

## **Transforming Professional Identities in a CPD Community of Enquiry** **Aileen Ackland, University of Aberdeen, Scotland.**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses a CPD programme which achieved effective professional learning by engaging with the social and institutional dimensions of learning culture, through an understanding of learning as a process of becoming. The pedagogy of teacher education was enacted as an intentional discursive move to project some discourses and resist others, in a contested space created by hybrid policy discourses. The paper describes a pedagogy that drew on ideas of social learning in communities of enquiry and engaged with a number of synchronising discourses for the co-construction of an imagined community and towards the negotiation of a shared but pluralistic professional identity. The value of a VLE as a mediating tool is considered. Finally, some evidence of transformation - of practitioners becoming activist professionals - is presented.

### **Introduction**

*'Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming – to become a certain person, or conversely to avoid becoming a certain person.'* (Wenger, 1998, 215)

In this paper I discuss the pilot phase (2006-2008) of a new national professional development programme for Adult Literacies tutors in Scotland which aimed to facilitate the renegotiation of professional identity. The discussion is informed by: ongoing research into the processes of change in the adult literacies field in Scotland (Ackland, 2006), which utilises the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003); experience in curriculum development for the Scottish TQAL Consortium<sup>1</sup>; and evidence from the evaluation of the pilot TQAL programme.

The Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy policy (Scottish Executive, 2001) explicitly promotes a social practices perspective of literacies. In response, the TQAL (Teaching Qualification: Adult Literacies) programme was introduced to improve the quality of teaching and learning by embedding the theoretical perspective in practice and to contribute to the professionalisation of the field.

Developed and delivered by a consortium of HE and FE institutions, the pilot programme brought together practitioners from a range of educational contexts across Scotland. The blended learning programme connected four geographically dispersed study groups in a shared virtual learning environment - a community of enquiry (Lipman, 2003) in which they could discuss, collaborate and negotiate new meanings of professionalism. The 20 month programme consists of 4 sequential modules: Learning Worlds, Making Mental Models, Expanding Our Repertoire; The Enabling Net.

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<sup>1</sup> The Scottish TQAL Consortium consists of the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee & Strathclyde, Cardonald and Forth Valley Further Education Colleges, and two representatives from the field. It is contracted by Learning Connections, an agency of the Scottish Government, to develop and deliver the new TQAL qualification.

Evaluation of the pilot drew on a variety of feedback mechanisms, including a report by an external consultant<sup>2</sup>, and incorporated the views of all stakeholders.

Before reflecting on the programme, I will begin by sketching the Scottish context of Adult Literacies in which it was located. My argument is that the tensions in the altered field of practice necessitated the negotiation of a new professional identity.

### **The Epistemological break**

The publication of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland report (ALNIS) in 2001 marked a radical shift in the topography of the field of practice and may be viewed as an epistemological break in the tradition of literacies education in Scotland. The report proposed a distinctive approach to adult literacies:

*'The Scottish approach adopts a social practice model, which sees literacies as key dimension of community regeneration and a part of the wider lifelong learning agenda.'* (Scottish Government website <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Life-Long-Learning/17551> [accessed 31/10/08]).

Literacy and numeracy are acknowledged as 'skills whose sufficiency may only be judged within a specific social, cultural, economic or political context' (Scottish Executive, 2001, p.7); the report asserts that learners should be supported to develop their own situated uses of literacies. In emphasising the local and contingent, post-structuralist theories of knowledge, such as social practice literacies, change the relationship of knower and learner, fundamentally challenging the foundations of educational institutions.

The new policy statement heralded a change of circumstances for literacies practitioners. Unprecedented levels of funding were invested in local Adult Literacy and Numeracy partnerships, on the basis that reaching the most marginal learners required 'collaboration and synergy of effort across all sectors' (Leavey, 2005, p23). Organisations which had previously operated in isolation and according to their own distinctive cultures and institutional objectives were induced into new social relations (Cardini, 2006) through funding mechanisms which encouraged the redefinition (made possible by the broader conception of 'literacies') of a wide range of educational provision as adult literacies work.

The ALNIS report also called for professionalisation. It promised the introduction of 'national training standards for all staff and volunteers whose roles relate to literacy and numeracy tuition and a new qualification for specialist literacy and numeracy practitioners' (p 4). Professionalisation was linked to the aspiration towards an Adult literacies 'system that learns' (p 33); the new approach was to be informed by the co-construction of knowledge about practice.

