

LITERACY INEQUALITIES



An International Conference held at the
University of East Anglia
1st – 3rd September 2009

Literacy Inequalities

AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE HELD AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA, 1ST – 3RD SEPTEMBER 2009

Hosted by the UEA Literacy and Development Group:

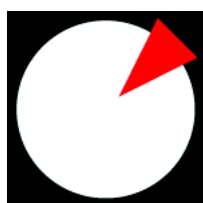
Sheila Aikman
Juan Carlos Barron-Pastor
Anna Magyar
Bryan Maddox
Nitya Rao
Anna Robinson-Pant

International Advisory Committee:

Lesley Bartlett, Teachers' College Colombia, USA
Malini Ghose, Nirantar, India
Mary Hamilton, University of Lancaster, UK
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Elda Lyster, School of Adult and Higher Education, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa
Lynn Mario T. Menezes de Souza, Depto. De Letras Modernas, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil
Brian Street, Kings' College London, UK
Virginia Zavala, Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru, Peru

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SUMMARY

The 'Literacy Inequalities' conference took place at the University of East Anglia from 1st – 3rd September 2009, organised by the **UEA Literacy and Development Group**. The conference brought together 80 literacy researchers, policy makers and practitioners from around the world and was timed to connect with the UN Literacy Decade mid-term review. The conference provided a unique forum for theoretical debate about 'literacy inequalities', stimulated by contributions from the British Academy-supported speakers who had engaged in this field of research and practice for many years. Papers looked at literacy inequalities in a diversity of contexts, ranging from an indigenous community's experiences of government literacy programmes in Brazil, to an account of a novice writer's interactions with the editorial team of an academic journal in the USA. All the keynote presentations and the conference proceedings are available on the website: www.uea.ac.uk/ssf/literacy-conference-09.



- Prof. Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza presents his keynote paper at the opening session of the conference, chaired by Prof. Brian Street.

CONFERENCE REPORT

Background

The 'Literacy Inequalities' conference took place at the University of East Anglia, from 1st – 3rd September 2009 and brought together 80 literacy researchers, policy makers and practitioners from around the world. The conference was organised by members of the cross-school Literacy and Development Group at the University of East Anglia, along with an International Advisory Committee who were actively involved in developing the programme, particularly discussion and development of the four main conference themes.

Since 2003, the Literacy and Development Group has organised an annual conference, with the aim of bringing together researchers, practitioners and policy makers working in this field (see <http://www.uea.ac.uk/dev/literacy> for further details of previous events). This conference built particularly on the success of our previous conference in 2007 on 'Literacy, identity and social change', which aimed to facilitate more critical debate between economists and ethnographers working in the area of literacy and development.

Funding from the British Academy and UNESCO (in connection with the UN Literacy Decade) enabled us to invite an impressive range of high quality speakers from a diversity of country backgrounds (including Brazil, USA, Peru, Pakistan, Dominican Republic, New Zealand, India, South Africa) who otherwise would not have been able to attend the conference. The UEA Alumnae Fund provided bursaries for 20 research students to attend the conference free of charge.

Conference Themes

The conference aimed to explore multiple perspectives on literacy inequalities, including those of rights and social justice, contrasting worldviews and practices, and the methodological and power dimensions of researching and representing literacy inequalities. Papers were invited on the following themes:

1. Literacy Policies and Social Justice

This conference theme will explore links between literacy, illiteracy and social justice in relation to national, donor agency and international policy. We would welcome papers on national or international strategies, documentation and research on literacy inequalities, the analysis projects of literacy measurement, or more sociologically or historically oriented analysis of literacy inequalities and social change. How are these themes shaped by contrasting notions of rights and social entitlements, or by ethical approaches to inequality and social justice? What rationales are provided for notions of minimal thresholds or concepts of adequacy? How might these be re-figured to incorporate diversity of literacy meanings and practices? We would welcome critical discussion of literacy assessment and measurement methods, and papers that focus on literacy inequalities within particular social groups – for example, gendered perspectives, ethnic and linguistic minorities, people with disability, or inequalities linked to caste, social class and social movements,

