

Agency over time: fighting fires and crusading

Yvonne Hillier, University of Brighton

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Introduction

I had a very interesting conversation recently with a tutor who's new. She doesn't have experience of teaching before the curriculum. It's like BC before the curriculum, AC after the curriculum. And she was asking me in an astonished kind of a way how we managed to plan learning before the curriculum . . . we managed perfectly well before this document [national standards] came out. And there are at least two or three generations I think of literacy teachers, the first wave who came in like me, then a middle wave and then these new people including the people who are doing the new PGCEs. They have no conception of what it could be like to teach without that wretched document, . . . and still be a good teacher, and still let learning happen in a structured way but without being dominated by the documentation... (Organiser)

Government interest in the development of practitioners supporting adult literacy, language and numeracy (ALLN) through funding of the Skills for Life Strategy (SK4L) in England can be linked to the larger agenda of working towards economic success (Leitch, 2006). Governments across Europe are devoting public money to increase basic skills in the adult population. All have been influenced by global processes of supranational data collection such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) conducted by the OECD across 13 'developed' nation states in 1996. The comparatively poor position of the UK provoked each of the four countries of the UK to develop a different national strategy in response to the perceived 'problem' of low levels of literacy and numeracy in their adult population.

In their study of the history of ALLN in England, Hamilton and Hillier (2006) identified four policy phases which have in turn influenced pedagogy and practice in ALLN:

- Mid 1970s: Literacy Campaign led by a coalition of voluntary agencies with a powerful media partner, the BBC.
- 1980s: Provision developed substantially, supported by Local Education Authority Adult Education Services and voluntary organizations, with leadership, training and development funding from a national agency (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Agency, ALBSU, later the Basic Skills Agency, BSA)
- 1989 – 1998: Depletion of LEA funding and control, statutory status of ALLN through a more formalized further education (FE) system, dependent on funding through a national funding body.
- 1998- present: Development of Skills for Life policy: New government strategy unit created, £1.5 billion of government money is committed.

What is the practice of ALLN and why has it become contested? The Changing Faces research attempted to capture the practices and examine the impact of policy and practice on the field.

The Changing Faces research

Two hundred interviews were undertaken with practitioners and adult learners, from four

case study regions in England. Documentary evidence and an archive of materials were collated and a series of timelines were created which chart the development of ALLN during the thirty year period. It is impossible to do justice to the breadth of practices that have occurred in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL during the past thirty years. The four case study regions were chosen, to represent urban and rural areas, and differences between LEAs with community focused education compared with those in urban areas which operated strict boundaries between schools, further and adult education. Within each case study, between 15 - 25 practitioners who had been involved in the field were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format, along with a further 20 key actors at local, regional and national level. All were asked to tell their stories of how they became involved in the field, their views on the practitioners, on the learners, their high points and low points, key moments and key people that had influenced their practice, and to identify changes during their involvement in the field. The learners were drawn from the National Child Development Survey cohort (NCDS), all born within one week in March 1958, and therefore who had been young adults at the start of the literacy campaign in the early 1970s. The 78 respondents who lived within the four case study areas were asked about the learning that they had undertaken as adults, as well as about their familiarity with any of the literacy campaigns that had taken place. These interviews provided insights into the impact of provision, both for those who had self-identified a difficulty with basic skills and for those who did not. In addition to the interviews, documentary evidence was gathered from agencies including the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), and organisations representing the field such as the National Association for Teachers of English Languages (Natecla) and donations of archive material from interview respondents and members of networks associated with basic skills. Key dates in the history of the field were specified from the interview and documentary sources, and these were linked to a timeline of events from across education and more general public policy in England, Europe and world wide where appropriate.

Using a Deliberative Policy Analysis, the research identified tensions resulting from the changing practices of ALLN but also how agency by practitioners have sought to manage such tensions. Deliberative policy analysis (DPA) takes practice as a unit of analysis (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003) and this fits particularly with the social practice of literacy approach (Street, 1995; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). DPA takes account of messy reality. Agency is exerted at all levels, including what Lipsky (1980) called the 'street level bureaucrats' who translate policy at the front-line of interactions with the users of policy (the practitioners) or 'policy activists' (Yeatman, 1998) operating through networks on different levels within the system to make a difference to the outcome of policy. ALLN practitioners are a prime example of how users of policy have used their agency effectively in the past three decades in their commitment to the field.

A brief history: A new field explodes into being

In 1975 a programme series 'On the Move' was broadcast at prime time on Sunday evenings to an audience that had no idea that adults could possibly have problems with their reading, writing and spelling, particularly as by now, the population had enjoyed thirty years of compulsory schooling following the 1944 Education Act. The innovative ten minute programmes were followed by a telephone help line, the first time this was used by the BBC, and people's calls for help flooded the system. The programmes had resulted from a campaign spearheaded by The British Association of Settlements (BAS) in 1973 where a conference 'Status illiterate: prospect zero' drew the attention of the BBC.

