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### Recommended Citation

Darville, Richard (2011). "Unfolding the adult literacy regime," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/25>

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## Unfolding the adult literacy regime

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Keywords: adult literacy, institutional ethnography, policy regime

**Abstract:** A quarter-century's development of a regime that promotes and regulates adult literacy has diminished the space for responsive and relational literacy work. Many institutional processes – in media, transnational policy-making, survey-based knowledge, and governmental regulation – are tied together in this development. Mapping their connections allows a better understanding of this development than does ideological critique.

This paper assimilates parts of several decades of experience and research in adult literacy in Canada – centred around the shrinking of the space for literacy work. I veered temporarily out of academia late in my Ph.D. work, to teach adult literacy in college and prison settings, serve on boards of provincial and national advocacy organizations, and sometimes consultant. I shared, with many others coming into literacy work in the 1970's and 1980's, a project of inventing the field. There seemed an open space for that invention, beginning from the experiences of learners and literacy workers. The project – in one shorthand expression – was for literacy work that is both responsive and relational. In the canny wisdom of literacy work, the teaching of reading and writing are *responsive* to learners' lives, respecting and developing what immediately makes sense there – “uncovering” rather than predesigning curriculum (Auerbach, 1993). Working from learners' lives entails, in the Freirian phrase, “reading and rewriting the world” from there; so literacy is not understood as just an attribute of individuals. It is *relational*, and developing literacy challenges conditions in people's lives that have restricted their literacy – by encouraging learner's “voices” against their subjection, and by interrogating institutional literacies, which are central to power (Darville, 1995; 2001). Although not everybody would identify with the project of a responsive and relational field, those terms do resonate with many experiences and hopes in literacy work. And they overflow with implications for teaching and program organization.

### Literacy regime

However, the sense of space for the creation of a field grounded in practice has shrunk. As an academic again, I have come to focus on how practice relates to policy processes, and how the field has been hooked into forms of governance that are far-flung from learners' and literacy workers' everyday experiences. An adult literacy regime – an ensemble of governmental, administrative, academic and media processes – has worked up a “literacy issue” for public and policy attention, and organized a regulated promotion of literacy. Teaching and learning – although enacted by literacy workers and learners – are brought into a massive interlocking set of coordinating arrangements involving not only schools but also labour market policy experts, national and international civil servants, politicians, and journalists.

Two decades ago, one could sensibly write about “the wisdom of literacy work” and ask “about the extent to which the policy process is permeable to discoveries made in practice ... the capacity of the governments and institutions that regulate literacy work to absorb its lessons”

(Darville, 1992, 77). That such questions now seem wistful has driven my inquiry into the regime. So has reading media and policy depictions of literacy that seem bizarrely wrong. So has being sucked into making bad arguments because they seem saleable. So has seeing accountability requirements threaten to throttle the continual invention of responsive and relational literacy work.

My inquiry produces a broad-strokes map of the regime's territory (much of it elaborated in Darville, forthcoming). The work contributes to the discourse of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), but I write it here for people still oriented to literacy work rooted in learners' lives and literacy workers' knowledge – for reflective old-timers and for newcomers who might find some back-story useful. This mapping exercise sometimes resembles common critiques of governing ideologies of adult education. But it goes beyond critique – to show how various “moments” of the regime are coordinated, and how texts conveying ideology – diverse mandates, reports, accounts, and so on – are constituents of that coordination.

### **Code and media**

The separation of a governing process from literacy advocacy became apparent in a surprising way in the media attention to literacy that began abruptly in the late 1980's (Darville, 1998). The recurrent frame of tales in this early coverage exaggerated illiterate misery and incompetence, and showed individual literacy skills gains leading to dramatic life-transformations. In one prototypical tale, a woman was “full of anger and frustration. Most nights I'd cry myself to sleep,” but after learning, “[N]owadays, instead of crying, I read myself to sleep.” The problem with this narrative frame – whose characters become literate and start businesses, quit prostitution, etc. – is not that big transformations never happen. It is that only exceptional stories are selected, and the courage and wisdom of people who don't read are shoved aside. The man proud to write his name, but who still doesn't read much, or the woman moving from unemployment to an unstable, ill-paid job, are not, in this frame reportable, not human-interesting.

Media attention didn't come out of nowhere. While some literacy advocates were dismayed at the distortions and exaggerations, others were heartened simply to have some coverage. And indeed program spokespeople told the stories desired, or selected learners to fit the frame. The stories could help attract volunteer tutors and charitable donors (who could step into the narratives' waiting subject positions, as agents of transformation). Key journalists were in touch with civil servants developing government agencies. Politicians recognized a winning issue (polls showed that it was). A string of earlier government reports had discussed problems of “undereducation,” and more importantly, business think-tanks were beginning to assert connections between literacy and economic competitiveness. These governing processes – not people's lives – made literacy “an issue.”

