Journal of International Education and Development
2025, VOL. 9, NO. 11, 155-158
DOI: 10.47297/wspiedWSP2516-250034.20250911

Adult Literacy as a Social Practice: An Integral Component of Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT
Due to global transformation caused by digitalization, migration and changes in labor market, the need for adult literacy education has become part of adapting to contemporary life. The paper claims that if adult literacy education wants to achieve lifelong learning, it should pay attention to the fact that it is a kind of sociocultural phenomenon. Skills approach to literacy, which has had an impact in policy circles, breaks literacy down into skills that can be measured, such as reading and writing for economic reasons. It ignores the complexities of everyday literacy activities such as building relationships or forming an identity. Sociological or anthropological perspective take a dynamic view of literacy and do not overlook the experiences of multiliteracies-digital literacy-and this view includes lifelong learning because of its emphasis on: 1. Literacy education is recognized as a lifelong process (UNESCO, 2022); 2. Motivation from inside, based on genuine needs such as caring; 3. To enhance agency and participation so as to empower those who have been excluded, but hegemonic policies are either literate or illiterate, job or employment focused. The article concludes that there needs to be a shift in policy with a whole and context-based approach that takes into account different pathways.

KEYWORDS
Adult literacy; Social practice of literacy; Lifelong learning; Skills-based literacy model; Informal learning; Marginalized Learners; Literacy proficiency spectrum

1 Introduction

The world is rapidly changing today because of digitalization, migration and changes in the way people work and live. And these things have made us pay more attention to how important adult reading is. At the same time, ideas about what literacy means have changed. Literacy is no longer seen as a collection of fundamental abilities, but rather as an ongoing lifetime activity that is constantly evolving as a result of modifications in social, financial, and technical circumstances (Moss, 2020). Starting from the 2010s, with the influence of UNESCO's lifelong learning program, there is now more interest in viewing adult literacy as a kind of social practice. According to Hanemann (2015) literacy is always situated within some social/cultural context. The paper states that adult literacy is part of lifelong learning if we look at it as something that happens between people. First of all,it contrasts this perspective against skill-based models. Then it looks into how socially located kinds of literacy can promote internal motivation and lasting engagement in learning, along with pointing out the shortcomings of main policy strategies.

2 Critique of the Skills Model and Defining Literacy as Social Practice

Extensive literature on international and local policies often simplifies the concept of adult literacy by focusing on a set of isolated reading and writing skills, for example, codebreaking, building a sentence, or filling out a form, thus overlooking the contextualized aspects that give meaning to literacy. For example, the current skill-based approach considers the assessment of adult literacy strictly within the framework of de-contextualized tasks, for example, reading comprehension on a given topic, answering irrelevant comprehension questions, or composing generic writing, rather than composing a letter to a family member or asking for support within the community. This underlying skill-based approach conceptualizes adult literacy not only as a fixed trait that cannot change but also as a characteristic that cannot be influenced by different cultural settings, experiences, and learning needs, which can actually only be systematically taught using the same technique (Hamilton, 2010).

As Papen (2005) persuasively argues, "This limited view often links the provision of literacy with the short-term demands of the labor market and economic development policies, reducing it simply to a utility for improving productivity and employability." This view, which I will refer to hereafter as the "skill-based approach," regards adult learners not as doers of their own deeds, but simply as passive conduits of valuable labor skills, learning, for example, how to read manuals for safe factory practices, how to understand computerized spreadsheets for entry-level office jobs, or how to write resumes that meet employer specifications, rather than active agents whose practices of literacy are informed by, and themselves participate in, larger social, cultural, and personal agendas. By so doing, the skill-based approach ignores the deeply complex ways that literacy mediates individuals ' engagement with the global culture and

the complex nexus between a range of highly varied social, cultural, and political concerns that give meaning and context to the fabric of individuals' lives. By definition, the "complete" practice of literacy includes, for example, the activity of a concerned grandmother documenting family genealogy for grandchildren, the activity of a determined community organizer rallying the support of neighbors through the circulation of a paper or online announcement, the activity of a new migrant coping with, through reading, the new healthcare system, the activity of a committed new citizen participating, through comprehension of political manifestos, within their new democracy. These deeply meaningful and quintessentially "human" practices, centered respectively upon identity, relation, and agency, are willfully hidden, of course, because of the purely economic utility-based approach of the skill-based model.

