

**Biographical narratives and
individual learning plans (ILPs):
comparing 'personal' and 'official'
representations of adult
literacy learners**

Sandra Varey

Department of Educational Research

May 2010

Introduction

- The Skills for Life strategy (DfES, 2001)
- Literacy: the debate
- Researching in a low-trust environment
- Research design and access
- 'Personal' and 'official' representations
- Why biographies?
- Why ILPs?
- Some emerging themes ...

The Skills for Life strategy (DfES, 2001)

- £5 billion spent 2001-2007; £9 billion by 2011 (House of Commons, 2009)
- Many changes in infrastructure since 2001
- Target: 95% of adults to have functional literacy and numeracy by 2020
- One adult in five 'not functionally literate' (Moser, 1999)
- Enabling adults to fulfil their potential (Moser, 1999)
- Focus on economy and employability (Leitch, 2006)
- 'people with poor literacy and numeracy skills'; 'remedial action'; 'skills deficiencies'(House of Commons, 2009)

Approaches to literacy

Social practices view

- Complex human activities
- Not a set of skills to be learned
- Does not simply exist in texts
- Is essentially social and exists in the interaction between people
- Considered in its plural form, *literacies* – dynamic and fluid

(Barton and Hamilton, 1998)

Autonomous / deficit view

- Is a set of technical skills
- These skills are detached from the social contexts in which they are used
- Learning involves the structured acquisition of hierarchical skills
- Adults are defined by their lack of skills

(Maclachlan, 2004)

Adult Literacy curriculum levels

The National Standards for literacy, with examples and school equivalents:

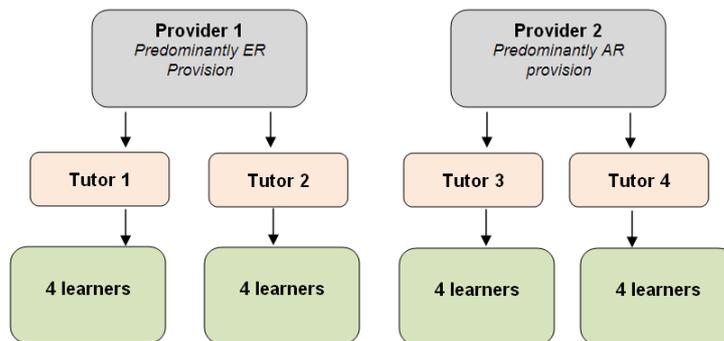
National Standard	At this level, adults will be able, for example, to:	School level equivalent
Entry 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> read and obtain information from common signs and symbols 	Level 1 (age 5)
Entry 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> use punctuation correctly, including capital letters, full stops and question marks 	Level 2 (age 7)
Entry 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> organise writing in short paragraphs 	Level 3 (age 9)
Level 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify the main points and specific detail in texts 	Level 4 (age 11)
Level 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> read and understand a range of texts of varying complexity accurately and independently 	GCSE A*-C (age 16)

(DfES, 2001)

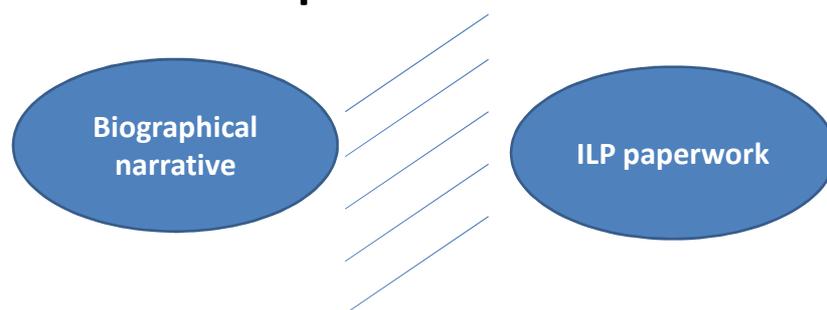
Researching in a low-trust environment

- Change and uncertainty
- 'Adult Responsive' and 'Employer Responsive' funding streams (House of Commons, 2009)
- Now many different providers and types of provision
- Confusion over changing professional requirements (Kerwin, Appleby and McCulloch, 2010)
- Embedding and 14-19 = changing contracts
- Tutors as the gatekeepers

Research design and access to participants

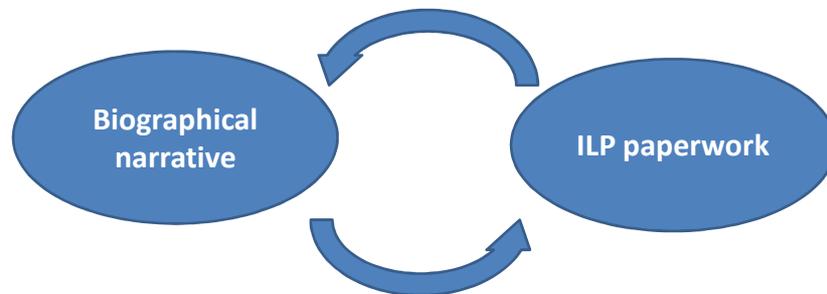


'Personal' and 'official' representations



What subject positions are constructed by and for the adults in each?
 What meanings are assigned to their literacy programmes in each?
 What are the similarities and differences between each representation
 and the implications for the Skills for Life strategy?

