

Prisoners, Literacy Practices and Politics

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This paper outlines a pedagogical and academic journey which began when I was first employed as a ‘remedial English’ teacher in New South Wales prisons in 1980. My intention is to explain how, based on my teaching experiences and academic studies, my understanding of the role of literacy in the lives of prisoners has changed over the years, and that the issue of literacy in prisons remains contested and highly political.

A traditional/dominant perspective

When I first entered a NSW prison in 1980 I did so with a number of predictable preconceptions. My understanding was that many prisoners would be illiterate and it was my job primarily to teach basic literacy skills. Without a background in specific literacy teaching (I had previously been a high school teacher of history and geography) my teaching instincts told me that I would need to start teaching literacy skills from the ‘bottom-up’, that is, begin with teaching the alphabet and basic sound/symbol relations.

From my first day, however, I only rarely found myself in the position of having to teach basic literacy skills in the way I have described above. For a start, not many so-called illiterate students entered the classroom door. Most of the students I met were

enrolled in correspondence courses and wanted assistance in working through units of their various courses. Many others were from non-English speaking backgrounds and sought assistance in speaking English. While most prisoners I met claimed to know of illiterate prisoners, rarely did these illiterate prisoners actively seek assistance to improve their literacy skills, and those that did seem to fit the description appeared to give up after just one or two lessons. Unwittingly at the time I was beginning to develop an understanding of the role of literacy in the lives of prisoners.

That many prisoners were illiterate appeared an unchallenged truth. From the available research literature at the time I learnt that some 30 percent of NSW prisoners were considered 'functionally illiterate'. This figure was cited in the *Report of the Royal Commission into NSW Prisons* (1978), and also in a later Annual Reports of the NSW Department of Corrective Services (Annual Report 1984). Every research study available at the time, both in Australia (e.g. Brennan and Brennan 1984; Dodd 1980, Noad and Hancock 1985) and overseas (e.g. Dalglish 1982, Isabelle 1990, Kozol 1985) indicated that prisoners had very poor literacy levels. Significantly also, many researchers came to the conclusion that low literacy levels were related in some causal way with criminality (see Kozol 1985 for a particularly powerful account).

A literacy mediator

While I was rarely engaged in teaching basic literacy skills to so-called illiterate prisoners, I did nevertheless provide assistance with literacy related tasks to many prisoners. The very nature of prison life involves an extensive array of literacy

practices. There are the personal letters to and from family members, friends and others in the general community. There are myriad legal formalities and correspondence to work through. Just about every significant decision a prisoner makes involves writing a request to the prison authorities. Even growing a beard requires written permission. And the small ameliorating comforts of prison life, the purchase of tobacco, biscuits, shampoo and other similar items require the completion of a buy-ups form.

When people who lack literacy ability become prisoners their regular means of managing literacy practices are disrupted. No longer is there a spouse or friend to provide literacy assistance, and they are forced to establish new networks of support, and some prisoners turn to the education staff.

I accepted that part of my role as an educator was to assist these prisoners with literacy practices. In effect, I became a literacy ‘mediator’ or ‘broker’. This role rarely receives recognition in prison education, but over the past couple of decades literacy researchers have increasingly recognised the importance of literacy mediators in a whole range of social contexts (see Barton and Hamilton 1998, Fingeret 1983, Moll 1992, Prinsloo and Breier 1996). Quite simply, if someone is unable to *independently* manage a literacy task, they usually get someone else to assist them. This happens everywhere – in workplaces and the whole range of social contexts, and it enables a great many people to get through life quite successfully. Many of the prisoners I worked with did not necessarily want a lesson in how to write, they just wanted someone to help them to undertake a literacy-related task.

Literacy practices in and out of prison

Extending the above 'social' understanding of the role of literacy in the lives of prisoners, from the mid 1980s I undertook some literacy research in prisons as part of a higher degree thesis (Black 1989). I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 low literate prisoners. They were identified as low literate on the basis of their poor performance in a verbal reasoning test conducted by prison psychologists. Each of these prisoners later confirmed in the interviews that they believed they had literacy 'problems' of some kind.

