbana: NCRE and NCTE.
Ooijens, J. (Ed.). (1990). *Alfabetizacion y mujeres: La experiencia del proyecto IHDER/ANACH.* The Hague: Centro para el Estudio de la Educacion en paises en vias de Desarrollo.
Philadelphia Proceedings. (1990). "World Literacy: Policy and Research Dimensions" conference. Philadelphia, 4-7 October. Personal notes.
Rockhill, K. (1987). Gender, language, and the politics of literacy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 8*(2), 153-167.
Scribner, S. & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Steiz, V. (1981). Literacy and the school child: Some perspectives from an educated country. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 3*(6), 15-23.
Street, B. (1989). Literacy—"Autonomous" v. "ideological" model. In M. Taylor & J. Draper (Eds.), *Adult literacy perspectives.* Toronto: Culture Concepts.
Street, B. (1991). International literacy year: Rhetoric and reality. *Adult Education and Development, 36,* pp. 161-167.
Stromquist, N.P. (1990). Women and illiteracy: The interplay of gender subordination and poverty. *Comparative Education Review, 34*(1), 95-111.
Torres, C. (1990). *The politics of nonformal education in Latin America.* New York: Praeger.
UNESCO/UNDP. (1978) *The experimental world literacy programme: A critical assessment.* Paris: The Unesco Press and UNDP.
Venezky, R. (1990). Definitions of literacy. In R. Venezky, D. Wagner, & B. Ciliberti (Eds.), *Toward defining literacy.* Newark: International Reading Association.
Windhoek Proceedings. (1990). Worldwide NGO Consultation Forum on Literacy. Windhoek, Namibia, 14-19 October. Personal notes.