DISCERNING THE CONTEXTS OF ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION: THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study compares competing perspectives of contextual literacy—literacy as practices, functional context education, and critical literacy. The first is linked to an ethnographic sensibility based upon how literacy is appropriated in the naturalistic settings of people's lives. The second is based on the mastery of concrete tasks that are embedded within environments that individuals seek to engage. The third stems from an analysis of oppression based upon an emancipatory pedagogy in the quest for societal transformation and a corresponding participatory pedagogy through which to structure critical practice. Each of these perspectives of literacy is philosophically congruent within particular programmatic settings, which are briefly identified in this article. Especially important are the ways in which these diverse frameworks may interact to deepen general community literacy programs that emphasize life improvement by including valuable instrumental and critical perspectives.

Résumé

Cette étude compare des perceptions qui se concurrencent au sujet de l'alphabétisation en contexte vis-à-vis l'alphabétisation en tant que pratique, l'alphabétisation fonctionnelle et l'alphabétisation critique. La première perception est liée à une émotivité ethnographique qui se demande si l'alphabétisation est essentielle aux gens dans leur environnement immédiat. La seconde perception concerne plutôt la maîtrise de tâches concrètes qui sont exigées dans les différents environnements où les individus souhaitent s'intégrer. La troisième perception a trait à la pression sociale exercée pour une pédagogie émancipatrice et une quête de transformation et pour une pédagogie participative à travers laquelle on développe une pratique exigeante. Chacune de ces perceptions de l'alphabétisation est philosophiquement conforme aux plans spécifiquement programmés et brièvement décrits dans cet article. La façon dont ces diverses perceptions peuvent

interagir les unes sur les autres est particulièrement importante pour approfondir les programmes d'alphabétisation de la communauté en général, de manière à mettre l'accent sur l'amélioration de la qualité de l'implantation des orientations instrumentales et critiques essentielles.

A major trend in the past 20 years is the widely (but not universally) held view that basic literacy develops among adults through contextual application. This view is based on the belief that one does not first master the rudiments of reading before real reading can begin. Rather, one draws on authentic material from the inception (even with beginning level students) through language experience approaches and other relevant material. This contextual trend is set within three perspectives of adult literacy. Specifically, three metaphors identified by Scribner in the early 1980s (see Scribner, 1984/1988) correspond to three important schools of literacy within the United States in the 1990s, and these schools are linked to particular programmatic emphases.

This article serves three functions. First, I flesh out some of the basic assumptions of each of these three key theoretical positions as prefigured in Scribner's description of the metaphors of contextual literacy. Second, I describe the programmatic contexts where each of the perspectives best fit. Third, and perhaps most importantly, I suggest how Sticht's functional context theory and Auerbach's Freirian-based participatory model can enrich the literacy-as-practices approach (as described by Fingeret and Drennon, 1997) for community-based volunteer programs and state mandated ABE classrooms, where student goals are not often sharply delineated and where attendance fluctuates a great deal.

The Contextual Trends Within the Three Perspectives

During the 1990s a phonemic revival has challenged the contextual perspective through the argument that some students, particularly those with diagnosed or (more typically) undiagnosed learning disabilities, require a highly structured phonic-based program. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (Adams, 1990) is a key text in the shift toward an increased focus on phonemic awareness, though Adams is far from dismissive of whole language strategies. The euphoria accompanying the whole language revival of the 1980s, which provides an important theoretical underpinning for contextual learning, was chastened. Still, a contextual approach has survived through the emergence of a *balanced* theory of reading, which argues that individuals learn through various bottom-up and

top-down methodologies. From the balanced perspective the relationship between basic skill development and meaningful context differs with each reader. Generally students achieve progress by balancing various decoding activities, working on comprehension, and reflecting critically on and through the text congruent with the learning styles and interests of each student (Purcell-Gates, 1995). The balanced approach has partially offset the back-to-basics deconstruction of whole language reading theory.

Notwithstanding the phonemic counterthrust, contextual literacy (which is premised upon the importance of meaningful *content*) extends from at least the 1970s with the work of Paulo Freire (e.g., Freire, 1970), Thomas Sticht (e.g., Sticht, 1997), and the 1975 Adult Performance Level (APL) study. It has continued to evolve over the past 30 years within diverse ideological and pedagogical traditions. The schools of critical and functional literacy, respectively represented by Freire and Sticht, have many contemporary advocates. A third perspective has also emerged; it is linked to the ethnographic work of Heath (1982/1988) and Street (1988) and is based upon the local experiences of individuals and groups within diverse communities. This perspective is referred to as *literacy as practices*, it undergirds the New Literacy Studies (Merrifield, 1998).

Scribner (1984/1988) reviews both the functional and critical perspective in what she identifies respectively as *literacy as adaptation* and *literacy as power*. For her, the concept of functional literacy "has a strong common sense appeal" (p. 73) in helping adults both for work and for assuming their basic rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Although Scribner acknowledges that the functional approach is an important aspect of literacy, she is aware of how problematic it is "to try to specify some uniform set of skills as constituting functional literacy for all adults" (p. 73). In contrasting functional to critical literacy she points to the influence of Paulo Freire for emphasizing the creation of "a critical consciousness through which a community can analyze its conditions of social existence and engage in effective action for a just society" (p. 75). From this perspective, she explains, "the expansion of literacy skills is often viewed as a means for poor and politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world" (p. 75). The Frierian perspective opened up a fundamentally different understanding of literacy from the functional approach in its emphasis on the politics of the oppressed.

