

Thoughts on adult literacy - March 05

Instead of taking the nominal phrase 'adult literacy' as meaning 'extending literacy for adults' ie literacy for anyone over the age of whatever, I reinterpreted it to mean 'literacy for adulthood' ie literacy to support the effort to become more adult. Thus I deliberately tried to rework the term 'adult' from its bureaucratic use as a classifier into an ethical term describing and evaluating an ethical demeanour and habitus - being an adult. And I defined 'being an adult' as 'taking responsibility ...'

Thus, for me, education *for* adulthood is the essence of adult literacy as a form of adult education. This approach is deliberately intended to contrast with the Knowlesian tradition of adult education which glosses adult education as a form of individualist expressionism mostly taking the form of the pursuit of informal hobby or culture classes. This to my mind has always seemed to be the adult education of the middle class topping up their lives with meaning, not the adult education needed or wanted by the underclasses grappling with issues of self, family, work and community.

The question then is how do I forge a connection between adult literacy as a wing of adult education as an education for adulthood, rather than an education for adults.

At this point I define literacy as a concern with the interpretation of the discourses framing social life. This contrasts with the functionalist definition of literacy as the forms of communication used in the enactment of social life. Functionalist views of literacy aim for adult who are 'competent in the communicational media involved in the realms of work, home and community'. My definition, by contrast, focuses on initiation into the more esoteric and more formal traditions of reflection on the discourses embodied in social life. Thus, in my view social life is not just enacted, it is also reflected on. This reflection takes the form of interpreting texts which stand in some form of representative relation to social life.

In short I am framing adult literacy as fighting alongside 'the othered' in their effort to become subjects, centres of agency and accountable reflexivity, not simply submissive and docile objects of a Fordist or Empiricist system of managed life and surveilled life. (Nor a Giddens retreat into post-traditional 'pure relationships')