In Scotland, therefore, the who, what and why, as well as the how, of adult literacies work changed dramatically. Colleagues from wider afield have looked on, sometimes in envy, at what has been described as a 'grand experiment' (Merrifield, 2005, 22).

### **Evolving cultures and identities**

Cultures do not change overnight, however. New conceptions and new expectations were experienced differently by practitioners in a range of sectors such as

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Yvonne Hillier of the University of Brighton,

ABE, FE and the voluntary sector who came to them with their own continually evolving professional narratives and a range of practices that could be located within diverse functional, liberal and critical traditions of literacies (Papen, 2005 pp.9-11).

In each of the sectors, the new initiative was contextualized in a distinct historical perspective. For some in community based Adult Basic Education, the new initiative represented an iteration in a cycle of political attention and neglect going back several generations. They remain sceptical about government commitment being long term. In contrast, there is a more linear (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000, 295-319) sense of time in FE, for whom one priority is replaced by another, and another, in an endless drive into a future of improved quality.

Practitioner identities are not only distinct but relational; practitioners define their own identity in relation and in contrast to other identities. For example, some community-based adult literacies *tutors* define their identity negatively - as *not* a teacher. For many practitioners, the informal nature of their practice was at variance with their concept of a 'professional'. Practitioners suddenly found themselves in the 'open moorland' of lifelong learning (Usher et al, 1997, 27), in competition not only for resources but for definitions of practice and the appropriation of the enterprise.

The influence of the new policy was thus mediated by distinct communities in which meanings are negotiated in practice (Wenger, 1998, 85). Five years after the ALNIS launch, doubts began to be expressed about the claim to be enacting a social practices approach in Scotland (Ackland 2006, Wallace & Ackland, 2006; Maclaclan, 2006; Tett et al, 2006). Examination of the hybrid discourses of the ALNIS report and the range of policy and practice artefacts flowing from this (Ackland, 2006), combined with evidence of local practices, led to the conclusion that the social practice discourse in Scotland was aspirational (Maclachlan, 2006). It was not yet consistently reflected in action.

### **Pedagogy as a discursive move**

Discourse both represents and constructs reality. It acts powerfully to permit some ideas and actions and to constrain others. Language is inherent to social life and, as a cultural tool, can establish, sustain or change power relations in social networks (Fairclough, 2003) Within discourse, ideologies are projected, contested and resisted; text (in the broadest sense) creates a trace of the capillary flow of power (Foucault, 1998). Within the text of Scottish policy, conflicting discourses - of social practices, functional skills and performativity - compete (Crowther et al, 2001; Maclachlan & Cloonan, 2003; Maclaclan, 2006; Ackland, 2006). These discourses are in turn reinforced, resisted or recontextualised (Fairclough, 2003, 32) in a chain of discursive moves and countermoves.

In 2006, The Scottish Consortium was contracted by the Government to develop and deliver the new qualification for Adult Literacies practitioners. The new programme was to improve and standardise the quality of teaching and learning and to contribute to the professionalisation of the emergent field of social practice literacies. The professional development programme would support the development of new practices appropriate to the new theoretical paradigm.

The Benchmark statements for the *Teaching Qualification: Adult Literacies* (Learning Connections, 2005) exemplified the conflicted and intertextual discourse of the

field. Whilst a social practice perspective of literacies is mentioned, the benchmark statements were derivative - adapted from the Initial Teacher Education standards applicable to the Scottish school sector, formulated before the 2001 watershed. The expectations of 'the good teacher' (Edwards et al, 2004) stipulated in this document are more consistent with a traditional model of teaching and learning than one derived from a social practices perspective. In the pursuit of a model professional, it appears that equivalence with other established educational professionals was an important characteristic.

Goodson (2003, 125 -126) makes an extremely useful distinction between professionalisation and professionalism: the professionalisation project is 'the pursuit of status and resources for an occupational group'. Professionalism, on the other hand involves 'teachers definitions of their peer group practices'. The professionalisation project was made explicit in the introduction to the TQAL Benchmark statements: '*In order for adult literacies teaching and learning to be recognised as a legitimate, specialist area and therefore have the prerequisites to be recognised as an area of professionalism – the need for a Teaching Qualification: Adult Literacies is pressing*' (Learning Connections, 2005, 5).