Despite its evident appeal to more-critical voices of mainstream ideology, Scribner (1984/1988) also views the literacy-as-power perspective as problematic. Specifically, she challenges the supposition of an all-

embracing dichotomy between functional and critical perspectives by emphasizing that "literacy has different meanings for members of different social groups" (p. 76). Scribner maintains that literacy is best understood as a set of practices embedded within the context of local culture rather than that of a single movement of "the oppressed" in search of liberation. Through her ethnographic stance, Scribner provides a discerning understanding of the limitations and strengths of functional and critical literacy, and lays the groundwork for a literacy as practices perspective as a third school. Scribner argues that "the multiple meanings and varieties of literacy [call] for a diversity of educational approaches ... that are responsive to [an array of] perceived needs, whether for functional skills, social power, or self improvement" (p. 81).

The concept of literacy as a set of social practices is represented in Fingeret and Drennon's (1997) *Literacy for Life,* which focuses on the emerging *literacy identity* of individual students in a loosely focused, student-centred volunteer tutoring program in New York City. The functional perspective is described by Sticht (1997) in *Functional Context Education: Making Knowledge Relevant,* which has applicability in settings where the learning objectives of external information is highly specific—such as in certain workplace or family literacy programs, or for GED preparation classes. The third, more critical perspective is represented in the work of Auerbach in her essays (1989, 1992a, 1993); her curriculum guide, *Making Meaning, Making Change* (1992b); and in the instructional manual, *ESL for Action: Problem Posing at Work* (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987). Auerbach's Freirian-based participatory model has special applicability in programs linked to community-based agencies that promote social change and empowerment through critical reflection and collaborative action.

Literacy for Life

In the quest to reduce what Sticht, McDonald, and Erickson (1998) refer to as the "turbulence" (p. 33, their terminology for student attrition) so pervasive in adult literacy, they suggest that at least "some adults ... have very specific goals in mind" (p. 35) often related to job training. They propose that persistence and attendance would be markedly improved if programs could provide education directly linked to such objectives. Sticht, et al. contrast such a focused perspective pejoratively with programs that "have very global, generalized purposes for education ... [in which] adults may wish to attend educational programs just to improve themselves or to further their education" (p. 35). They suggest that such students are less

likely to maintain a commitment to the program than those who can link instruction to some *direct* outcome of significance to their lives.

Linking Literacy to Life Improvements

Fingeret and Drennon (1997) argue that literacy linked to life improvement represents an important source of motivation. "Students often feel the societal pressures for independent action and individual achievement keenly, and they suffer emotionally over their inability to meet those perceived needs" (p. 79). Like Sticht (1997), they also argue that unless programs meet such needs students are not likely to persist in their efforts. The difference is that Fingeret and Drennon argue that the learning process is more circuitous than implied by Sticht; Fingeret and Drennon argue that specific outcomes and goals often emerge through an ongoing evolution of a literacy identity. One student in their study, who discovered the importance of writing, describes this evolution:

> Say the graduation day ... you have to make a speech and here I'm writing out this speech that I must read in front of a thousand people, whatever, you know. I would love to be able to just read about my life and how did I grow up and how did I struggle to be able to read and write. And to get up on the stage and to read this you know. I would love to do something like that. (p. 23)

For the students identified by Fingeret and Drennon, the journey of discovery through the process of becoming increasingly literate is often as important, if not more so, than any specific outcome attained.

Fingeret and Drennon (1997) provide a developmental model to explain the shift from orality to literacy in the reconstruction of an adult identity. They discuss the dynamic interaction between societal and internalized processes of acculturation (as does Sticht, 1997). However, as implied in the student quote (above) Fingeret and Drennon emphasize strongly subjective variables that influence learning; this emphasis has been a long hallmark of Fingeret's student-centred approach. Moreover, Fingeret and Drennon pay much attention to what Auerbach (1992b) refers to as the "emerging curriculum" (which occurs as students pass through the successive stages described in their model). Fingeret and Drennon point out that programs such as Literacy Volunteers of New York City (LVNYC) draw on a wide range of contexts in the realms of the personal, practical, social, and aesthetic— similar to those identified by Lytle (1991):

> When adults who enter programs are given the opportunity at the outset to explore a range of possibilities, they typically go beyond a general

interest in "becoming better readers" [although they certainly do desire that] to name particular reading and writing tasks they hope to accomplish, often for specific purposes and audiences. Some come with a desire to learn more about a particular subject, for example, African-American history, parenting, or health. Many seek ways to deal with their own children's literacy and schooling ..., whereas others wish to participate or assume new roles and responsibilities in their families, workplaces, or communities. Some are looking for community in the literacy program itself. Some seek economic improvements in their lives through new jobs or promotions, or by dealing more competently with personal finances and/or their encounters with "the bureaucracy." For many, the program offers the possibility of taking more control and ownership of their own learning. For most adult learners who come to the programs, the desire for enhanced self-esteem is implicit in many of their stated and unstated goals. (p. 128)

The model of literacy for life proposed by Fingeret and Drennon (1997) is woven through such multidimensional sources of motivation and interests sparked in programs like LVNYC, where goals are not so sharply defined (particularly at the outset) as with Sticht's model of functional context education. Moreover, among many students who participate in generalized volunteer tutoring or state-mandated ABE programs, what is of primary concern is not the subject matter per se; rather, many students seek a dynamic learning process that builds confidence that learning is both*possible* and that sense of progress as *felt* experience occurs.