2. Literacy, change and contestation

The literature on literacy and change has tended to focus on the 'benefits' of literacy, and the barriers faced by marginalized groups in accessing literacy education. Moving beyond evaluation of inclusion strategies, this conference theme will look at literacy as a process for challenging and transforming inequalities - around, gender, poverty, language, ethnicity and disability. It provides the opportunity to investigate how literacy practices can sustain or challenge dominant power relationships in a wide range of contexts and from differing perspectives, and the significance of changing literacy environments and practices. This might include investigation of the processes through which adult literacy programmes challenge or reinforce dominant languages and literacies of power, or discussion of the potential for cross-cultural interaction within higher educational institutions to transform academic literacy practices and tackle current North-South inequalities in academic publishing. Exploring literacy processes in relation to socio-cultural and political change can raise new issues around research methodology, literacy pedagogy and planning approaches, such as: What insights can ethnographic research offer into changing literacies (both in terms of how literacies are changing and initiating change) and inequalities? How are new technologies shaping literacy practices both inside and outside educational programmes and what are the implications for social change? What role can literacy education (as compared to group mobilisation or 'awareness raising') play in transforming gender inequalities?

3. Literacy materials: in and across organisations, communities and classrooms

Looking at pedagogy, organisational practices and issues of representation, this conference theme would explore not just the range of literacy materials available (from primers to 'real' materials) and the pedagogies used for learning, but also focus on how these alternate approaches reflect existing social practices, or attempt to change them. It will also consider innovations in materials development and pedagogy, including those that pay attention to engagement with institutional literacy practices, to diverse and changing literacy environments, and to questions of social practice. Do the materials and pedagogies used for learning reproduce inequalities and create a further layer of representational inequalities, or do they contribute to a renegotiation of power relations? What is the value accorded to different types of texts within everyday cultural practice? How these materials, documents and texts are accessed and transacted contributes towards the formation of particular social statuses and hierarchies. The theme could address a range of questions around the representation in social life (and status) by different literacy materials, including for example elements of multi-modality, digital and other literacies; the role of particular types of materials in transforming gender and other social inequalities; and the influence of the organisation of a literacy class on the perception of its value.

4. Inequalities and epistemologies: exploring knowledges, oracies and literacies

This conference theme will investigate literacies and inequality from the perspective of a diversity of worldviews, practices and knowledges, informed by the politics of difference and cultural diversity. It will examine inequalities of expression and representation, for example between oral knowledges and traditions and different literate traditions, and inequalities embedded in political projects involving the development of scripts and literacies. The theme may also explore indigenous and non-indigenous pedagogies, multilingualism and conceptual and policy debates on 'interculturality'. The backdrop to debates about the nature, meaning and experience of inequalities is intense social and cultural change, global communications and processes of marginalisation and poverty characterised by linguistic, gendered, ethnic and religious inequalities. How do dynamics of change and marginalisation shape diverse literacies, knowledges and oral traditions, and how are contestations and agency expressed in relation to rights, such as rights to self-determination, participation and education?

Conference Programme

The conference was opened by the Vice Chancellor of the University of East Anglia, Prof. Edward Acton. The opening session also included a presentation by Dr. Sabine Kube from UNESCO. She gave an overview of the progress of the UN Literacy Decade, as the conference was planned to connect with the mid-term review of the decade.

Papers presented at the conference looked at literacy inequalities in wide-ranging contexts and this was reflected in the presentations given by the British Academy-supported speakers, both in the keynote addresses and in the three parallel sessions. Whilst the keynote addresses were intended to facilitate debate on the four conference themes, the parallel sessions were structured to enable more in-depth discussion of the themes in relation to sectoral (e.g. 'Higher education and literacy inequalities'), geographical (e.g. 'Literacy inequalities: perspectives from South Asia') and professional perspectives (e.g. 'Literacy inequalities: exploring implications for training and materials').

The final day focused more directly on drawing out the cross-cutting themes (both the initial four themes and new themes that had arisen through the parallel sessions), through the informal discussion groups, which were facilitated by Elda Lyster, Mary Hamilton, Judy Kalman and Sheila Aikman. Rapporteurs from each group presented a brief report in the final session, chaired by Lesley Bartlett.