My aim essentially was to analyse how these prisoners managed with literacy practices and how this related to their reasons for participating or not participating in a literacy program in prison. My findings were not definitive. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are unlikely to provide consistent explanations of how people manage with literacy related tasks in their lives. I concluded from the research that how a person manages with literacy practices differs according to many factors, and in particular, their individual characteristics and the social context they find themselves in. Within a continuum of participatory behaviour at one extreme there were some prisoners I referred to as 'emotionally oriented' in relation to participation in a literacy program. That is, they felt ashamed at their lack of literacy, embarrassed at their 'deficiencies', and blamed their lack of literacy for much that was wrong with their lives. They would only participate in a literacy program if they could do so without embarrassment. At the other extreme were the 'rationally-oriented' types, those who did not feel embarrassment and simply asked for literacy assistance if they

needed it, and then strictly on their own terms. They would only participate in a literacy program if they perceived there were sufficient tangible benefits to them. And if they felt they could manage well enough with their existing literacy abilities and some assistance from others then they would be unlikely participants in a literacy program.

This research tended to confirm what my experiences as a prison literacy teacher/mediator had indicated, that literacy is related strongly to social contexts, and that lacking literacy ability is not necessarily a major problem in people's lives. People can be lacking literacy in a normative sense, based for example, on a standardised literacy test, but still manage their lives well enough both in prison and outside. Only rarely did lack of literacy appear to seriously impede how my low literate prisoner respondents functioned in prison or in their previous working lives. Of course, it was often a nuisance, and sometimes embarrassing having to seek assistance with literacy practices, but most prisoners managed reasonably well. Although the life circumstances of many prisoners were at times quite distressing (for example, broken families, violent childhoods, poor work records), it was difficult to attribute these life circumstances specifically to lack of literacy. There were other factors such as material and emotional poverty and a lack of formal education generally that appeared far more significant.

No single measure of literacy

My research findings disrupted the mainstream or dominant discourse that presents a picture of illiterate prisoners hobbling along unable to cope with life. My research focus was on social practices, on how individual prisoners managed with literacy related tasks, and my qualitative findings were necessarily messy and inconsistent. Literacy was no longer for me a singular concept, a set of skills which people possessed to varying degrees and which determined to a large extent their life circumstances. I wasn't fully aware of it at the time, but my understanding of literacy was largely in accord with a growing number of overseas literacy researchers working within ethnographic research approaches and whose work has been termed the 'new literacy studies' (for example, Cook-Gumperz 1986, Gee 1990, Heath 1983, Levine 1986, Street 1984).

Adding to this understanding of literacy was a survey I jointly conducted with male and female prisoners in two NSW prisons (see Black, Rouse and Wickert 1990). The survey examined literacy across three dimensions: document, prose and quantitative literacy. It was based on the recently published Australian national survey of adult literacy (Wickert 1989) which in turn was based on Kirsch and Jungeblut's (1986) literacy survey of America's young adults. Thus, with some qualification, it became possible for the first time to make some comparisons between the literacy abilities of prisoners and those found in the general adult community. The most interesting findings related to the apparent inconsistencies in the results within the literacy dimensions. It was found, for example, that young male prisoners performed very

poorly on a document literacy task that involved completing a job application form compared with the results for the general population in the national survey. However, when it came to another document task that required an understanding of dosage instructions on a pharmaceutical package, younger male prisoners performed better than the national average, and young female prisoners even more so. On another task, identifying products on a paint chart, older male prisoners performed better than the general population, but older female prisoners performed least well.

These findings reinforced the importance of social context in understanding literacy. They indicated quite dramatically that there was ‘no single measure’ of literacy ability. They suggested people tend to become proficient at literacy tasks they may be familiar with. The findings certainly indicated the futility of testing prisoners using a standardised literacy test as the results would be likely to have little bearing on how prisoners actually managed with the wide range of literacy practices they were confronted with either inside or outside prison.