Experiencing life *inside* the program lays the foundation for building a sense of confidence that, in turn, buttresses the underlying motivation to engage in the mastery of basic literacy tasks, practices, and situations*outside* the program. Fingeret and Drennon point out that, for many adult literacy learners, building a reconstructed identity where literacy is drawn upon as a viable way of interacting with the social environment takes a long time. In fact it can take years, though progress can be discerned along the way as individuals increasingly build confidence and increase their competence to draw on literacy in various areas of importance to them. This is not to deny the importance Sticht (1997) places on short-term, focused programs for those who can benefit from them. Yet without the building of an empathic learning community that can sustain individuals in their quest for the long haul, the many barriers to participation (see Quigley, 1997) can easily derail the best of intentions.

Fingeret and Drennon (1997) briefly refer to a "fourth conception of literacy as *critical reflection and action"* (p. 63) which makes problematic literacy practices and situations that adult literacy learners typically take as normative. However, the main focus of their research does not follow along the lines of a Freirian vision of radical social change and cultural transformation. Rather, they focus on the assimilative impact of literacy for life in enabling individuals to fit in with the broad norms of mainstream society in a manner that they can internalize. That is, adult literacy learners "are aspiring to *act* like other people act at other rungs of the social ladder" (p. 63) by creating a better fit between their own individuality and broader societal and cultural norms.

Throughout the stages of constructing an emerging literacy identity, individuals progressively appropriate literacy in dealing with tasks, social practices, and situations both inside and outside the program. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) clearly imply that a sustaining identity based on the appropriation of literacy is a long-term process that requires several transformations—which some adult learners will fully attain, though most will not. Not completing a *spiral of change* does not deny the value of literacy as an intervening variable within particular social practices and situations that individuals engage, especially if there is support within such environments that better enable them to mediate print communication. Unlike Sticht (1997), who seeks short-term, highly focused courses, the model presented by Fingeret and Drennon requires the sustaining of longer-term learning communities. This sustained effort enables adults to engage in a wide array of literacy practices within the program over a period of time sufficient to move progressively toward independent mastery of print conventions, which are embedded in the social situations that they seek to engage. Whether such an investment of time is realistic for the vast majority of students who participate in an adult education and literacy system is another matter, which is one of the main points that Sticht addresses.

A Framework for Change

Fingeret and Drennon (1997) draw on the image of a spiral to characterize "the deep and profound change in their identity" (p. 65) as adults appropriate literacy for life. Although their model focuses on personal agency, Fingeret and Drennon realize that change takes place in an interactive relationship with the "social, political, and economic environment" (p. 65). Their focus, though, is in sketching out and in providing a model to explain personal change within the immediacy of local culture, both inside and outside the literacy program. They identify "one

turning of the spiral" (p. 65) from orality to literacy, as it moves through five stages in "an iterative and dynamic process that occurs at varying rates" (p. 65). Building on the research of Lofland and Stark (1965), Fingeret and Drennon (1997) describe these stages as "prolonged tension; turning point; problem solving and seeking educational opportunities; changing relationships and changing practices; and intensive continuing interaction" (p. 65).

Prolonged tension (such as a sense of shame or inadequacy) represents an enduring state of coping and compensation that enables an adult to meet many life situations, though not in as complete and satisfactory a way as mastery of literacy might facilitate. This is a shift for Fingeret, who has spent much of her career authenticating the oral subcultures of adult nonreaders (Fingeret, 1983; Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). The social network theory that supported her earlier studies has had less relevance for her latter work on LVNYC. There, students over and over again embraced the literacy myth that literacy, in itself, represents important cultural and social capital in the quest to enhance life, particularly in the cosmopolitan milieu of New York City. In working around the edges of a deficit model of adult literacy education, Fingeret and Drennon (1997) acknowledge that though many adults "experience deep shame associated with their literacy abilities ... it does not define their lives and their identities [yet], it remains a force to be dealt with" (p. 69).

A turning point is typically needed for an adult to move from a stage of coping and compensation to that of giving consideration to drawing upon literacy as a way of more adequately resolving life issues. Fingeret and Drennon explain that this is usually a crisis that requires resolution or an opportunity that presents itself, perhaps for the first time in a clear way, which stimulates awareness that literacy could open doors to a more enhanced life. Such turning points are many—moving away from home, a job change, the birth of a child, children going to school, the ending of a marriage, retirement, or a religious conversion. Thus, "students' decisions to enter a literacy program are usually part of a larger process of change in their lives that often involves changing relationships to family, friends, work, and themselves" (p. 74). Both the stages of prolonged tension and the shorter-term phenomenon of turning point take place before the student enters the program. The remaining stages occur during and after a student's participation in the program.

Drawing on literacy as a means of problem solving is an important step in the appropriation of a literacy identity. As explained by Fingeret and

Drennon (1997), "once the decision is made to enter a program students continue to monitor whether their needs are being met" (p. 91). A critical step at this stage is students' gaining increasing comfort in an instructional setting whereby they build confidence that they do have the capacity to learn to read and write. With such buttressing students begin to tackle private and public literacy situations inside and outside the program.

Many students gain confidence when they begin to perceive gradual improvement in their ability to read, write, comprehend, and spell. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) point out that these are not merely skills but important cultural symbols of competence; appropriation of valued knowledge enhances identity. Very much linked to this, adult literacy learners are also "seeking a program where they feel valued rather than devalued, central rather than marginalized, ... and also want to feel that there is some amount of predictability inside the program" (p. 77). The culture and durability of the learning environment (as exemplified at LVNYC) plays a vital sustaining factor. As students progress, they seek additional educational opportunities within the program or in gaining knowledge of other programs that may better fit their needs.