'Personal' and 'official' representations



What subject positions are constructed by and for the adults in each?
 What meanings are assigned to their literacy programmes in each?
 What are the similarities and differences between each representation and the implications for the Skills for Life strategy?

Why biographies?

'People telling their own stories reveal more about their own inner lives than any other approach could' (Atkinson, 1998)

'We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell ... our narrative identities are the stories we live by' (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich, 2006)

'Examining the relationship between lives and learning does not simply mean looking at what is going on in people's lives at any given moment, but also developing an understanding of 'where they are coming from'' (Barton, Ivanič, Appleby, Hodge and Tusting, 2007)

The ESRC-funded Learning Lives project focuses on 'what learning 'means' and 'does' in the lives of adults' (TLRP, 2009)

From interviews ...

- Four interviews
- Ethical considerations
- Activity-led interviews
- Multi-modal approach
- Participatory
- Less structure, more focus on literacy

To biographical narrative...

Interview data is compiled into a neonarrative:

In the Neonarrative method the narrative is concerned with developing a plausible account where meaning is constructed from the personal histories of participants embedded within the social history of their world. Its bricolage of approaches is composed of autobiography and interview.
(Stewart, 1997)

Why ILPs?

'In the contemporary workplace, workers across a variety of sites are being confronted with having to renegotiate their knowing, their doing, and their worker identity'

(Iedema and Scheeres, 2003)

Adult learners as central to the future of economic success in the UK.

'An elevated but submissive position' (Osgood, 2009)

Overview of two participants

Jalisa

FE college
 Full academic year
 Sat level 1 test in January
 Taking level 2 test in June
 Final interview June / July

Louise

Local authority provider
 15-week Move On course
 Local business centre
 Taking level 2 May 2010
 Int 3 and 4: end May / June

Jalisa

'I'll probably always end up talking about Katie but try and steer me away from it.'

Katie is 'brain damaged and autistic. She's got right-sided weakness and she's got behavioural problems and epilepsy'.

'Well she's got a trust fund, because they messed up when she was born. So she's got a trust fund, and they tried other carers but she wouldn't have them. Because, I don't know, she just wouldn't have them. And then I got back in touch with my friend again, and she said, 'Oh, I'll take her off your hands for an hour or two'. 'Cause she could see I was getting to the end of my tether. And that's how it all started, basically.'

What meanings does Jalisa assign to her literacy course?

'I can actually plan ahead now.

Were you not able to before?

No, I only used to plan like a day in advance. I never used to plan further than a day. But I can plan a bit further ahead now, so it's a lot better.'

'Mainly because I've always wanted a degree in English, always. And it was something that I've wanted from school and I've never got round to doing it. I've always been good at English, it's my best subject and I had to leave school without getting any qualifications at all. Nothing. I didn't get nothing because I didn't do any of my exams.'

'What it were though, because it were so easy, I kept second guessing myself. So I'd think, 'Hang on a minute. This is too easy, this is'. But, yeah, I just got four wrong. They would have been spelling mistakes probably, because I'm not very good on spellings.'

Louise

'It's my ideal job. I've always wanted to do it and I couldn't think of anything else to do. Nothing better to do. It's just what I love doing. You get so much from it and they're really, you know, I think they give you so much as well back ... when you're not there they *do* really miss you so it's nice because when you come back you feel wanted, you know? You feel like somebody cares about you.'

'Relationships with adults can be quite difficult when you compare them to relationships with children. You find that a relationship with a child, that you have in a school, can be a lot easier from a relationship you have with an adult.'

'[The children] are getting something out of it and it makes me feel good that they are. But also I think it is important to me, it's being cared about as well. I know it's probably a silly thing but my family aren't very close and my upbringing wasn't very, you know. I don't really see my dad and so I just love it ... So to go to work every day and have that in my life and it's not through a relationship that could break down...'

What meanings does Louise assign to her literacy course?

