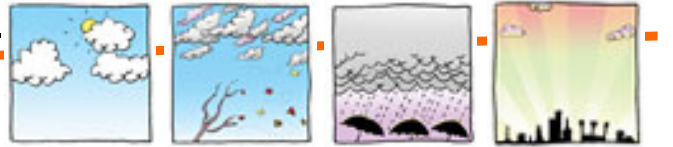


four seasons in one day –

literacies in changing climates

Adult Literacy Conference ■ Melbourne ■ September 10-11, 2004



What use is theory to the seasoned adult literacy practitioner?

Liz Suda

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When I began my research into the humanities department's process of developing a policy on oracy in the curriculum in an inner city secondary school in the late eighties, this is how I was introduced to the staff meeting: "Liz Suda is here to dangle her microphone from the highest turret of her ivory tower". What was going on here? I was after all merely a teacher on family leave who had decided to do some further study in the field of education; a fellow practitioner wanting to improve practice. And I had initiated this study from the very same process the teachers were about to embark upon, a desire to improve practice and learner outcomes. Why the tongue in cheek reference to academia as the ivory tower of superior knowledge? This insider/outsider distinction was reminiscent of the epithet:

"Those who can, do;

Those who can't, teach;

Those who can't teach, teach teachers"

And perhaps one should add: "Those who can't teach teachers, do research".

I had just been aligned with the dark side of the gulf between theory and practice, the academic educator versus the practising teacher. Later I would be cautioned by my university supervisors about the dangers of 'going native', when the researcher gets too close to the subjects of research, thereby compromising critical analysis and academic rigour. I found myself caught between the challenging idealism of theory, and genuine empathy with fellow teachers for whom the realities of the job were more a matter of survival than altruism (Suda 1992).

Now, after many more years of teaching and learning, I find myself in a similar position straddled between the world of practice and theory. Or is it theory and practice? Which came first? And which should come first? Or are they one and the same thing, the yin and yang of the richly complex whole? This tension is explored in some depth in HEG 204: Literacy Methodology, at Victoria University, where every Tuesday evening I engage in persuasive dialogue with cynical practitioners, who like the resistant students I used to teach in secondary schools all those years ago, defiantly ask. "How is this going to help me get a job?" or words to that effect. My aim is to convince them that the sometimes impenetrably dense theory they are expected to read will not only get them a job, but actually help them to do the job better. And I do at times feel a little like a used car salesman, albeit a relatively ethical one, who is trying to sell a quality product to a deeply suspicious customer.

So where does one begin in unravelling the complexities of adult literacy theory to a group of practising teachers engaged in post-graduate studies? And how does one position oneself; as an academic or a practitioner, when one is in fact expected to be both? The two sides are certainly not mutually exclusive but they do require a degree of understanding and analysis to achieve a harmonious union. The purpose of this conference presentation then is to not only seek feedback on the narrative of adult literacy theory and practice presented in this course, but also to stimulate dialogue around the question 'What use is theory to the seasoned adult literacy practitioner?'. Is it just a matter of changing fashions that can be easily mixed and matched, or do teachers need to understand the deep theories underpinning much educational practice? How much theory do they need and how best might it be experienced and explored?

Teaching adults in a Higher Ed context

As an adult educator I am keenly aware of the learning needs of adults who may have had negative experiences of schooling and education, or as in this case academic theory. The principles of adult learning are explored in the theory of Androgogy (Knowles 1978). Many of these principles are familiar to teachers of adults whether they have read the theory or not. Adults have previous life experience and hence knowledge and skills which should be utilized in the learning process. The relationship between teacher and adult student is also different. The teacher or facilitator of adults must take a more egalitarian

approach, draw upon the student's knowledge, blur the line between teacher and learner, and make the learning relevant to the learner's life.

Such principles, whilst not necessarily highlighted in many higher education contexts, provide a theoretical framework for the delivery of the course content. I resolved at the outset to model good adult learning principles, as well as good literacy practices in a 'practice what you preach' methodology. The participants are asked to interact with the subject matter as reflective learners, as practitioners and as theorizers. Most importantly, they are asked to reflect on their own literacy practices and processes for becoming more literate in the context of 'lifelong literacy' (Suda 2001). As students they are asked to reflect on the process of becoming more literate in academic discourses, and as teachers, in the discourses of pedagogy. The assessment tasks reflect this framework:

- **Teacher as learner – Reflective journal**

The journal provides the learners with the opportunity to respond in a slightly less formal way than an essay to the prescribed readings and lecture content, and includes analysis of the readings and class topics, reflections on readings and class topics in relation to lived experiences -civic, social, professional and public debates about literacy.