The conference ended with a plenary panel discussion, where the four speakers were invited to reflect on the issues that had emerged for them (or had not been addressed) throughout the conference, relating them to their experience as literacy practitioners, researchers and/or policy makers. See Appendix 1 for written accounts of each participant's contribution to this session.

The panel consisted of:

Virginia Zavala, (Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru)

Malini Ghose, Nirantar, India

Clinton Robinson, UNESCO UN Literacy Decade team

Alan Rogers, University of East Anglia

All the keynote presentations, parallel session paper abstracts are available on the website:

www.uea.ac.uk/ssf/literacy-conference-09.

KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

The first keynote speaker, **Prof. Lynn Mario Menezes** de Souza from the University of Sao Paulo, presented on '*(Dis)locating Literacy Knowledge: abandoning a view from nowhere*', exploring an indigenous group's experiences in Brazil in relation to government literacy programmes.

Prof. Suresh Canagarajah from Pennsylvania State University discussed a 'novice' writer's interactions with the editorial team of an academic journal in his keynote presentation, '*The dilemmas of negotiating change in academic publishing practices*'.

Prof. James Collins from the University of Albany/SUNY, explored literacy practices of children and youth in two immigrant communities in the United States in his keynote paper '*Literacy as social reproduction and social transformation: the challenge of diasporic communities in the contemporary period*'.

In his presentation, '*An ethnographic perspective on literacy inequalities; the power to name and define*', **Prof. Brian Street** (Kings' College London) drew on theoretical debates within the field of New Literacy Studies and examples of literacy programmes to analyse the ways in which an ethnographic perspective on literacy practices can contribute to a conceptualisation of 'inequalities'.

Dr. Catherine Kell (Auckland University of Technology and University of Waikato) also took forward theoretical debates in this field with her keynote presentation, '*Literacy and the spaces-in-between: space and scale as mediators of literacy inequalities*'. Based on her micro-level research in South Africa and New Zealand, she used the concept of 'recontextualisation' to develop an approach for analysing what happens when texts shift across contexts.

What was achieved?

The conference provided a unique forum for theoretical debate about ‘literacy inequalities’ stimulated by contributions from the British Academy-supported speakers who had engaged in this field of research and practice for many years. Policy attention to literacy inequalities has generally focused on how to include groups who have been marginalized from mainstream education (for instance, disabled people, minority linguistic and ethnic groups). The conference aimed to examine these issues of literacy inclusion and exclusion, but also to widen the debate, to include a focus on the geo-politics of differentiated literacy practices and texts as well as opportunities for transformation.

Comments from delegates indicated that the conference had succeeded in developing theoretical insights that could contribute to a reconceptualisation of ‘literacy inequalities’ within policy debates, particularly in relation to the second half of the UN Literacy Decade. The conference discussions had pointed to significant new directions within the field of literacy and development, which several people hoped to pursue in the future in their role as researcher, policy maker or literacy practitioner:

‘AN EXCELLENT, VIBRANT, WELL-ORGANISED WAY TO REVIEW THE CURRENT STATUS OF LITERACY RESEARCH AND THEORY AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD. INSPIRING!’

‘AN EXTREMELY STIMULATING CONFERENCE, THANKS TO THE INTENSE INTERACTION BETWEEN COLLEAGUES WITH CLOSELY RELATED BUT DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES. MANY OPPORTUNITIES OF ENORMOUSLY PROFESSIONAL INTERACTION. OUTSTANDING FACILITIES, ACCOMMODATION AND HOSPITALITY’.

‘RICH, COMPLEX, ELABORATE ACCOUNTS OF LITERACY PRACTICES IN LOCAL DETAIL, MULTILINGUAL, MULTIMODAL, MULTIPLE. THERE IS MORE THERE TO DESCRIBE THAN OUR THEORIES CAN HOPE TO EXPLAIN.’