In contrast, the social practice approach provides a more integrated, anthropologically informed view of adult literacy, sensitive to the complexity of the processes involved. This approach transcends skill-based thinking, moving toward a new definition of literacy that is seen as a living, contextualized practice that is jointly constructed by the norms of the culture, the design of the institution, and individual practice. Literacy, then, is not simply a thing that can be possessed by the individual but a set of practices that are carried out among others, within specific contextualized social milieus. For example, the researcher Street (1984) stressed that literacy practices are inevitably integrated within larger, overall socio-political discourses, wherein the very practices of reading and writing cannot be separated from the underlying purposes, beliefs, and dynamics of power that subsume them. Such practices of literacy are, again, inevitably informed by context, for example, the rules of their use on the job, the manner of family communication, or the specifications of official documents that the authorities require.

Take, for instance, the example of the visa application form that the migrant worker is required to fill out. This very activity is simultaneously driven by the presence of institutional language, the language policies that perhaps give precedence to the major language spoken in the country over the worker's native language, and the migrant's transnational identity. The skill-based model will merely see it as "filling out a form," where the assessment will only be on the correctness of the words that are spelled or the grammar, but will not take note of the other underlying processes of identity, culture, and emotion that are involved, like deportation, the challenges of comprehension when the words are not familiar, and the need for legal status for the family. These, I argue, are not merely additional, they are the very essence of literacy.

Kalman (2008) continues this dialogue by pointing out the difference between the use of literacy skills and the possession of functional literacy, claiming that resource use does not automatically promote meaningful literacy. Additionally, he suggests that the availability of books, technology, or official documents is only a precursor, rather than a guarantee, of meaningful reading or writing practices for the individual. For example, a poor parent wishes to access educational communications for their child, but the messages are couched in highly academic language, and the parent simply cannot meaningfully interact with the messages. By the same token, a senior can access medication, but the use of the medication is couched in language that is incomprehensible, using print that is too small, and the senior simply cannot interact with it. Meaningful, or deep, literacy, on the other hand, cannot simply be acquired in the classroom. Rather, it develops because individuals participate in meaningful ways that affect their lives, meaning that the classroom activity of reading and the activity of the business owner composing messages on social media, the senior reading medication, or the parent composing messages for the educator happen because of a genuine need. That need is because the parent must compose messages for the educator about their family hardship, the member composing messages about the need for better transit, the senior composing messages to understand their medication, or the small business owner composing messages for customers. In these ways, the meaningful use of literacy is not the "goal," but the means of achieving meaningful goals that are recognized within the context of the social engagement that individuals maintain. This highlights the need for individuals not simply to attain the skill of literacy, but the need for engagement that meaningfully demonstrates individuals' attention and awareness of the ways that the use of literacy affects their environment. By doing so, individuals build not only the skill of the activity, but also the meaning of the activity within the context of their environment.

Moss (2020) continues this train of thought by asserting the dynamic, constantly changing nature of literacy practices, which are deeply bound up with the processes of identity construction, communication, and experience. Literacies are not fixed accomplishments but respond variably, depending on the particular role and context: for example, the language of the profession can range through formal, technical language used in business communications, casual language used in SMS and other messages, to expressive narrative used for personal, private purposes. Such variability indexes the dynamic, constantly varying nature of these practices, influenced by the role, purpose, and context of use. Such practices operate across various cultural domains, including the work environment, the family, the migrant population, and the community, because the various adults' lives require them to take on various roles: employed, familial, social, communal, and cultural. Consequently, reading and writing on a daily basis can be seen not only as technical skills, but also as essential instruments for relation-making, resource access, and identity construction. It can also be seen how the educator can create learning programs that take into consideration the cultures of the learners, the grandparent can teach the next

generation their culinary recipes, the community activist can educate the population about social justice, and the recovering individual can keep a recovery diary. Of importance to note is the fact that, according to the social practice approach, the adult literacy process can actually be seen not only as a one-time thing, but also a lifelong activity of meaning-making. This is because, upon exposure to new situations, embracing new roles, and grappling with new challenges, the need for new meaning-making through literacy practices continues. Such a reconceptualization of literacy education offers relevance: it shapes the manner of literacy education that can support genuine lifelong learning for adults, empowering them to participate meaningfully and actively within the social, cultural, and political domains. Socially grounded literacy education goes beyond merely educating about skills for isolated incidents and promotes the use of reading and writing practices that are relevant for the lives of the individuals. It also takes place with respect for existing knowledge and experience, tapping the motivational aspect, recognizing that the definition of literacy should not only include productivity but also take into consideration the concepts of connection, identity, and agency that connect with the human aspect of individuals.