Many students also begin to appropriate literacy outside the program. They do so in such ways as reading maps and road signs, following written instructions, reading menus, reading mail independently, filling out applications and forms, and gaining increasing mastery of print medium at work and in other important social contexts. Fingeret and Drennon claim such literacy practices are embedded in situations connected to broader life plans from whence meaning is derived. Maximal motivation requires a sharply linked connection between specific skills and such longer term purposes. This requires close attention to life span issues as students become increasingly literate.

As individuals move toward a fuller embrace of a literacy identity, their relationships and practices change both inside and outside the program. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) point out that they begin to develop "positive accepting relationships with ... tutors, administrators, and fellow students [who] can mediate the sense of shame and isolation and support the development of enhanced self-esteem" (p. 78). Relationships outside the program also often change. These may be viewed by the student as negative or positive and have a lot to do with whether or not the individual will continue with the program and, if so, in what manner. Relationships within social networks may change, "particularly when they [adult learners] have been exchanging their skills and knowledge with adults who offer assistance

with literacy" (p. 79). Such change is far from typically negative, though it often requires a readjustment in the relationship. The adult literacy program as a learning community, buttressed by small group instruction and a supportive curriculum that deals with significant life issues, can play a major role in facilitating of such boundary crossing as students appropriate literacy both inside and outside the program as part of an identity reconstruction.

Fingeret and Drennon (1997) identify intensive continuing interaction as the final stage of the cycle, wherein a literacy identity is sustained, although they acknowledge that not many adult literacy learners attain this stage. They draw on Mezirow's (1991, 1996) concept of perspective transformation (a radical shift in self-perception). Through critical reflection, adults at this stage may experience the reintegration of their lives by taking on new literacy practices in a broad array of situations at home, at work, and in the community. Fingeret and Drennon refer to adults at this advanced level as engaging in an important boundary shift in cross-cultural education and identity reconstruction as they develop the confidence and ability to assimilate into a more mainstream value system and way of life. They are not only "attempting to cross boundaries from predominately oral to more literate culture," but are also "crossing boundaries of race and class" (p. 95). Such development, when it does occur, takes a long time and is greatly aided by the support of a learning community. The extent to which both the institutional system and the learners themselves can accommodate the time required for such growth is another issue, which Sticht (1997, p.7) points out in his functional context theory.

By focusing on literacy practices mainly through the lens of individual behavior, Fingeret and Drennon (1997) leave hovering in the background the critical social, political, and economic issues of justice, equity, class, race, and gender even though these issues may have more influence in literacy education than does personal motivation. Auerbach (1993) questions the value of

> emphasizing individual goal setting without any accompanying social analysis [which] reinforces the specific Western mainstream value system of individualism—that through hard work and individual effort, learners can change the basic conditions of their lives. ... [The] vision of individual self-betterment may be a false promise in a society where race, ethnicity, gender, and the general vicissitudes of the economy play such a dominant role in the distribution of jobs, social status, and income." (p. 544)

Though Fingeret and Drennon are well aware of the school of critical literacy (given their ethnographic methodology and student-centred sensitivity) they instead focus on the importance of personal agency in the quest to reconstruct identity through the appropriation of literacy. In doing so, they invariably skirt some of the sharper issues that Auerbach raises. Nevertheless, Fingeret and Drennon have made an important contribution by describing the psycho-social dynamics that adult literacy learners often experience as they struggle toward enhanced literacy. Moreover, their emphasis on assimilation is difficult to ignore in light of the importance adult literacy learners attribute to functional competence.

The Functional Literacy Context

Expanding competence in reading and writing is at least a contributory factor toward life improvement, though not typically *directly* correlated with upward mobility. In this section I draw on the work of Sticht and Auerbach and suggest certain refinements to Fingeret and Drennon's (1997) literacy-as-practices model and consider additional programmatic emphases on discerning the contexts for adult literacy education in a metropolitan, post-industrial setting.

An Overview of Functional Literacy

Lytle and Wolfe (1989) provide a complex description of functional literacy that moves well beyond the philosophy of positivism and the psychology of behaviourism in which it is sometimes characterized, particularly in contrast to critical literacy (Lankshear, 1993). Such studies focus primarily on the influence of the 1975 APL study. By contrast, Lytle and Wolfe discuss the evolution and changing definitions of functional literacy through the late 1980s. Although they acknowledge that early definitions of functional literacy are based on the attainment of particular competencies linked to the alleged mastery of pre-defined daily tasks, they point to other definitions that are "more relativistic. Ideological in nature, these definitions situate functional literacy within the needs and characteristics of different groups and cultures" (p. 8). For example, Hunter and Harman (1985) define functional literacy as:

> the possession of skills *perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups* to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. (p. 7)

Moving beyond any stimulus–response behaviourism, Lytle and Wolfe (1989) seek "to capture the thinking required in the interaction among reader, task, and specific types of text" (p. 9). It is this more complex understanding upon which Sticht's (1997) functional context education is based—especially the extraction of information from specific environmental contexts deemed important to the adult literacy students. Sticht emphasizes using "to the extent possible, learning contexts, tasks, materials, and procedures taken from the future situation in which the learner will be functioning" (p. 3).