‘AS A LITERACY PRACTITIONER, MY VIEW HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY NARROW, FOCUSING IN ON MY OWN PET TOPICS. I ENJOYED THE CHALLENGE OF GRAPPLING WITH OTHER VIEWS AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT GAINED WHEN OTHERS SHARED THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES’.

‘THE LITERACY INEQUALITIES CONFERENCE WAS A GREAT INSPIRATION BRINGING TOGETHER A NUMBER OF TOPICS REGARDING SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POLICY MAKING, RIGHTS AND SOCIAL ENTITLEMENTS. VERY DIVERSE AND INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE.’

‘MEETING PEOPLE WHO RECOGNISE THE SAME NEEDS IS EXTREMELY MOTIVATING AND INSPIRING TO START MY OWN WORK’.

‘NEVER KNEW THAT CONFERENCES COULD BE SO INVIGORATING. IT WAS WONDERFUL TO OBSERVE PEOPLE ONE HAS READ ABOUT ARGUING WITH EACH OTHER’.

‘THE CONFERENCE REMINDED ME OF LITERACY IN THE WORLD: THE VARIETY, THE SUFFERING, THE TANG OF HOPE’.

‘MY MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE OF THE CONFERENCE WAS THE EXPOSURE TO AN ECLECTIC RANGE OF EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ACROSS DIVERSE CULTURAL CONTEXTS ON ‘LITERACY’, ‘EMPOWERMENT’ AND ‘SOCIAL CHANGE’.’

Proposed follow-up and outputs

As with our previous conferences, we hope to engage with participants over a longer period through a collaborative publication based on the papers presented. We are currently liaising with two journals to produce special issues on '*Literacy Inequalities*' and on '*Addressing literacy inequalities: pedagogical and policy perspectives from countries in the North and South*'.

We invite participants and those who were unable to join us for the conference to send us suggestions for other possible follow-up activities and future events. We are particularly interested in exploring the possibilities of bringing ideas from the conference into policy debates within the second half of the UN Literacy Decade.



- The group of UEA research students who were awarded bursaries from the UEA Annual Fund to attend the conference.

APPENDIX 1

FINAL PLENARY PANEL PRESENTATIONS (SEPTEMBER 3RD, 2009)

In the final session, four conference participants (who have different roles in relation to literacy practice, policy and research) were invited to present their reflections on the conference and the issues that had been raised through individual presentations and plenary debates. Their written accounts are presented below in the order in which they presented.

1. Reflections by Virginia Zavala (Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru)

I am going to briefly share some impressions I have had about how the conference topics have been discussed during these two days, considering that I have just attended some of the parallel sessions and that I have missed many of them. I must also say that I will comment on what I am most interested in, as always happens in these kind of presentations.

I feel that this conference has been an opportunity to discuss where we are as researchers and practitioners working within the New Literacy Studies (NLS), what our limits are and where we should be heading next. Cathy Kell's paper has been extremely important in terming of reconceptualizing our unit of analysis and the theoretical tools we have been using, such as *literacy events* and *practices*. It seems that with the amount of ethnographic data that we now have, those concepts seem constraining and we need to look at them again in order to move on. It also seems that *digital literacies* (from which we have not heard much in this conference) constitute a growing area within the NLS, which could help us to elaborate more on the theoretical constructs.

I would also like to comment on the importance of solving the textual bias in literacy and writing – that Suresh Canagarajah mentioned yesterday - in order to focus on *strategies* and *practices* rather than in *codes* and *conventions*. At least from my experience as a university teacher in Perú, I can tell that it is very difficult for linguists (and for people in other disciplines as well) to differentiate between genres and practices, since they think that both constitute the same thing. However, we should also take into account the other side of the coin, which refers to looking at practices but not doing textual and interaction analysis as well. This is definitely the bias of social analysts, who should also enrich their research with the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences and the advantages of doing discourse analysis.