As the development proceeded, the title of *Teaching Qualification* was to crystallise many of the contested issues of the professionalization project. The inclusion of the term 'teaching' was queried by practitioners whose values were invested in the term 'tutor' and who sought thus to distinguish themselves from what they perceive to be the authoritarian methods of the school sector. The title was also called into question by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), the professional body of school and college teachers; they pointed out that the denotation of the qualification as a *teaching qualification* contravened legislation which limited the use of this terminology to specific situations; it is part of the mechanics of gatekeeping professional 'teacher' status. Much later, students on the new programme, which had been validated with different titles in three separate institutions, were to express their anger at the inequality they perceived of one title including the term *teaching* whilst the others did not. They felt that the title which included the term *teaching* would have higher standing.

The Consortium thus found itself in a contested space in which language was of critical importance. Acknowledging the inherently ideological nature of education, it chose to align itself with the pursuit of professionalism as opposed to the professionalisation project and to found the new programme on the rhetoric of a social practices perspective. By choosing to amplify one discourse over the variety of others in circulation, the consortium sought to resist the recontextualisation of the social practices discourse by a discourse of performativity and reject interpretations of professionalism as compliance and accountability (Goodson, 2003). Instead, it offered an opportunity to negotiate a new form of professionalism.

### **There is nothing more practical than a good theory: Communities of practice**

Searching for a congruent pedagogy of teacher education, the TQAL curriculum development team began with the belief that teaching itself is best understood as a type of social practice (Ackland & Wallace, 2006). Starting from 'a socio-constructivist perspective on learning' (De Corte et al, 2003, 25), we therefore approached the design of the programme with an emphasis on the situatedness of learning within a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) in which learning is seen to occur in a 'network of relations'

(Felsted et al, 2005, 364). We adopted the metaphor of learning as becoming as opposed to learning as acquisition.

What one learns and how it is learned cannot be separated from the groups one belongs to nor from their wider location in the social structure (Sommerlad, 2003, 157). The social practices of teaching are shaped by the prevailing norms of specific socio-cultural contexts. The prevailing social norms of the diverse contexts in which adult literacies work takes place are distinctive in significant characteristics such as their allegiance to traditions of literacies education (Papen, 2003), historical narratives (Turner & Trompenaars, 2000), levels of knowledge codification (Boisot, 1998). To achieve the aim of the development of a new professional domain in which the norms and practices of a social practice perspective of literacies were shared, it was crucial to provide the opportunity for participants to address and reshape the social norms which prevailed in the patchwork of the contemporary field. The programme sought to engage explicitly with the question of what it means to *be* a literacies professional in the new theoretical paradigm.

‘Communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998) is an anthropological model of social relations and learning. Communities of practice are social organisms that evolve, they cannot be created; but Wenger does suggest that a number of aspects of community are critical to learning, including connectivity, membership, projects and artefacts. In the design of the TQAL curriculum each of these elements was considered. We concentrated on these processes rather than content which could be delivered. Our response to the new ecology of literacies learning and teaching was to draw upon contemporary understandings of social learning; we elaborated our understandings of the implications of a social practice theory of literacies for teaching and learning to arrive at an ideal teacher identity distilled from the literature of the new literacies studies (Ackland & Wallace, 2006, 4). It was this image, of a critically aware social actor, rather than the outmoded benchmark statements, which informed our pedagogy.

### **Synchronising discourses: Critical Reflection, Action Enquiry, Activist Professionalism and Social Practices**

*‘Grasping a threshold concept is transformative because it involves an ontological as well as a conceptual shift. We are what we know. New understandings are assimilated into our biography, becoming part of who we are, how we see and how we feel.’*  
(Cousin, 2006, 4)

Four threshold concepts (Land & Meyer, 2008) were central to the programme and became community artefacts which helped to established alignment through a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, 153).

First , we employed Brookfield’s theory of the 4 lenses for critical reflection (1995):1. Our autobiographies; 2. Our learners’ eyes; 3. Our colleagues; and 4. Research and theory. The programme drew heavily on Critical Theory (Brookfield, 2005) and embedded the concept of the 4 lenses at all levels. For instance, assignments required participants to reflect on their own experiences, to work with their learners to explore literacies in a social context, to observe and collaborate with colleagues, to review recent research and to engage with policy and theory.

For some participants, critical reflection did not come easily. It appeared that community-based tutors tended to invest value in the practical rather than the intellectual. Their knowledge and understandings are largely tacit and a significant part of their identity is in 'just knowing' what to do. They tend to be wary of 'theory' which they perceive to be some distance from practice realities. At all times the tutor team were adamant about our rejection of the theory/practice split. We worked with participants to explore the theories embodied in their own practice, yet some participants still experienced the early stages of the programme as 'academic' and found the focus on 'mental models' in module 2 difficult to grapple with. The synthesis of this discourse with the next – Practitioner Enquiry - in module 3 helped to make the idea of praxis more tangible. By the conclusion of the programme, the idea of critical reflection and the mechanism of the 4 lenses was common currency in the community. The social practice of critical reflection had become a norm of the community of practice.