It now seems that media coverage was consolidating an ideology, indeed an “ideological code” for literacy and the literacy issue, that could be reinscribed in other forms of discourse. That code constructs literacy as individuated skills (standard across individuals, and autonomous from other aspects of people's lives), and as a beneficent force for changing individual lives and society as a whole (cf. Collins and Blot, 2003). More recently, media coverage usually accompanies new releases of statistical reports about literacy, and indeed the ideological code next appeared in the first reports of the population literacy testing conducted since the late 1980's, the International Adult Literacy Survey, IALS, and its predecessors and successors (recently, Statistics Canada and OECD, 2005).

## **IALS and the OECD**

Largely developed by Statistics Canada and the (U.S.) Educational Testing Service, sponsored by the OECD, and conducted under the auspices of national statistical agencies in many countries, IALS supplants school-attainment criteria for literacy with direct measurements. It portrays literacy in several dimension (prose, document, quantitative, etc.), and not in a dichotomy but as a continuum – divided, for reporting, into four levels. The IALS test “construct” is not traditionally conceived literacy skills, but “information-processing.” Test items require locating and combining bits of information to perform predefined tasks. IALS famously asserts that 48% of Canadians 16 and over don’t meet the “level 3” standard required for our “information society.”

In some public discourse about literacy, such a “shocking statistic” is about all that appears. But these purported facts do not stand on their own. They are interpolated within extended institutional discourse and organization. IALS discourse and measurements – often criticized as “economistic,” and indeed they are – fill in, within a complex intertextual hierarchy, an encompassing OECD economic agenda.

An OECD-promoted macroeconomic human capital theory conceives all human knowledge and ability in terms of its economic usefulness, as a “stock of skills.” IALS elaborates this with a discourse of literacy for competitiveness (Darville, 1999). In the IALS reports, the literacy levels and rates are “policy objects,” significant for their correlations with other objects of policy interest – unemployment or social assistance rates, GDP growth, individual income, health. Literacy rate changes – in hydraulic imagery – are seen to pump these others up and down.

The IALS measurements and levels of individuated, hierarchically-ranked skills do not describe actual literacy as used anyplace. They are purely textualized phenomena, existing only through testing technologies. The IALS levels are fitted into human capital discourse through the supple information-processing ability they demand people have for its level 3 criterion. Although the claim that 48% are below level 3 is routinely corrupted to say that those people struggle with everyday reading, IALS’s actual statement is that those people don’t have a “predictable capacity” to perform an array of moderately complex information-using tasks – very likely including what are *not* everyday but new tasks for them. It’s like what musicians call sight-reading. IALS’ adaptable level 3 readers are the counterpart of flexible, retrainable workers in contemporaneous management discourses – ready immediately to conduct tasks determined elsewhere (but not to “read the world” from which those tasks come). So the discourse and measurements together recapitulate the ideological code.

## **IALS in force**

The literacy for competitiveness discourse and IALS “object” of level-ranked literacy become active in the regime, or come into force, not as freestanding ideology, but as they hook into and organize public discourse, rationales or mandates for government expenditures, and regulatory devices that coordinate literacy programming and teaching.

First, the mantra of literacy for competitive advantage is now ubiquitous in media discussions, policy proposals and research, and even advocacy organizations’ issue-promotion. The competitiveness discourse melds readily with the “neoliberal” (Harvey, 2005; Brown, 2005) or “social investment” state (St. Martin, 2007), which makes the market’s success the indicator

of the state's success, and in which government expenditures are justified as investments that will pay off in reduced government costs or greater economic productivity.

The OECD also exerts force through "governance by data." With its education "indicators," including IALS and PISA, league tables are made, ranking nations and provinces. What counts as effective policy and programming becomes what gets the relative rankings higher. So the data on literacy as a resource for economic competitiveness instigate educational competition between jurisdictions.

The counting of low literates has led not to the long-sought pan-Canadian strategy for literacy, but to a firming of the regime's regulatory grip. It infiltrates the regime's developing program accountability and curricular devices. Accountability requirements arise from a general "culture of suspicion" (O'Neill, 2002) about public services, and from now-dominant models of public management by "performance outcomes measurement" (McBride, 2005). Emerging accountability devices (Crooks et al., 2009) increasingly insist on measureable, commensurable results, as indices of programs' effectiveness. Such governing machineries may not actually require IALS-like testing, but IALS contributes an enveloping frame for conceiving outcomes, and within the competitiveness discourse and the jurisdictional rankings competitions, programs become administratively accountable for producing something isomorphic with the policy object that is called "literacy."

So the OECD abstracted conception of human knowledge and ability is shell (Smith, 2005, p. 111-113) that is filled for literacy with IALS. IALS in turn serves as a shell to be filled in with measures that promise to enable governments' league tables standings to be better. Alternative reckonings of how literacy is a social good are displaced. This shaping of the adult literacy regime, largely done behind our backs, evading questions democratic legitimacy, exemplifies the OECD's workings as an *éminence grise* of education policy (Rubenson, 2009; Rizvi and Lingard, 2009).