However, the BBC and BAS were aware that there needed to be an infrastructure of support available if people needing help were not to be turned away. In the previous year,

each local education authority (LEA) had been asked to consider what arrangements were in place to help teach the adults who were going to be coming forward. Most decided to follow the example of the BAS and recruit tutor organisers who recruited and trained volunteers to work on an individual basis with a learner, in that person's own home or in community centres.

Such provision needed funding, and a commitment for this was sought not only within the local authorities, but also centrally through parliament. A private member's question about 'illiterate' adults led to a decision by the Minister of State for Education to identify one million pounds to set up an Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA), which would provide resources to the LEAs as they began responding to the demand for literacy teaching. Over the next thirty years, literacy classes for adults grew in number, and the form of provision changed in mode from primarily one to one teaching by volunteers to small group teaching, open learning and e-learning, and was conducted in adult and community learning centres, further education colleges, the work place, in voluntary organisations and in homes.

ALLN practices

ALLN practice heavily depended on volunteers and practitioners who were prepared to undertake professional development voluntarily. A fundamental characteristic of literacy work comprises pedagogy that will enable adults who have low levels of literacy and numeracy to learn in ways that are relevant, appropriate and useful. The initial methodology used with adults was drawn from a variety of sources but primarily from primary and remedial education, a language experience approach and quite frankly a 'try it out and see if it works' approach. Underpinning all of these approaches was a sense that adults needed to be able to function in society through being able to read everyday signs and notices, complete forms and write messages and letters. This approach, known as the functional approach, has become challenged over the years by practitioners particularly criticising the government agenda of increasing the skills of the working population to ensure economic success. This agenda is seen to override the social aspects of functioning in society which today includes being able to text using mobile phones along with more traditional activities such as reading to children.

The challenge to the functional approach of literacy practice arose out of the new literacy studies (Street, 1995; Barton and Hamilton, 1998) and developed a social practices approach which acknowledges that people use a variety of literacy skills which enable them to function satisfactorily in their personal and professional lives even if they do have difficulties with basic skills as defined and measured by practitioners and policy makers. People also make good use of family, friends and their communities to assist them with literacy activities, and operate perfectly well in situations requiring high levels of literacy and numeracy. The social practice of literacy argues there is no neutral, fixed measure of literacy and seeks the examination of the many and varied literacy acts that occur in everyday life, rather than how people fare against a measureable outcome such as form filling.

Professional development

As the field was developing its expertise in teaching ALLN, so practitioners were encouraged to improve their professional knowledge. As noted above, ALLN relied upon volunteers to support its work and much of the professional development stemmed from the initial training of volunteers and tutors. In the 1970s and 80s this was achieved through regional training supported by the national agency, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills

Agency, ALBSU. Although there were specialist qualifications in teaching literacy (an RSA Diploma), and ESOL (RSA Certificate and Diploma), there was no specific qualification for teaching numeracy. In 1990, ALBSU created a new professional qualification, the Initial Teaching Certificate (ITC) awarded by City and Guilds, to accredit the training that had previously been undertaken. A further qualification, the City and Guilds 9285 was developed to accredit tutors and organisers with experience in the field, and this, again, was a competence based qualification. The ITC was used by employers, often those providing work-based training, as a teaching qualification at a much higher level than the award actually specified and with minimal training, people were being employed to teach groups and individuals with complex and demanding learning needs.

It was not until the new Skills for Life Strategy that a set of standards against which basic skills teaching in literacy, numeracy and ESOL were created and a suite of qualifications for practitioners based upon these standards are now mandatory for new tutors and trainers entering the field.

Tensions and agency

Emerging from the Changing Faces data is a multi-faceted story of commitment to learner centred approaches coupled with struggling for funding, recognition and ideology. Practitioners did not accept their situation lightly. There are stories of fighting and resistance throughout the thirty year period we have studied and the following extracts illuminate this developing, agentic field.

Lobbying for change: pressure groups, practitioner bodies

Unlike the teaching profession in schools, practitioners in ALNE developed very little national presence or organized representation. The voluntary ethos, the part-time nature of employment, the dispersal of staff in many different contexts and with different employers and terms and conditions was not conducive to organised action and networking. The voluntary sector was better organised and vocal in the early period, documenting their achievements, advocating for funding and working collaboratively with learners to voice their concerns through the National Federation of Voluntary Literacy Schemes (NFVLS).

There were examples of local political activism in all of our case site areas. Such activity typically was around protecting funding for programmes, rather than pay and conditions specifically for practitioners. In the 1980s, NATFHE (the main trade union representing teachers in the post-compulsory sector) had an Adult Basic Education Sub-Section (ABESS) but this did not survive into the incorporation era. ESOL was alone in developing a professional organization NATECLA, advocating on behalf of the field, contributing to policy, training, research and curriculum. NATECLA published a regular journal 'Language Issues' and was instrumental in getting a separate core curriculum defined for ESOL within Skills for Life. The national organisations for literacy and numeracy practitioners were research-oriented membership organisations. Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, (RaPAL) focussed closely on links between research and practice and published a regular journal, whilst Adults Learning Maths (ALM) developed a stronger international base and an annual conference. Both organisations contributed to networking and publishing.