Such definitions, which merge toward the literacy-as-practices perspectives, have led Levine (1982) to question the "extreme elasticity" of the term functional literacy (cited in Lytle and Wolfe, 1989, p. 9). The difference between this more-complex interpretation of functional literacy and the concept of literacy as practices is more of a continuum than sharp contrast. That is, even this version of functional literacy is more focused on task attainment within a more-or-less self-evident social environment. The literacy as practices perspective draws out more subtly the sociocultural context that enshrouds literacy events within particular behaviours attitudes, and mores within a complex web of interaction wherein literacy tasks are not so sharply delineated. Still, the differences are subtle and not easily demarcated.

Functional Context Education

Consistent with other contextual approaches to literacy, Sticht (1997) maintains that "literacy is developed while it is being applied" (p. 2). Sticht's special focus is the progressive mastery of environmental contexts of importance to students—whether at at home, work, or in the community— through the assimilation of knowledge that is embedded in them. For Sticht, functional context education is the most expedient way of providing adults with low basic skills with important knowledge in critical areas of their lives because they "do not have a long time to learn literacy so they can improve their work opportunities, parenting needs, and so forth" (p. 7).

Sticht's (1997) cognitive approach focuses on the mastery of tasks normatively viewed as essential in various areas of life adjustment; the goal is to "explain what the students are to learn and why in such a way that they can always understand both the immediate and long term usefulness of the course content" (p. 3). Learning tasks are embedded in the cognitive demands of external environments students need or seek to master through efficient *informational processing*. Students accomplish such learning

through a developmental process that builds on previous knowledge by integrating the new knowledge. Instruction, in turn, is sequenced so that

> each new lesson ... builds on prior knowledge gained in the previous lessons ... [Learning objectives are derived] from careful analysis of the explicit and tacit knowledge and skill needed in the home, community, academic technical training, or employment context for which the learner is preparing. (p. 3)

Sticht recognizes the importance of internal processing which moves him outside a strict behaviourist camp, though there is a stimulus–response conation to his work in that the desired object of knowledge resides outside the self, which is then appropriated through progressive task mastery.

Sticht (1997) draws on a view of cognitive science that includes not only psychology, but also anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy (p. 38) and takes a developmental perspective in the recognition that knowledge emerges through the life span as the individual interacts with the social environment. Notwithstanding Sticht's emphasis on cognitive psychology, this represents an important sociocultural strand that grounds his work. That is, Sticht recognizes that society and culture provide the "symbols and symbol system, such as the natural language and conceptual ... knowledge, which constitute the primary means for the transmission of cognitive abilities" (p. 42). Sticht continues in this general Vygotskian vein (see Blanck, 1990) in acknowledging how the child is acculturated through the "internalization ... of the ideas of the parents and society, ... [mediated] through the local community" (p. 43).

However, as a cognitive psychologist, Sticht does not pursue this line of argument in probing the subtle interaction between self and the society mediated by family, language, local culture, and literacy—although Fingeret and Drennon (1997) clearly do. Instead he largely remains focused on how individuals master particular cognitive challenges with learning *tasks* identified by an "objective" (irony intended) analysis of the environment. The so-called objectivity implies that "the relationship between language *and* society is conceived to be unidirectional and static rather than dynamic and dialectical" (Rodby, 1992, p. 23) in terms of what is viewed as essential knowledge. Nevertheless, Sticht is acutely aware of the constructivist role of the learner as an active processor in the mastery of such knowledge.

Although Sticht (1997) brings to bear the importance of information *outside the head,* his informational processing model brings to the foreground the internal mechanisms of learning, which Rodby (1992) calls

"innate structures of [the] mind" (p. 14), which reside *inside the head.* As Sticht puts it:

> Cognitive development is the change in the cognitive system that results from changes in the anatomy and physiology of the human brain as it grows, develops, and deteriorates in later life, from the processing of information by the brain but manifested in a mental context called the mind and from the processing of information extracted from the environment in which the person lives. (p. 50)

Sticht (1997) concentrates on two aspects of the mind, the *"knowledge base* or long-term memory and the *working* or short-term memory" (p. 50). Learning happens when the individual "picks-up information from the outside environment and the internal knowledge base (the long term memory) and combine these two sources of information to construct an understanding of the world at a particular moment" (p. 50). Sticht acknowledges but does not explore the impact of "emotional context for learning and behaving" which he attributes to "psychophysiological processes" (p. 50). Neither does he concentrate much on the social construction of knowledge and its diverse implications for learning and for identity reconstruction, through the increasing appropriation of literacy among previous non- or low-reading adults. That is, he does not explore the "inner world" of emerging adult literacy, the hallmark ideas of Fingeret and Drennon (1997) in *Literacy for Life.*

Sticht (1997) views the individual "as an active, adaptive organism busily ordering and arranging an internalized representation of the life space … [engaged in] an active constructive [process drawing on information] … from the internal or external environments" (p. 56). For Sticht, such constructivism "differs from a strict behaviorist conception in which learning is the result of some fixed automatic process of association among stimuli, responses, and their consequences" (p. 56). However, his mentalistic description of cognitive processing represents only a minimal ecological view of learning. His emphasis on tasks, based on discrete functioning that may have applicability in specific contexts, is evasive of the broader cultural context in which the literacy behaviour of emerging adult readers is situated. As explained by Dewey scholar Burke (1994):

> We have to understand mentality as a feature not of brains or organisms, but of agents consisting of organisms embedded in environments. This would require an informational processing view of mind [in itself, a metaphor for how the mind works] which takes the mind out of the brain alone and embeds it also in the world. As a feature or

characteristic of an organism/environment system, mentality is essentially and fundamentally and directly driven as much by the regularities and forces in the world as in the head. (p. 95)