A lot has been emphasized about “building bridges”: between research and policy (or practice), between ethnography and capabilities approaches, between the New Literacy Studies and the thematic field of intercultural bilingual education, between the NLS and postcolonial theory. I think that the NLS has always been interested in building bridges. As I once heard from David Barton during another conference, the New Literacy Studies constitute a theory located at a “meso” level, which is situated between the descriptions at the micro level and the theoretical reflections at the more macro one. This means that the NLS has to necessarily make interdisciplinary bridges towards other theories in order to be able to elaborate theoretically in a more ambitious way. The discussion about *capabilities approach* introduced by Brian Street made me wonder which bridges are possible to build and which not in theoretical terms. However, although many of us are not very sympathetic toward that approach, it is a fact that it has

managed to enter the discourse of the World Bank and other international agencies and that at least could be disestablishing some hegemonic structures. Could the NLS be able to do something like that? How can we have more impact on policy?

When it comes to literacy policy, many discussions during the conference pointed to the ambivalence that exists within this field. For example, while UNESCO states that literacy provision has to be *context specific* and that it is important to ensure *culturally appropriate programs*, at the same time it stresses the need to have “sustainable literacy skills for improving quality of life”. In addition, while the discourse of international literacy agents has started to use terms such as *literacy practice*, they really don’t use it the way academics do. As Lynn Mario mentioned, this could be evidencing that sometimes policies tend to exclude in the name of inclusion. Discussions have also signalled the ambivalence between government policy and lack of implementation – as in the case of Cameroon for example- or the fact that countries like Brasil – and Perú - has a progressive legal system that favours indigenous languages but communities decide to choose the mainstream culture and language. I believe that, in all of these cases, it is important to critically analyze what is underneath this ambivalence between policy and practice.

Another point that I would like to make regarding the bridge between research and policy is the following. I was wondering how this notion of literacy as one that always happens in particular contexts, for specific purposes and “in unpredictable ways” (that’s a phrase that came out of the discussion yesterday) is useful for policy makers who are trying to do quantitative measurements and make broad generalizations about its use. What I am trying to say is that if we want to make this bridge between research and policy perhaps we should try to do what Canagarajah (2003) proposes for studies on multiliteracies: to move from the current exploratory stage towards more analytical model building, that is, towards generalizations regarding effective literacy practices and productive strategies. Cathy Kell also pointed out the need to reflect more about what she called the vertical move between the *emic* descriptions (or the level of the observed) and *etic* concepts. It seems that the NLS will have to think more about that bridge between the micro and the more macro level.

I would like to comment on a topic that I think has been relatively new and rich in relation at least to the last conference that I attended in UEA on **Literacy and Social Change** a few years ago. This is the theme of *inequalities and epistemologies: exploring knowledges, oracies and literacies* (that I am sure has been influenced by Sheila Aikman’s work in Latin America). I believe that the NLS could benefit a great deal from discussions going on in this field, which have been led by Latin American ethno-historians, literary critics and post colonial theorists. Since the beginning of the NLS, a notion of literacy as alphabetic was constructed, and this left out of the unit of analysis other visual and non alphabetic literacies that people have engaged with before their contact with the written word. In relation to this, I have sometimes felt that the ethnographic perspective from the NLS – which my own work also reflects - lacks “historical density”, that is, a historical dimension that will complement synchronic descriptions.

But I also consider that the field of Intercultural bilingual education (at least in Latin America) will benefit a great deal from the New Literacy Studies since, until recently, writing in indigenous languages has been conceived as an unquestionable imperative, as if it will necessarily solve the maintenance of the languages and of the people involved. As Lynn Mario and also Sheila Aikman commented, writing indigenous languages only for the bilingual school could lead to the loss of indigenous oracies (considering that this could also be a literate construct) and visual literacies, and also ends up being a superficial and technical practice which is more focused on the alphabet and on the language and not on the social practice that is developed through literacy use. Introducing the social practice perspective on literacy in the intercultural

bilingual education field helps us to realize that this type of education does not constitute the solution, because it continues reproducing communicative inequalities, does not challenge dominant epistemologies and does not construct intercultural relations. The field of indigenous education has been “code biased” (and for example has privileged *corpus planning*) and this has hidden the ideologies, the actions and the rights of the subjects involved.