Tensions

Tensions are represented throughout ALLN practice and practitioners used their individual and collective agency to counter some of these tensions. Time and time again, our interviewees defined their practice in learner centred ways yet tensions often arose from these deep seated values. For example, assessment has become more focused, more targeted and certainly a key strand of government policy today. Yet testing learners was

anathema to early practitioners who were keenly aware that their learners had failed so much at school. Later, in the early 1990s, the first competence based accreditation for learners was introduced and again, some practitioners were vehement critics of this development.

There is still suspicion that the current national standards and curriculum for adult learners are not in the best interest of people coming forward for help to improve their literacy, numeracy and language. This can be seen through an inspection report by the Further Education Funding Council on basic skills.

During the last decade, and particularly since 1994 there has been a trend towards greater use of accredited awards. This has improved the quality of provision, providing greater rigour and a more structured approach. For most students, the opportunity to gain nationally recognised qualifications, which can be the first step to other studies, is a welcome development. Some students, however, still do not perceive accreditation to be of value, given their immediate circumstances, and some teachers do not offer student sufficient encouragement to register for qualifications. (FEFC 1998, pp.31)

Not all practitioners we interviewed were against the move towards assessment and for every example we have of practitioners expressing a concern about assessment is balanced by an alternative view.

I was appalled coming in to teach with all my qualifications and experience and real skills in teaching literacy and dyslexia was the non-existence of real knowledge in practitioners who were out there delivering basic skills. You know it was a cottage industry with volunteers put into teaching

Agency

The ways in which practitioners used their individual and collective agency is seen through the struggle for funding.

I was always scrounging money. You'd just approach anybody and you'd write trying to get grants for things and you were just scrounging for money all the while.

Funding fashions provision and organisers of ALLN became very attuned to finding money that would support their practice. Nowadays, there is significant funding but with strings attached and this, too has created tensions

Everything is funding led and defined in terms of funding and it destroys, it sucks the life out of the work that we do. And I am amazed by myself as well as other people that we continue to maintain an enthusiasm and quality experience. And I mean quality in the true sense of the word, not in the way it's bandied about in terms of quality standards.

One way around the issue of funding was to accept what was required in order to satisfy the funding source but limit the impact on practice

Look, we have to do this blinking test, and then we can get the money. Let's just do the test, and then we can do the other stuff

During the last three decades there have been a number of cuts forced upon ALLN provision. The 1980s was particularly difficult and practitioners told us of a galvanisation of tutors and students to lobby local councils when cuts were being made to adult education provision in particular. We were also told stories of good fortune and organisers were quick

to make use of such happy circumstances

Suddenly out of the blue we got the whole funding back. Whereas half the city had been wiped out, we suddenly got the full amount. So we had a whole year double funded. We restocked the crèche, we restocked our machines, we got materials in case we got cut the next year.

Agency was also exerted through tutors realising that by moving into management they could influence the field. As one practitioner noted

If you actually feel strongly enough about them [learners] then you ought to go and do something about them and I came to the conclusion that actually managing it and the micro- policy elements of managing it, and more strategic work I thought was likely to have more impact over this thing that I cared about than the one-to-one interventions as a volunteer or a tutor. So that's what it caused for me ... to go and find the places where you can exert the greatest influence

How will the story of ALLN develop in the current climate? There will continue to be tensions but there will, too, be practitioners who are prepared to take action to support and protect what they are deeply committed to. Their words demonstrate the strength that the field possesses.

That's the precious heritage that we have got, and it survived and it's shown its strength because we have been able to adapt for all the new initiatives and drives ... And I can see that a lot of what we held dear: individual support, group support, resources that were based on the student needs and adult context, it's good to think that that's survived

And we've managed, you know, like little resistant fighters, to keep going for a long time and now there's a huge shortage of teachers and far more recognition and appreciation and yet I still don't feel that actually what they want is what we've always done really and yet I don't think those people who are the hardest to reach, who most need to develop their skills, are going to respond in any other way than to those tried and tested methods which we did develop in the '70s

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This paper addresses how practitioners have used their agency to champion their commitment to learner centred practices when government directives and funding regimes may demand otherwise. It draws upon the Changing Faces project (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006) which examined the history of ALLN from 1970 - 2000 through research with practitioners and adult learners (ESRC R000239387) (author abstract). The Crusades were a group of wars over religious views between the Christian and Muslim populations of Europe and West Asia. It started mainly due to a fight for areas thought to be Holy Land. Both Muslims and Christians considered the same lands holy for reasons like Jesus' resurrections and Muhammad visiting there. The eight big crusade expeditions occurred during 1096 to 1291. The Holy Land was still in a place that is very important for the three major monotheistic religions: Islam, Judaism, and