Sticht might not deny this, as is evident in his emphasis on contextual learning through his research on military and workplace literacy. What is missing is any subtle depiction on the relationship between the environment and the internal representation as individuals move across the continuum from orality to literacy within the complex contexts of their lives. Goals for entering and persisting in a program are not always crystal clear, as Fingeret and Danin (1991) explain:

> *Students do not necessarily have a concrete goal in mind, an instrumental view of literacy tied to some specific task or aspiration. More than anything, they want to feel that there are possibilities for the future, that there are choices and potential for change.* (Original emphasis, p. 45)

Nonetheless, Sticht's (1997) emphasis on environmental mastery makes an important contribution to the field that an asset-only approach to adult literacy education often evades. For those who are ready and able to participate in the highly focused courses Sticht promotes—such as certain workplace- and family-literacy programs and GED preparation classes— there is much to gain through functional context education. Moreover, tightly focused courses and programs in an array of contextual areas (see Quigley, 1997), to supplement programs like LVNYC, could serve as the vehicle through which many students are better able to stabilize a literacy identity— for example, students at higher levels of literacy and learning attainment. In contrast, generalized programs may prove more effective in nurturing the more emergent stages of a developing literacy identity, for which *some* students may be better situated *throughout* their literacy careers. Though even on this score, the importance of emergent motivation and the various permutations of the reconstruction of personal identity should not be lightly ignored even for advanced students, as goals do change in light of shifting life contingencies throughout the continuum of mastering a literacy identity.

Still, there is much to gain in selectively appropriating functional context education in the mastery of particular topics as they emerge in community-based programs of a general nature, like LVNYC. A sharply based, content-oriented approach could contribute to strengthening a student-centred focus in linking processes more overtly to desired outcomes (Quigley, 1997). Also, many students take advantage of highly specific courses, as Sticht (1997) maintains. However, discerning the context often

requires subtle probing of emotional and social factors that may impede any direct appropriation of external demands and expectations regardless of student level, especially in programs that experience the turbulence of extensive student turnover and absenteeism.

Participatory Literacy Education: An Auerbachian Critique

Working in the Freirian tradition, Auerbach (1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1993; Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987) provides an impassioned critique against the assimilative tendencies of a literacy-as-practices approach (as well as that of functional context education) and offers an alternative curriculum focus through her model of participatory literacy education. She does so by contrasting student-centred and participatory-centred adult literacy education even though both put learners at the centre of the pedagogy. Despite their various commonalities they reflect "potentially different ideological implications" (Auerbach 1993, p. 543). Participatory education emphasizes social transformation whereas student-centred approaches, grounded in current literacy practices, focus on self-realization "that through hard work and individual effort, learners can change the basic conditions of their lives" (p. 544).

Against this, Auerbach (1993) calls for a curriculum focus drawn "from the social context of learners' lives" (p. 543). Auerbach (1992b) believes that "students develop literacy by reading, writing, and talking about social factors (like housing, work, or neighborhood safety) in their family and community contexts and, most importantly, about ways that they can shape these conditions" (p. 22). She links individual experience with social analysis, claiming:

> Participants look at their personal experience in light of each others' experiences and examine the root causes of problematic conditions. Thus, they talk not only about someone's difficulty in finding an apartment, but why there is a housing shortage, about why some landlords prefer to rent to immigrants and others prefer not to, and about strategies for finding housing. This collective reflection depersonalizes problems, provides support, and is the basis for action [often collective action]. (p. 22)

Drawing out an important role for the teacher as a problem poser rather than a mere facilitator of what students already know, Auerbach (1993) rejects any notion which "promise(s) people that through education they can be assimilated into the very system which required their marginalization" (p.

544). Rather, the purpose of participatory education is to promote the transformation of society into a more equitable system.

> The teacher's role in this process is to identify problematic aspects of learners' lives, represent them to learners as content for dialogue and literacy work, and guide reflection on individual experience to more critical social reflection that eventually could lead to collective action. (p. 544)

Auerbach and Wallerstein (1987) provide an example from an English as a second language lesson titled "Jobs at Home and Jobs in the U.S." Le Minh, an Asian immigrant and a 10-year college math teacher in his native country, seeks employment in a hospital. Though he had never worked in a hospital, he states that he likes to work with people. The interviewer asks him if he is interested in a position in the kitchen. Le Minh's reluctant response is, "I guess so" (p. 16). The lesson is followed by questions to stimulate critical reflection. Some focus on purely personal matters such as how participants feel about their jobs or what they want to do; other questions ask students for factual information about Le Minh. The key questions, which resonate with the purpose of the dialogue are "Why do many immigrants and refugees [especially with Le Minh's education] have low-paying jobs? ... Do you think non-Americans have to start at the bottom?" (p. 17). Though Auerbach and Wallerstein maintain a problem-posing stance, their clear implication is that structural issues are at the heart of such "personal" matters. Similarly, Auerbach (1993) seeks to put back into currency in participatory pedagogy a *P* that "stands for politics—critical analysis of the social context of learners' lives" (p. 545).

Auerbach (1992a) distinguishes between assimilative and transformative models of adult literacy education by making "explicit the situated and interested nature of various views of literacy, the practices through which they are manifested, and their implications for instruction" (p. 71). She seeks to deconstruct any naturalized view of literacy—such as may be discerned in the ethnographic work of Fingeret and Drennon (1997) or the functional interpretation of Sticht (1997), where literacy becomes reified with "social reality" or "common sense." For Auerbach (as for Freire) the political and pedagogical are inherently intertwined and any effort to mask or blunt this reality is a form of ideological obfuscation. "Through dialogue and critical reflection ... the classroom becomes a context in which learners analyze their reality for the purpose of participating in its transformation" (p. 72).