- **Teacher as practitioner – Presentation to the group**

Participants are expected to give a presentation to the class outlining an educational practice they have experienced, delivered or researched. Delivery style and ability to transmit knowledge and engage the group (their peers) being the major focus of this activity.

- **Teacher as theorizer – Academic essay**

Students are required to demonstrate the ability to engage in critical analysis of the various theoretical positions presented throughout the course in a well structured, coherently written essay using standard academic conventions. This task is required as evidence of the student's competence with an academic genre – higher order literacy skills.

The conventional academic lecture is characterized by the image of a learned scholar, who stands at a lectern with overheads and transmits essential knowledge. The participants are passive receptacles, waiting to be filled, in what Freire (1976) described as the 'banking' concept of education. Such approaches seem to be incongruent, even contradictory, in a course on adult literacy theory and practice. Alternative methods of delivery are required. I resolved to structure the course around a series of questions which could be explored, debated, refuted and exposed; questions which problematized the notion of literacy and allowed the learners to interrogate the various definitions, positions and approaches. Students have the opportunity to critique and challenge interpretations in both the seminars and in their journals.

Underpinning these questions, is a narrative, the story I want to tell about adult literacy based on my readings, understandings and experiences. It is important to declare that intention at the outset and be open to the prospect of that story being challenged. In this way the course participants are engaged in a dialogic process that more accurately reflects the ideas communicated in the subject matter.

- **What is literacy?**

In the first session the participants are asked to define the term 'literacy' in a brainstorming session. The commonly accepted view of literacy as "the ability to read and write" or more broadly "to be educated" is brought into question. Participants draw on their own understandings of what it means to be literate before learning of other attempts to define literacy. Various definitions are presented.

The Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL), for example, defines literacy thus:

Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge that enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy that allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society.

(Senate Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training
1991:90)

Definitions of literacy are however, as Maushart (1991) suggests "a slippery concept" and are constantly changing. As societies evolve and develop so too do their approaches to communication. Changing economic and political discourses also impact on those definitions (Gee 1987, 1990) as do changes in industry and technology (Lepani 1998, Leu 2001). The politicisation of literacy, which is often expressed in terms of a crisis, has in fact created an environment where, 'literacy means whatever the culture at large wants it to mean, no more and no less' (Maushart 1991: 20). Debates around the question of what is literacy are therefore quite complex and require an understanding of a range of theoretical perspectives from the pedagogical to the political (Lo Bianco & Freebody 2001). To ask the question 'what is literacy' in an adult education context requires an even broader exploration as it must take account of the specific requirements of the labour market. To gain a full understanding of why ACAL has settled for this definition of literacy, participants need to engage with and understand the social, political, economic, cultural, linguistic and educational debates that inform it. An understanding of these contexts is also vitally important to an understanding of what the teaching of adult literacy entails.

The readings and course content reflects underpinning knowledge required by teachers of literacy (See Appendix 1). In a sense the whole course is designed to unpack the definition of literacy adopted by ACAL.

Turbill (2002) provides a historical picture of how theories of reading and writing have evolved. She presents four Ages:

1. The age of reading as decoding
2. The age of reading as meaning making
3. The age of reading-writing connections
4. The age of reading for social purpose

What is interesting in Turbill's account is that she does not present these ages as fads or fashions but rather what she calls a 'developmental metaphor'. Each age builds upon the understandings and insights of the previous age. She acknowledges that hers is but one version of history and other's may tell the story differently, however Turbill does highlight the value in each and provides insights into what has generated the change and brought us to the current definition of literacy. She then suggests that a fifth age is upon us - 'the age of multi-literacies', particularly digital literacy. "Meaning making now involves being able to 'read' not only print text but also colour, sound, movement, and visual representations" (Turbill 2002)

Turbill's article reinforces Luke and Freebody's 'Four resources model' (Freebody and Luke 1990) and connects it with earlier models of reading theory as visually represented in this diagram

A Social Model of Reading

(From [Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons, & McKenzie, 2001](#))

The course explores the whole language versus back to basics (or rather phonics) debate in a non binary fashion. Not an either/or argument but rather an exploration of 'why?' and 'what else?' Upon completion of the course participants should be able to respond to each of the following questions with some measure of confidence:

- What is Literacy? Definitions, myths and the role of literacy in the 21st Century
- What are the drivers of literacy policy? Government involvement in literacy
- How does policy impact on pedagogy? Policy implementation, i.e. measurable outcomes.
- Who are the learners? Adult learners' profiles/backgrounds/motivation
- What are adult learning principles? Negotiated and facilitated learning
- What is lifelong learning? Exploring the concept
- How is life long learning achieved? Exploring the contexts in which learning occurs.
- What is reading? A psycholinguistic guessing game?
- How is it /was it taught/ learned? Understanding the science of reading
- Whose literacy are we learning? Literacy and social structures
- How are (literacy) texts constructed? Reading between and around the lines
- What is critical literacy? Critiquing between and under the lines
- What is genre? Structuring texts for specific purposes
- How are these put into practice? Modelling texts
- How do we accommodate differences in learning needs? Back to the learners
- What are the different needs of LBOTE and ESB learners in Literacy classes? Is it ESL or literacy?