'Just recently I'm looking at doing a degree in Psychology but because I work and because I work full-time, I can't afford to do it ... I *will* do it. I'll find a way. Because I've pondered on it for such a long time now and I think, 'You're interested in it, Louise. You've got to do it! You've got to do it because you want to do it!'

'I didn't have an overdraft and now I've got a big one. And that's what I'm doing now. I've got months of trying to pay back money. So it's like a whole year taken out of your life.'

'I'm really a bit worried about [the level 2 test] because I think since I've started this course it hasn't done me the – it's sort of put me back and not forward. I think it's made me doubt myself on a lot of things. I think maybe looking back I shouldn't have done it because I already had my GCSE.'

Discussion

References

- Atkinson, R. (1998) *The Life Story Interview: Qualitative Research Methods, Volume 44*. London: Sage.
- Barton, D., Ivanič, R., Appleby, Y., Hodge, R. and Tusting, K. (2007) *Literacy, Lives and Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (1998) *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. London: Routledge.
- DfES (2001) *Skills For Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*. Available at: http://rwp.excellencegateway.org.uk/readwriteplus/bank/ABS_Strategy_Doc_Final.pdf [Accessed on 2 May 2010].
- Fawns, M. and Ivanič, R. (2006) 'Form-filling as a social practice: taking power into our own hands'. In Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (eds.) (2006) *Powerful Literacies*. Leicester: NIACE. Pages 80-93.
- Hamilton, M. (2009) 'Putting words in their mouths: the alignment of identities within system goals through the use of Individual Learning Plans'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 35:2, 221-242.
- Horrock, S. (2006) 'Scholarship, teaching and calculative thinking: a critique of the audit culture in UK nurse education'. *Nurse Education Today*, January 2006, Vol 26, Issue 1, p.p.4-10.
- House of Commons (2009) *Skills for Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy, Third Report of Session 2008-09*. Available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmpubacc/154/154.pdf> [Accessed on 3 May 2010].
- Iedema, R. and Scheeres, H. (2003) 'From Doing Work to Talking Work: Renegotiating knowing, doing and identity', *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 24, No.3, p.p. 316-337.
- Iedema, R. (2003) *Discourses of Post-Bureaucratic Organization*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Kerfoot, D. (2003) 'The problematic professional: Gender and the transgression of 'professional' identity'. In Barry, J., Dent, M. and O'Neill, M. (eds.) (2003) *Gender and the public sector: professionals and managerial change*. London: Routledge. Pages 205-211.
- Kerwin, M., Appleby, Y. and McCulloch, S. (2010) forthcoming in RaPAL journal, No. 71, Spring 2010

References

- Leitch, S. (2006) 'Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills'. Available at: <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/leitch> [Accessed on 3 May 2010]
- Maclachlan, K. (2004) 'Changing policies, changing practices: changing approaches to adult literacy learning'. Glasgow University. Available at: http://www.gla.ac.uk/centres/cradall/docs/Botswana-papers/Maclachlanfinal_46.pdf [Accessed on 3 May 2008].
- McAdams, D.P., Josselson, R. and Lieblich, A. (eds.) (2006) *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*. American Psychological Association: Washington DC.
- Moser, C. (1999) *A Fresh Start: Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy for Adults – Summary and Recommendations of the Working Group*. Sudbury: Department for Education and Employment. Summary report available at: <http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/mosergroupindex.htm> [Accessed on 3 May 2010].
- Osgood, J. (2009) 'Childcare workforce reform in England and 'the early years professional': a critical discourse analysis', *Journal of Education Policy*, 24 (6), 733-751.
- Sachs, J. (2001) 'Teacher professional identity: competing discourses, competing outcomes', *Journal of Educational Policy*, 16: 2, p.p.149-161.
- Sreide, E. (2007) 'The public face of teacher identity - narrative construction of teacher identity in public policy documents', *Journal of Educational Policy*, 22(2), March 2007, p.p.129-146.
- Stewart, R. (1997) 'Constructing Neonarratives: A pluralistic approach to research'. *Journal of Art and Design Education*, Vol 16, No 13, 1997, Blackwell, p.p.223-229.
- Strathern, M. (ed.) (2000) *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stronach, I., Corbin, B., McNamara, O., Stark, S. and Warne, T. (2002) 'Towards an uncertain politics of professionalism: teacher and nurse identities in flux', *Journal of Educational Policy*, 17:1, p.p.109-138.
- Teaching and Learning Research Programme (2009) 'Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course homepage'. Available at: <http://www.learninglives.org/> [Accessed on 3 May 2010].
- Tusting, K. (2010) 'Paperwork in the workplace: responses to 'imposed' literacy practices'. Forthcoming in *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*.