Central to Auerbach's politics of literacy is her assessment of the literacy myth (described in Graff, 1979), which she maintains does not

deliver on its promised goods of providing a better life particularly as manifested through social and economic mobility. As Auerbach (1992a) explains it, "race and gender, rather than literacy (as evidenced through educational status), shape economic possibilities" (p. 74). The literacy myth is especially pernicious in reifying such concepts as "individual worth, effort, personal achievement, and [the prospect of] economic advancement" (p. 75) promoted via the literacy myth. The appropriation of such values by marginalized social groups masks "structural needs for a stratified workforce" in modern Western industrial societies. "Thus, the promise of economic advancement ... [via literacy] serve(s) the function of appeasing the working class while legitimizing and reproducing the status quo" (p. 74). If individual achievement is the pathway to success, failure is due to personal attributes rather than to structural inequality, which requires marginalized groups to assume their appropriate role at the bottom rungs of the social and economic ladder. On Auerbach's reading, this is the social subtext of mainstream adult literacy education. It is the capacity of illiterate groups to interpret this subtext that leads to so much resistance to adult literacy education, which is not to deny that some people modestly improve their lives by participating in mainstream programs. Such a subtext, in turn, serves as the basis for Auerbach's Freirian-based participatory approach.

Auerbach extends this critique not only to the most obvious decontextual approaches to adult literacy education, but to those that are highly sensitive to various student-centred contexts, although the latter ignore a more critical dimension of relating individual experience to that of the social order. That is, she is critical of an ethnographic approach that takes individual sensibilities into account within local situations "when they serve a more efficient way to move [adult learners] ... toward mainstream literacy practices, without challenging the system that uses these practices to maintain inequalities" (p. 77). Thus, in appropriating narratives of adult literacy learners into the curriculum, more than a celebratory or empathic approach is required. Rather, their "histories and language ... must also be considered critically in relation to the experiences of others, and to the conditions that gave rise to them, so that students can expand their repertoire of cultural understandings and possibilities" (p. 78).

Auerbach might argue that the undeniably individual ethos of literacy practices as articulated by Fingeret and Drennon (1997) "may undermine the possibilities for collective action and obscure the limitations on their [students'] power as isolated individuals to shape their environment, thus leading again to self-blame" (p. 78). Beneath the rhetoric and the ardent

beliefs of many adult literacy students, the literacy myth fails to deliver the goods of upward mobility in any substantial sense. In short, Auerbach provides a powerful critique grounded in the Freirian tradition of radical social analysis that challenges the assimilative aspirations both implicit and explicit in Fingeret and Drennon's *Literacy for Life* and in Sticht's *Functional Context Education*. She also provides a curricular framework, including specific instructional materials to ground her politics of literacy in practice. Whether the instructional materials are as forcefully reflected in the curricular framework, as Auerbach (in her more idealistic moments) envisions, is another matter.

Ideas for Enriching Literacy Practices

In this section I extract ideas for enriching literacy practices by comparative analysis of the literature on context in literacy. Sticht, Fingeret and Drennon, and Auerbach provide sophisticated versions of three distinctive traditions—literacy as tasks, literacy as practices, and literacy as critical reflection—sketched out by Lytle and Wolfe (1989) over a decade ago. There are important similarities in their contextually driven work, all of which draw upon a neo-Vygotskian understanding (see Blanck, 1990) of the relationship between the social context and internalized representations of knowledge. For example, they might all agree with Blanck that "mental activity … is the result of social learning, of the interiorization of social signs" (p. 44). They differ somewhat substantially on the implications of what is important about the relationship between society and the self.

Sticht (1997) focuses on various cognitive processes, intrinsic to selective environmental contexts, that individuals seek to master within roles available to them. He recognizes the importance of individuals' internalizating and building on their current knowledge about those contexts. However, for Sticht the "text" to be mastered resides within the environment rather than inside the head or in an interactive negotiation between the self and the social context that might result in a variety of solutions that work for particular students regardless of canonical assumptions seemingly *inherent* within the text. He also emphasizes task mastery based upon a sequential building block of knowledge acquisition and the importance of highly focused instructional courses geared specifically toward such learning. The mastery of such basic competence, which may be facilitated by a highly focused emphasis on functional context education, represents an important aspect of adult literacy education that may have considerable appeal within programs geared to specific purposes—such as those that focus on workplace or family literacy, GED preparation, or any other particular theme. Sticht's

approach may also be selectively incorporated into general, student-centred basic education or second-language programs because students identify specific goals—though not so likely in the systematic manner in which he portrays—wherein the mediating role of the self plays a prominent part in determining the focus of instruction.

Fingeret and Drennon (1997) focus on the individual aspirations, attainments, and mental representations of adult literacy learners within the context of a student-centred volunteer tutoring program. Within such a setting, as reflected in *Literacy for Life*, students move toward enhanced literacy as a means of working out more satisfying ways to interface with society as well as reconstructing a more satisfying vision of their own self-identity. Like Sticht, their focus is largely on cultural and social assimilation, though they emphasize more emerging internalized representations of shifts in identity as learners work through the stages suggested in their model. They all might agree with Auerbach (1992a) in critiquing any mystification inherent in the literacy myth if it is directly associated with economic and social mobility. However, they identify a more benign appropriation of the myth that is linked to various life improvements, which learners themselves view as significant. This is spelled out in the case study material of *Literacy for Life* (Fingeret & Drennon, pp. 5-50). Where societal transformation may seem well beyond the pale, an emphasis on life improvement, though highly limited and evasive of broader societal and cultural influences, may represent a more viable *nearer-term* focus for adult literacy education, particularly in mainstream programs like that represented by LVNYC.