An exploration of these questions however generally leads to deeper educational theorizing. One question invariably leads to another, and therefore examination of another set of theories, beliefs and hence stories. In attempting to explore the question 'who are the learners', for example, one invariably asks the questions: Why are they so? Why have they had negative experience of schooling? Why has schooling been ineffective? Theories of education abound, and it is difficult to know where to stop in providing an overview of the development of educational theory from the early work of

John Dewey (1916) on the role of education in a democracy, through an analysis of theories about the impact of social class on the learner's capacity to learn (Bernstein 1971-75; Labov 1972), the concept of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973, 1983), theories of resistance (Giroux 1983) and stories of transformative experience (Lingus 1994, Bradshaw 1999). Each layer of theorizing invariably raises further questions. Such is the nature of theory and dialogue. It's a never ending story really, but one can't just keep telling stories, there has to be some guidance as to how these stories may be used to create new stories, the empirical data of the theorizing as it were, namely action or 'praxis' (Freire 1976).

Theory into Practice

My view is that once teachers have a clear understanding of how various theories have impacted on policy and practice they are more able to practice what has been preached, that is, the theories and policies that underpin the curriculum documents they are asked to deliver. If teachers understand the political, social and economic context of the literacy debates, if they are familiar with the science of reading as per the psycho linguistic approach or the socio-cultural approach, if they are familiar with recent trends and developments, and if they recognize the changing demands of digital literacy, then they are equipped with the necessary knowledge to engage in reflective practice, to be engaged with the recurring educational debates as they happen, to fulfil their role as professionals. The second semester of the Literacy Methodology course is therefore devoted to applying the theory explored in Semester 1 to the development of curriculum and an exploration of pedagogy.

McGuirk's national survey of Adult Literacy teachers revealed that the majority of teachers follow good practice principles, are strongly committed to their learners and are extremely professional in their approach (McGuirk 2001). However, when asked which theorists they were familiar with and which theorists and theories they were familiar with, few responded with any breadth of knowledge. And this is really where our argument begins. If teachers know what good practice is do they need to know why it is 'good' and why it is better or worse than another approach? Do they really need the theory or is achieving the 'learning outcomes' enough? Do we need a historical overview of literacy theory and practice? Do teachers need to understand the rationale behind government policy on literacy? Will this help them to understand why they are being asked to do what they do? Does what we call 'good practice' reflect 'good' theory? And who says it is good?

My own experience as a teacher has been greatly enriched by the insights of theory. I remember the excitement I felt when first introduced to the work of John Dewey. Here was someone who believed in Education as a means to creating a better and more democratic society. Dewey provided a view of knowledge and learning that inspired me to persevere and experiment with different approaches. Many of the frustrations I felt with the nature of schools and classrooms were explained by various theorists. After many years of teaching I felt dissatisfied with the hit and miss approach and wanted further input and direction to improve my practice. That input merely stimulated the desire for more input, greater understanding, a deeper purpose. For me the decision to teach Literacy Methodology in a higher education context is effectively a professional development exercise in that it provides the opportunity to engage critically with educational theory, policy and pedagogy.

So why do many teachers view such theorizing as lofty idealism at best and unrealistic posturing at worse. Many will comment that teacher training programs do not adequately prepare teachers for the practicalities of the classroom. They see little relationship between the theory and pedagogy. Yet some kind of theoretical principles must underpin the decision to teach in one way or another. What some might regard as common sense

is still a process of theorizing. All teachers theorize either implicitly or explicitly. 'Dangling microphones' into forums where teachers talk does provide insight, and it seems to me that the problem teachers have with 'academic' theory as compared with common sense theorizing is twofold. Much theorizing is dense and abstract and therefore difficult to read. Often it does not immediately suggest changes to practice. On the other hand theories that do suggest alternative pedagogies are often hard to put into practice – for example negotiating the curriculum with a group of resistant learners, or introducing enquiry based learning with learners who have never done so. 'Ivory tower' theorists are seen to be far removed from the realities of the classroom and it is common for teachers to be wary of being judged by researchers who seek to put classroom practice under a theoretical microscope. Teachers seem to be more preoccupied with what and how questions, rather than why. I'm inclined to believe that it's easier to work out the 'what' and 'how' if one understands the why. I would like to think that the ivory tower is a place that all teachers might visit from time to time. Perhaps the microphone could act as the metaphorical anchor or bridge between theory and practice. Teachers talking theory in an action research process.