3 Social Practice View and Lifelong Learning

Unlike the skill-based model, the social practice perspective regards reading and writing skills as a lifelong and continuous off-campus learning process. As Hanemann (2015) pointed out, literacy must be regarded as a continuum of different levels of proficiency formed by our environment and daily experience. In this sense, the continuity of literacy enables adults to incorporate learning into their daily lives rather than confining it to school. This also aligns with UNESCO's (2022) definition of lifelong learning, which refers to lifelong learning in formal, informal and non-formal settings. So, when we say that literacy is a social practice, it means that what we learn is related to our daily life, for example, reading health information or participating in community activities. All of these are meaningful and continuous lifelong learning.

More importantly, if literacy is carried out in significant social activities, it is more likely to activate the intrinsic motivation for learning. McCombs (2010) pointed out that if learners believe the learning process is meaningful, relevant and empowering to them, their motivation will be stronger. From this perspective, in order to maintain lifelong learning, a person not only needs to learn new skills but also always has the desire to learn. However, skills-oriented reading and writing abilities rely on context-free teaching, neglecting learners' interests, purposes and social interactions. Therefore, the perspective of social practice creates a sense of resonance and personal connection, which is very important for encouraging learners to engage in the long term. Hamilton (2010, p. 11) refers to this meaningful activity as a "knowledge fund", which enables learners to associate their new literacy experiences with the social roles they are already familiar with. Knowledge funds exist within groups and individuals and can be valued, utilized and shared during the process of literacy learning. Similarly, Hanemann (2015) pointed out that literacy should take into account attitudes, values and self-efficacy, which are related to lifelong learning. Empirical examples show how social context literacy supports initiative and participation. Take Papen (2005) as an example. She wrote about a woman learning to read medical documents to care for her elderly parents and an adult immigrant learning to read to fill out official forms. Both involve the development of technical skills, but they are both based on specific social needs and demonstrate greater initiative and participation. These experiences show that when adult learners achieve meaningful personal goals through reading and writing, the resulting sense of success will enhance their motivation to continue learning. Therefore, viewing literacy as something people do in society will not only change our perspective on it, but also help us understand, support and always adhere to adult learning.

Although it is becoming increasingly clear that literacy is a continuous, context-based matter, policies in many places still only take into account some skills. Hughes and Schwab (2010) criticized the large-scale literacy campaign for relying on a binary distinction between literate and illiterate people. It leads to shallow learning outcomes and does not help learners stay focused. Similarly, McCombs (2010) pointed out that learning motivation is an intrinsic and relational process formed by the learner's experiences, needs and beliefs. However, many policy structures prioritize the outcome of being ready for employment or obtaining certification. It is likely that this will marginalize those who are motivated by care, community involvement, or developing their sense of self. If literacy doesn't consider the social contexts, interactions, and purposes of adults, lifelong learning won't have these important parts and won't happen.

4 Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues that adult literacy as a social practice is essential to lifelong learning. In traditional notions concerning adult illiteracy and education based exclusively on skills acquisition, adult illiteracy or education can never be viewed in terms of its connections to specific societal functions.

Such an approach assumes a crucial significance in promoting lifelong learning efforts to achieve intrinsic motivation. In other words, when there are real-world needs to fulfill, like a parent wanting to interpret medical texts or an immigrant wanting to communicate with his or her child's school, there will not only be an intrinsic desire to learn but there would also not be an itemized list to show off. In fact, such a model argues against mainstream ideology to focus merely on skills-oriented objectives. These objectives generally tend to ignore real-world uses of adult literacy.

In placing so much focus on the social practice dimension of literacy, there remains an encouragement to think differently about its definition. The issue remains that there has long been a tension between its redefinition to focus on its more comprehensive elements, such as its continuous development influenced by evolving technology or a shift in community needs, against being defined or measured in terms of other more tangible endpoints that are merely value-laden or based upon its employment-related competency or competence. To close the gap between what there is to learn in terms of adult education policy and what needs to happen to improve adult education, there needs to be a paradigm shift in understanding adult education's value. Why focus exclusively on deficit thinking with "literate" or "illiterate" adults? Rather than assuming there are only two options in terms of adult education skills, there needs to be more understanding in terms of adult education. The answer to adult education advancement lies in understanding adult education in non-classroom settings like communities or online networks.

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