

## **Promoting Employability through Specific Literacies**

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This special issue of the *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Comparative Studies* (IJMCS) is drawn from the papers presented at the week-long Research Workshop, run by Literacy Research and Development Centre (LRDC) at the University of Greenwich. The papers were accompanied with a series of seminars sharing research-informed teaching and learning strategies in adult literacy to promote employability. Playing host to adult literacy teachers and researchers from a variety of different education settings in Europe, the Workshop aimed to facilitate a discussion on how to design literacy curricula to meet the needs of both learners and employers.

As highlighted by Ade-Ojo and Duckworth (2014), the notion of what constitutes *literacy* (that being the ideologies interpolated into it) is not static; it has a changing ideological historical thread which has encompassed an embodiment of a trinity; perceptions/theory, policy and practice. Each aspect of the trinity has in some way fed into the emergence of the other parts of the trinity. However, with the changing of time and political landscapes, the relationship between the three components of this trinity has not necessarily been consistent. In recent times, nonetheless, we would suggest that the relationship amongst the components of the trinity has become more evident following the seminal contribution Street (1984, 1993) made on the autonomous and ideological models of literacy, and similar voices on perceptions and models of literacy which have persistently echoed across the globe. Contributions from Barton (1994) on the ecology of language, Barton and Hamilton (2000) on social literacy, Gee (1998a and 1998b), Lankshear (1999) Luke (1992) and indeed the New Literacies group, have been consistent with the injunction that observations of literacy must take into account the social nature of literacy which must, therefore, be seen as a social practice. Literacy for learners, therefore, must be situated in the learners' real life and everyday practices. Illustrating how this has been enacted in the classroom, products such as teaching and learning resources developed by learners have been used in several instances to capture and give meaning to their experience, motivation and aspirations. In other instances, these products have been co-produced with the teacher (see McNamara 2007; Duckworth 2008; 2013) to the same end. This has promoted what might amount to a paradigmatic departure from learning outcomes that arise purely from a prescriptive pre-set curriculum that echoes Freire's (1974) banking education concept.

More importantly, however, Literacy education has been shown to enhance confidence, contribute to personal development, promote health, social and political participation and lead to benefits in the public and private domains of learners' lives (Duckworth 2013, 14).

In the context of the trinity at play in the field of literacy, we would suggest that the dominant component of the trinity at this stage has remained ideologically-driven policy. Practice has continued to be controlled by policy which is perhaps even more entrenched because of the funding associated to it and perhaps because of the different perceptions of literacy held by policy makers.

Globally we are now faced with radical challenges with fundamental changes to society and economies particularly with the rise of the knowledge economy, which is attendant to development and globalization. Indeed, in an age of globalisation and neoliberalism, the literacy curriculum may be viewed as a product of market driven changes. Illustrating this alliance to market driven initiative, the hitherto dominant Skills for Life agenda in the UK has now evolved into a functional Literacy approach, which reflects the roles that have now been ascribed to literacy, and a changing perception of literacy as the cause rather than the symptom of a range of social malaises (Ade-Ojo, 2011). Consequently, the Functional Skills agenda is defined by its social purposes, in which there is an alignment between individual skills, the performance and needs of society, the global economy and economic productivity. There is no doubt that a varied range of responses and strategies will continue to emerge in response to these compelling social settings.

Perhaps as a part of one such response, this special issue asks what ways the curriculum can be developed and implemented to promote Employability through Specific Literacies. This is crucial in the current post-depression era and the drive towards using employment to drive the desired economic recovery. The goal, therefore, is to explore the concept of specific literacy in the context of developing employability skills. In essence, each paper develops the specific literacy they are associated with (academic, information, assessment of prior learning etc) and discusses how these literacies might help to promote employability skills. As an overarching position, we would argue that literacies matter, and helping individuals increase their literacy is important for improving their choices both in the private and public domains of people's lives, which includes opening labour market opportunities and more importantly, providing choices in terms of what is available and desired by learners.

The six different papers that are collected in this issue all draw on and respond to different elements of what can be seen as a broad debate around Employability through Specific Literacies and draw on a range of contexts from the public sector, local and wider workforce, further and higher education, and from different national contexts.

The first paper by Crawford and Irving, positioned in the UK, explores the complex issue of Information Technology and its wider link to employability and the workplace, a theme that is of clear importance beyond the specific context—public libraries—that is the focus of the paper. The paper positions Information literacy as a critical space for developing personal and civil rights, participative citizenship, lifelong learning, using technology wisely, the reduction of the digital divide, skills and economic development, education and critical thinking and the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle.

With Mbiatong's paper, the context turns to France, to contest the idea that the heterogeneity of people with literacy needs is met. Typologies are explored in the context of how they fail to reflect the diversity of society. A key consideration is the recognition of learners' capital and the acknowledgement of the fact that, building on that capital permits us to take the diversity of the learners into account. In this context, therefore, the aim of education in a democracy should be seen as being to support the fight against all forms of discrimination and to promote mutual understanding.

Again located in a French context, Lafont's paper, explores another aspect of literacies in relation to the representations on 'illiteracy' and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) devices for adults facing literacy difficulties. The notion of avoidance strategies is identified and proposes a new screening possibilities offered by prior learning recognition devices.

Moving to Spain, Guillermo Perez-Bustamante presents what he calls entrepreneurial literacy. He draws on six andragogical programmes to illustrate how a range of approaches can be employed to promote the acquisition of a specific type of literacy and how this literacy can itself enhance the employability prospects of its beneficiaries.

Again contextualised in the French setting, the paper by Pariat takes the focus from employees to basic education and post- high school training. The paper highlights how the French educational system dissociates transmission of basic knowledge from the development of employability. A collective mobilisation is recommended in order to uproot 'illiteracy' in relationship with any educational situation, however deteriorated.

The next paper by Zannis identifies that sharing literacy practice between countries is important, noting that this process is not as straightforward as it may appear. Zannis draws on her research to identify social and or political factors that may be behind literacy development and the implementation of literacy policy. Presenting the history of literacy policy in France this short paper concludes that the focus of literacy delivery should be on the whole person and their individual needs with classes being designed to meet the learners' needs and taking a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of learners and their communities.

It is hoped that these papers, which offer a number of compelling conclusions in their own right, will act to inspire further discussions concerning some of the issues that are relevant to developing and teaching literacies, as well as exploring the potential roles of these issues in *promoting Employability through Specific Literacies While most of these papers offer starting points from empirical studies, the ultimate goal is to use the inherent principles as a driver identifying alternative to currently dominant approaches in linking literacies with employability.*

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