Auerbach's work contains explicit analysis of the American political culture and social structure largely missing in Fingeret and Drennon (1997) and Sticht (1997). Her critique is grounded in the Freirian tradition in which literacy is viewed as a social issue linked to class, race, and gender *oppression*. She has also developed an emancipatory pedagogy based upon "critical social reflection that could eventually lead to collective action" (Auerbach, 1993, p. 544). In its more utopian aspirations, Auerbach's vision is based on a fundamental transformation of the social order at the least, as a powerful heuristic even if not practically realizable within the reformist context of the American political culture. Her instructional (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987) and curricular (Auerbach, 1992b) guidebooks have special applicability for community and union-supported work-based programs aimed to stimulate local social change and a more critical perspective of the social environment than that stressed by Fingeret and Drennon and by Sticht.

As critique this is compelling in many ways. Auerbach's (1992a) deconstruction of the literacy myth helps to explain how pervasive resistance is among so many potential adult literacy learners who refuse to participate or who leave programs before making substantial progress when such programs typically do not deliver the goods of upward mobility implicit in the promise (Quigley, 1997). Such skepticism makes an important contribution in grappling with the reality of current practice; her guidebooks provide a model for practical application within programs inspired by the participatory vision of adult literacy and second language education.

Despite Auerbach's (1992a, 1993) critique, the linkage of literacy practices identified by Fingeret and Drennon (1997) with various life improvements for those learners who remain in programs until substantial progress *is* made represents a significant factor that cannot be lightly ignored. Freire (1970) refers to the "limit-situation" (p. 105) of adult literacy education in the contemporary North American setting; thus the progress that Fingeret and Drennon describe may represent an important boundary line in adult literacy education not easily crossed. Tuman (1987) provides a model of social development drawn from the psychological theory of Piaget in regulating the dynamic tension between continuity and change within a given historical period. Specifically, he contrasts the forces of "*accommodation*— wherein we alter ourselves so that we conform to the demands of the world" to "the principle of *assimilation* wherein we attempt to change the world either in thought or reality to conform to our wishes" (p. 79). What is important to Tuman is the deepening of both accommodative and assimilative tendencies in a manner that results in progress among historical actors themselves within the particular context of time and place. These tendencies are critical both in coming to terms with enduring patterns of power in the construction of any social, political, and economic realities and in opening up the possibilities of change within constrained but open environments.

Given a context grounded in a liberal and sometimes reformist political culture in which democracy is very much enmeshed with corporate consumer capitalism, I find it difficult to be sanguine about any near-term prospect of a transformative politics of literacy linked to an emancipatory vision of social justice and equality within mainstream North American settings. Given also the ethos of individualism and self-realization, as a powerful cultural value difficult for adult literacy learners *not* to internalize, programs like LVNYC may be hard-pressed not to focus on life improvement as a major instructional project. Shorn of its more radical intent—which remains useful as a utopian boundary in a political culture that espouses the *ideals* of

equality, social justice, and inclusive pluralism, as well as for programs able to take a more radical tact—Auerbach's perspective may be grafted onto a *reformist* vision. This could prove more congruent with the liberal stand of mainstream political culture, which could also result in wider appeal among such programs that *do* emphasize life improvement as the primary purpose of adult literacy education. Co-optation is always a dilemma, but such an ideological shift could extend the literacy-as-practices emphasis on self-realization identified by Fingeret and Drennon (1997) and still result in significant change for individuals affected, even though the macro structure remains largely intact. An example is Auerbach's (1989) discussion of family literacy as parents develop skills to interact with the school system based on *their* terms rather than terms determined by school personnel:

> The classroom becomes a place where parents can bring school-related issues and develop the ability to understand and respond to them. They can explore their attitudes toward their own and their children's school experiences. They can assess what they see and determine their responses, rehearse interactions with school personnel, and develop support networks for individual and group advocacy. (p. 178)

Such critical literacy can be logically grafted onto a life-improvement focus in emphasizing issues where people live and link them to equity, voice, and access—at home, at workplace, and in community settings. There may be settings where more of the full import of Auerbach's critical analysis and praxis may come to bear on radical change through an appropriation of her guide books; but more localized and piecemeal change (as suggested in the quote, reflective of a *reformist* temper) may be the more typical outcome of literacy and second language instruction stimulated by her curriculum materials. These more modest outcomes may represent much of the fruit of Auerbach's actual pedagogy, which still has the capacity to extend the power *of literacy* to individuals and to groups in their engagement with collective action for significant life improvement even if the broader macro structure remains largely intact.

Conclusion

Contextual adult literacy is appropriated in contemporary North American settings, whether the specific focus is on functional skills, social empowerment, or self-improvement. I have argued throughout this article that each distinctive literacy is especially applicable in particular programmatic contexts. Some thought has also been given to their complex interaction, largely in extending a literacy-as-practices model advocated by Fingeret and Drennon by simultaneously appropriating sharpened

instrumental *and* critical lenses. Moving from theory to practice will require experimentation, innovation, and documentation.

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