The politics of literacy

Since my involvement in the above prison literacy survey in the early 1990s, my interest has shifted to other literacy related contexts, including the role of literacy in the lives of unemployed people (Black 1995), and more recently, the role of literacy in workplaces undergoing structural workplace reforms (Black 1998).

Briefly, in the case of the long term unemployed, during 1993 I conducted in-depth interviews with unemployed people referred to a literacy program by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) with the aim of improving their chances of gaining employment. What my research indicated was that many of these unemployed people previously had little difficulty in obtaining work, and certainly lack of literacy skills appeared not to play a significant role in determining whether they gained or maintained employment. I concluded from this study that it was the recessionary conditions of the early 1990s that largely resulted in these people becoming unemployed, not their lack of literacy. Government policy however, targeted lack of literacy among the unemployed largely because it was politically expedient to do so. From a macro perspective I argued that by focusing on lack of literacy (and lack of skills generally) the state was in effect trying to shift attention and responsibility away from the structural economic factors which were the real causes of unemployment in the early 1990s.

In another workplace context a few years later (1996) I conducted in-depth interviews with local council maintenance workers. These workers were responsible for constructing footpaths and repairing drains in the local municipality. Under an enterprising new manager they were in the process of having their work restructured into 'competitive teams' as a means, ostensibly, of saving their jobs in the face of competition from private contractors. In other local councils this type of maintenance work had become privatised. These local council workers were being told that they needed to work differently (i.e. smarter, more efficiently) in new competitive teams otherwise they would lose their jobs. Significantly, the manager and his supervisors focused on the poor literacy levels of these council workers as they believed these

workers would have difficulty in adapting to the new workplace reforms without improved literacy levels. My interviews with the workers and observations of their work practices, however, revealed that this type of work, even in the new competitive teams, required relatively few literacy practices, and those that were required could usually be managed with some assistance from other workers. Lack of literacy was not really the issue, and yet management targeted this with plans for remedial literacy programs for these workers. I concluded from these findings that management targeted lack of literacy as a way of saying to these workers that they (the workers) did not have the right skills generally or perhaps the right attitude and enthusiasm for this new 'competitive' way of working. Management in the council wanted their workers to adopt a new identity congruent with new competitive ways of working (i.e. flexible, multi-skilled, 'smarter' workers). Lack of literacy skills was a code used by management to indicate that workers did not currently have this new worker identity.

The two studies briefly outlined above indicate that literacy is political, and it can be used quite effectively by some dominant groups in society against the interests of others (usually those of lower socio-economic status). I think the same line of argument can be extended to prisoners. When we are confronted with horror stories of illiterate prisoners there are likely to be political interests involved. Presenting prisoners as largely illiterate brings into play the popular media constructions of illiterate people as 'seedy, hopeless, even irresponsible' (Wickert 1993: 31), reinforcing notions of failure and inadequacy. It helps to draw distinctions between deviant prisoners ('they') and the law-abiding general community ('us'), thus reinforcing negative community attitudes towards prisoners and those who break the law.

Prison educators are often happy to perpetuate this dominant picture because their interests too are being served; their work and careers would appear to be aided by a picture of deficient prisoners in need of education, and even more so if there are perceived to be causal links between low literacy and crime. Hence, we find leading prison educators in Australia describing prisoners as ‘socially deprived’ and having (Harmonsworth 1992) with the consequent need for ‘compensatory education’ (Noad 1989).

My experiences as a literacy teacher in prisons and my research conducted with prisoners indicate a different picture to the dominant one outlined above. I would contend that the literacy abilities of prisoners are not markedly different from those found in the outside community, and that the more important issue is how prisoners manage with the literacy practices that are important in their lives. It may well be that many prisoners are successfully managing these literacy practices, probably with some assistance from others, and that low literacy is not a major blight on their lives. But it is also likely, given the politics of literacy, that there are others whose interests are not served by my alternative perspective.

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