The second key idea, then, was of Practitioner Enquiry. From the outset, participants in the programme were required to investigate aspects of their own practice. Starting with a case study in module 1, collaborative enquiry was an expectation of each of the assessment tasks. The third module was structured around a formal Action Enquiry process throughout which participants shared their experience with the wider community through blogs. For many participants this was a pivotal point in our learning. Action Enquiry helped us examine our own practice and see whether it lived up to our expectations (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). In the words of one student '*action enquiry helped me see I'm living the right way.*' Enquiry is a state of mind - participants did not just *do* enquiry they *became* enquiring.

Each of these concepts was reinforced through modelling by programme tutors. Critical reflection and enquiry were not just assessment tasks students were set, they were instead, the assumed norms of the learning community.

The third element we introduced was the idea of the Activist Professional (Sachs 2003). Sachs' conception of activist professionalism is located in the context of the compulsory education sector. Although she elaborates this in the experiences of secondary school teachers, it was our contention that the characteristics of the activist professional are congruent with the ideal of the Adult Literacies professional committed to a social practices perspective. In TQAL, we translated her ideas into our own context and negotiated a meaning of activist professionalism that could be embodied and enacted in our own communities of practice. An important characteristic of the activist professional is their commitment to constructive dialogue with other stakeholders. Again, collaborative enquiry tasks encouraged participants to experiment actively with this connected identity.

In the main, these three ideas were fresh to participants in TQAL. However, the fourth and most critical threshold concept, '*social practices*', was more problematic in that people came to the programme with their own meanings of the term, mediated through the communities of practice in which they operate at work. These meanings reflected professional identities shaped in the diverse cultures and were refractions of existing values, beliefs and expectations. The rhetorical power of the 'social practices model' in Scotland, made it difficult to question the concept. Most practitioners have adopted the language of social practices (Maclachlan, 2006), but, in my view, most often use it to project pre-existing values of teaching and learning, such as learner-centredness.

Social practices theory is primarily a theory of literacies in society. It is not an educational theory. Articulations of the implications of this perspective for teaching and learning are beginning to proliferate (e.g. Appleby & Barton, 2008) but in Scotland, the discourse is so powerful that these implications are assumed to be self-evident. The ongoing dialogue in the TQAL community of enquiry sought to re-examine this concept and its meanings, including its meanings in practice. This is an ongoing project of fundamental importance to the formation of a new professional identity of Adult Literacies practitioner. The TQAL programme provides the focus for a negotiation of meaning about what the Scottish social practice approach really means.

### **Online community: co-creating professional discourse**

The negotiation of meanings was supported by a blended learning approach that aimed to nurture a 'knowledge building community' (Swan & Shea, 2005, 6). Connectivity in the TQAL community was facilitated by the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE; in this instance, *Blackboard*). As well as affording communication between all participants, and in particular, the four separate study groups, the VLE sustained the circulation of the synchronising discourses and provided shared tools and artefacts around which the co-construction of knowledge could take place. The online community therefore acted as an expansive learning environment (Engestrom, 2001) in which participants could transcend their restricted local communities of practice and engage in the co-construction of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006) of Scottish Adult Literacies professionals.

One crucial aspect is that online discussion requires writing. Co-created texts operated as thinking tools in the learning community in which social dimensions were integral to the learning process. Every contribution, formal or informal was recorded and so shaped the nature of future interactions, which in turn constructed the expectations of community talk so that over time, participants moved from being consumers of the discourse of the profession to becoming active authors of that discourse.

In addition, the VLE provided three critical benefits to participants. Firstly, the creation of text supported the development of the authorial voice in the professionals. According to Brandt (2005, 1), writing is now 'the productive skill of consequence' and increasingly central to the role of the professional at work. Rehearsal of contributions to professional discourse in the online community increased the confidence of participants to contribute to the wider professional discourse as people became active contributors to national networks, conferences and publications. Secondly, online discussions scaffolded a move from tacit to articulated knowledge, not only for the individual but also for the community of practice and beyond. Finally, the use of the VLE provided an opportunity for powerful experiential learning of the skills that allow learners to flourish in the digital age. The use of web2.0 tools and multi media expanded the repertoire of resources available to serve enquiry and, consistent with the programme philosophy of 'loop input' (Woodward, 1991), encouraged the use of these new tools and resources in practice. As we all participated together in the expanded repertoire of digital practices, these social practices were confirmed as part of the repertoire of the literacies professional.