### **Consequences and alternatives**

The literacy for competitiveness discourse and the IALS skills measurements construct one version of literacy and why it is worth troubling with. Over the last 25 years, that version and its intertextual tentacles have become ever more pervasive, indeed hegemonic. In concluding I raise selected questions about the faithfulness of IALS and the regime mentality of which it is part to actual literacy and literacy learning, and consider some consequences of its hegemony.

Traditional psychometric questions regarding faithfulness, as "construct validity," ask whether tests actually measure the ability defined, and how measured ability relates to actual-life performance. IALS is odd in that second regard: its concern is not how individuals' assessed abilities relate to their actual performances, but how aggregated population literacy levels relate to other policy objects – and, overall, to the functioning of the "information society." The information society notion does point to actual developments of intensified text-mediations, as people at all levels within institutions – workers and clients as well as managers and professionals – are increasingly called upon to take instruction or give information in textual forms. This push-down of text usage produces "literacy demands." And within a regime mentality, IALS claims for correlations between aggregated abilities and other policy objects may well be correct.

But to think about how measured ability relates to actual-life performance, we have to break out of the regime mentality with its remotely known policy objects, and break out of IALS' preoccupation with the purely textual concoction of level 3's "predictable capacity."

When we make these breaks, the tests' relation to actual-life performance seems highly problematic. It is a robust finding of literacy as social practices that skill demands are limited in many situations, and that networks, mediators and scribes often stand in for individual skills. (The "Who are you calling illiterate?" response that IALS attracts is not surprising; neither is IALS own finding of high rates of individuals' self-evaluations as adequately literate for their everyday lives). Other major areas of literacy studies recurrently shown that whether text-mediated processes operate well depends on much more than individuals' skills. Notably, in workplace literacy, people's understandings of the relations in which texts are used are as important as skills alone; different contradictory interests in the uses of texts – including those through which workers provide data to be used by managers in making decisions or certifying quality – determine the seriousness and attention with which people use them (Belfiore et al., 2004); and workers' capacity to make productive use of (computerized and other) texts depends at least as much on management willingness to allow text use as on workers' abilities (Zuboff, 1988).

Regime discourse also splits from actualities in accountability frameworks – whose demands are not the only and may not be the essential matters in literacy learning. It has long been recognized that "concepts of success" in adult literacy (Charnley & Jones, 1979) are problematic and that conventional skills measures miss much actual success and are "likely to produce substantial distortions in educational practice" (Reder, 2009, p. 47). In a now flourishing reformist discourse about accountability, both academic and practitioner researchers observe that the important gains in literacy work often involve people increasingly using authentic texts, and becoming more confident, confident specifically about engaging with texts and text-related talk and action. There is a push for these actual gains to be recognized within accountability frameworks, in terms like non-academic outcomes (Battell, 2001; Lefebvre, 2006), literacy practices (Reder, 2009), or social capital (Salomon, 2010).

There are, then, chasms between IALS levels and actual-life performance, and between what counts in accountability schemes and the actual gains achieved in literacy programs. These chasms raise questions of "consequential validity" – taking into account the aftermath of testing (and of accountability schemes related to testing) for individuals tested and for society (McNamara, 2001). IALS measures that are blinkered to the relational complexity of actual literacy use, and accountability schemes that are unresponsive to all the gains beyond skill that are involved in learning, ignore – and push out of the regime's promotion of literacy – much that would improve individual well-being, make text-mediated institutional processes work better, and even reduce costs for government.

One further consequence about the "consequential validity" of IALS should be asked. It seems to endanger traditional literacy work with "those whose needs are greatest." The IALS project has always given pride of place to level 3, and a recent offshoot makes getting people to level 3 the central policy goal, and makes invidious cost-benefit calculations (Murray et al., 2009) in which lower level people appear as costly investments with unlikely pay-off.

Literacy workers and learners – impelled by the gaps between actual literacy and the regime's institutional ordering – will inevitably will go on discovering the wisdom of grounding literacy work in people's lives, doing literacy work more generous than governance presumes. But – to be bluntly grim – it will be difficult for this invention to gain traction. Not only do administrative schemes squeeze out grounded inventiveness. There is also an intellectual dispossession of literacy workers under way. Support for government work not framed within the regime's vocabularies is being systematically shriveled (Hayes, 2009). Co-optation often seems

the price of entry into regime positions. And outside of academic social practice studies of literacy (e.g., Barton et al., 2010), there are few spaces for discourse about literacy work produced by and/or for those doing it.

The rub is that the literacy regime is not on the side of responsive and relational literacy work. In particular, the OECD seems immune to evidence outside its neoliberal human capital accounting (Rubenson, 2009). It displays a “flexible liberalism” sometimes, but not in education – which is too close to its central economic purposes (Mahon & McBride, 2009). Alternatives are of course imagined: literacy mandates not for competitiveness alone, but for human well-being; and a “right to literacy” as a basic democratic capacity, developed in diverse locally sensible ways. For these hopes, critiquing economic ideology won’t do the job, apart from making a different governing discourse, and changing the institutional relations of which it is part.

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