If teachers are resistant or cynical about theory then they are even more so about government policy on education. Alan Luke suggests that teachers don't like to get their hands dirty and apply themselves to the hard work of making policy and having input into 'big picture' issues. It's easier to criticise and resist. Yet many educators have input into policy making and they rely on theoretical understandings and evidence derived from classroom research to arrive at those recommendations. Wickert (2001) is however circumspect about the 'unforeseen consequences' of promoting certain views of literacy in the policy making context. She maintains that the mainstreaming of adult literacy has ironically undermined many of the emancipatory ideals of the field.

History suggests that Literacy debates will be a recurring theme in any discussions about education and the future. Already the fifth age of 'multi-literacies' that Turbill refers to has provided teachers with significant professional challenges; to go on-line or resist technology, to embrace digital literacy or leave it to 'computer' teachers. Our capacity as a field to address the challenges of this age I think requires us to adopt a professional persona that includes an active engagement with theory.

I welcome your response to the issues raised in this paper.

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Appendix 1.

- **Victoria University - School of Education**
- **Literacy Methodology HEG 2204**
- **Course Outline Semester One 2004**

These readings will be copied and handed out in class in the first weeks of the semester. Other readings will be handed out for use throughout the course. Additional readings, and general reference material relevant to the session topics and the assignments listed are given in full in the additional bibliography. Other reading will be recommended when appropriate.

Some books will be placed on reserve at the Footscray park library, and some articles will be available on the VU website

Guest lecturers may be invited and this course outline may be varied to suit the needs of the class and any issues of interest arising.

	Topic	References (see handout for full reference)
1	Introduction to the course Course overview Contact arrangements What is literacy?	Street, B.V. (1984), <i>Literacy in Theory and Practice</i> , Searle, J (1999) "What is Literacy?" <i>Literacy Link</i>
2	Who are the learners? Adult learning principles Adult Literacy learners	Boud (details???) Wickert,, R and Lee A (2000)"Reading the Discourses of Adult Literacy Teaching" in Foley Ed.
3	Literacy in the Australian Education System: An Overview of Policy, Methodology , and Debates What are the drivers of literacy policy? Does Australia have a literacy crisis? The place of literacy surveys	Lo Bianco J, and Freebody, P (2001) <i>Australian Literacies</i> Lo Bianco,J & Wickert,R(2001) Australian Policy Activism in Language and literacy Luke,A (2001) <i>How to Make Literacy Policy Differently: Generational Change, Professionalisation, and Literate Futures</i>
4	Literacy Methodology; an overview	Turbill: <i>The Four Ages of Reading Philosophy and Pedagogy: A Framework for Examining Theory and Practice</i>
5	Psycholinguistics and the construction of Whole Language	Smith, F. (1985) <i>Reading from behind the Eyes</i> Reading Goodman,K, Goodman, Y Hood WJ (eds) (1989) <i>The Whole language evaluation book</i> Anstey and Bull, <i>The Literacy Labyrinth</i> Prentice Hall, Australia 1996*
6	The SocioCultural View of Literacy Part 1 Systemic Functional Linguistics and Genre	Hammond et al (1992)English for Social Purposesp.1-8 Gadd, N: Genre Theory and Practice in <i>Fine Print</i>

7	"Reading as Critical Social Practice"	Cope and Kalantzis 1993 <i>The Powers of Literacy</i> p1-21 Luke 1990 Anstey and Bull, <i>The Literacy Labyrinth</i> Prentice Hall,
8	Genre Approaches(2)	Cope and Kalantzis (1990) Secret English Video
9	Critical Literacy	Fiarcloough, N (1989) <i>Language and Power</i> Freebody P, and Luke A (1999) <i>Further Notes on the Four Resources Model</i> Bradshaw D Ed. <i>Knowledge of texts: Theory and Practice in Critical Literacy</i> Language Australia 1998
10	Corrective Reading – back to phonics Guest Speaker: Janis Copping	
11	NESB and ESB Literacy Learners	Hammond, J., Wickert, R., Burns, A., Joyce, H. and Miller, A. (1992) <i>The Pedagogical Relations Between Adult ESL and Literacy</i> , Davison, C., Taylor, E. and Hatcher, L. (1993) <i>Pedagogy and Politics: Developing Ethnic-Inclusive Practices in the ALBE Profession</i> ,
12	Theory practice dilemmas	Bradshaw – Beyond the Lesson Plan