The VLE was therefore a powerful mediating tool. Not everyone participated equally; some participants struggled in a variety of ways with the challenges of the medium. However, 'it was hated, enjoyed, used but never ignored' (Hillier, 2008, 20).

The VLE was central to the experience of the programme. The repository of community artefacts – such as photos taken at events – contributed to the collective self awareness of the community; the artefacts formed a mutually familiar backdrop to the final conference at which the national group met for the first time.

### **Experience of change: becoming activist professionals**

Transformative learning is not a comfortable process (Brookfield, 1995 & 2005; Mezirow et al, 2000, 160). Some participants referred to this as being taken out of their comfort zone, acknowledging their new-found empathy with their own learners:

*'We ask learners to go outside their comfort zones in their learning - without this it is difficult to progress - so why should we not be pushed outside ours? And it's good to see how this feels (on reflection of course!) and be reminded of how valuable it is to face challenge'* (Student comment)

A process of becoming is simultaneously a process of ceasing to be; both in the sense that one leaves behind previous identities but also one abandons the security of a settled existence. This position of 'liminality', as Land and Meyer (2006, 2) term it, can include resistance or contestation and may be the locus for creative tensions. Some participants experienced dissonance between the discourse of the 'imagined community' and the discourse of their local communities of practice. This could be acute and bring with it the threat of cultural suicide (Brookfield, 2005). As they became a core member of the new community of practice they began to see the world with fresh eyes and in some instances became more critical of local practices that they perceived to be inconsistent with the professional identity they were co-constructing with others on the programme.

*'The process encouraged me to challenge my own ideas about the way we do things and why. It also made me re-evaluate my own understanding...'* (Student Comment)

Activist professionalism is not for the faint hearted (Sachs, 2003) but in some instances, the participants were successful 'brokers' (Wenger, 1998, 109) between the imagined community and the local communities of practice; the discourses of critical reflection, practitioner enquiry and activist professionalism began to circulate more widely, influencing local practices, of, for instance, CPD and tutor support. (Learning Connections evaluation meeting, 08/4/08; Learning Connections focus group, 18/9/08)

Practitioners became 'more linked into policy and practice professionally' (Hillier, 2008, 15) with *'the confidence to voice opinions and suggest ways forward for the development of the strategic planning within the local authority.'* (Student comment)

*'The influence of the TQAL programme extended beyond the adult literacies practice. For example one tutor was able to influence the delivery of adult literacy in a military service. A practice tutor was using the TQAL approach with volunteers in the ITALL programme. One tutor was using the practitioner research model with her own colleagues and another in collaboration with her student in TQAL had created a peer observation process linked to self assessment of tutoring... Tutors were engaging with their wider communities in a number of ways, particularly through attendance at conferences such as RaPAL and through active engagement with their employers, partnerships and networking virtually'. (Hillier, 2008, 15)*

Whilst it is dangerous to generalise about the identity outcomes for all participants, the majority of the practitioners involved in the pilot programme now appear to be active discursive agents in their field of practice, inhabiting a new professionalism which has criticality at its core. Some have moved into positions of agency in national organisations and networks. Most have taken ownership of the ideas of criticality and activism and are contributing to the circulating discourses with their own projections of these ideas:

*'As 'professionals' I feel we need to keep stretching the boundaries, doing the requirements of the job but always, always broadening this out to include a critical analysis of what we are doing, why and in whose interest - if we don't challenge these and put forward alternative visions then we are not active participants in anything, we are merely deliverers of governmental economic policy and we limit not only what we do but what literacies are!'* (Extract from Student Comment on the VLE)

## **Conclusion**

A national community of practice in a new professional domain can be considered an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) It relies on practitioners identifying themselves with one another despite the distinctiveness of their local cultures and having a shared sense of the norms, values and social practices of the overarching community. A professional development programme which intentionally creates space inside the discourse to negotiate the meanings of professionalism can contribute effectively to the process of collaborative change in a field of practice.

Evaluations of the pilot TQAL programme indicate that a community of enquiry approach supported practitioners to take ownership of the experience of their own professional development. It has had transformative effects on their self-confidence, sense of agency and professional identity. Together, we have constructed our own concept of activist professionalism (Sachs, 2003) and begun to forge a reflexive, critical and connected professional identity that is congruent with a social practices perspective of literacies.

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