2. Reflections by Malini Ghose (NIRANTAR, India)

In this brief intervention I will reflect on some of the ideas emerging from the various plenaries and workshops from my location as a practitioner in India. The discussions over the three days have been rich and varied, reflecting several of the complexities, those working on literacy experience across contexts.

Understanding Inequalities

Exploring 'inequalities' was at the core of the agenda of this conference, and indeed the presentations covered a wide range of insightful ways in which inequality can be understood and unpacked. Discourses around inequalities tend to focus (at least in India) on the issue of access - how do we enable 'marginalized' or 'disadvantaged' communities to access literacy or education? Such discussions inevitably lead to identifying (or 'targeting') communities (on the basis of caste, ethnicity, religion, gender etc.) and suggesting strategies to redress inequalities, unfortunately in fairly compartmentalized ways. Several presentations once again underscored the fact that inequality is rarely experienced along a single axis and that interrogating issues of power has to be at the heart of any serious intervention that seeks to redress inequalities.

Flowing from this is another problematic dimension of such debates and interventions -- the tendency to 'pathologise' certain communities rather than understanding and addressing the causes of deprivation. Most such discussions are ahistorical and apolitical, especially in the context of literacy, which is seen as a neutral project. Policy documents are replete with phrases 'like hardest to reach', 'most difficult groups' etc. which are possibly intended to draw attention and resources to certain critical concerns, but often end up marking such groups as 'lacking'. While the challenge of bringing more nuanced and complicated understandings into the domain of policy and practice remains, one thing that is abundantly clear, is that neither a 'silo approach' nor a 'deficit model' provide the way forward.

Dominating discussions around access is the need to bring marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged communities into the 'mainstream'. Literacy and education are typically seen as reasons that keep individuals and communities out of the mainstream. The 'mainstream' in such discourses is unproblematised and it is believed that once 'they' are part of the mainstream, problems facing such groups will be (almost automatically) solved. The situation is also complicated by the fact that often communities experiencing inequality, will themselves articulate a need to become a part of the mainstream, and such desires have a legitimacy that cannot be ignored. Such tensions and complexities are possibly inevitable, and emphasise the need to adopt a 'critical' approach to literacy work. For instance, the importance of understanding learners' needs was referred to in some sessions but we need to constantly ask ourselves whether we are going beyond standard methods of 'needs-assessment' to address real needs of communities. The challenge is to do this without inappropriately projecting perceived needs onto a community or pushing them into the enveloping embrace of the mainstream.

Policy and Advocacy

Several presentations made at the conference analysed policies, both national and international. Many of the critiques would resonate with comments made above. I believe however that we need to complicate our reading of policy and go behind the text. As someone who engages quite actively with policy discussions I would like to suggest that we bring in the actual process of policy formulation into our analysis. Who participates in such processes? What are the competing interests? How are these negotiated? How and why do so-called marginalized communities seek to present themselves in order to bring visibility to their issues and more importantly get a slice of the resource pie? How are different viewpoints accommodated? There were moments at this conference when I did feel that the discussions on policy were far removed from the actual practice of policy formulation and including a healthy dose of 'realpolitik' in our analysis would be useful. Moreover, readings of policy texts reflect not so much black and white situations, but of changes, continuities and contradictions.

Linked to policy are advocacy efforts, and at the ground level things often boil down to grabbing or trying to carve out spaces to intervene. This in itself is often a difficult task in the context of adult literacy, which is a marginalized and under-resourced policy and political agenda. Speaking from my own location, I would say that our advocacy efforts entail walking a tightrope between 'strategic' concerns and 'ideology'. We not only often end up endorsing some of the very things we critique but also may speak different languages in different forums, for strategic reasons. This may be self-evident, but the need for self-reflexivity and locating policy analysis in particular contexts and processes is worth re-iterating.

Practice

One of the things that I missed at this conference was greater discussion on the 'how' – that is training, pedagogy, materials etc. – of bringing such nuanced understandings of inequalities into literacy practice. And not just practice, but programmes on a large scale. Theoretical positions inform practice but how that actually gets translated or takes root has a bearing on how discourses are in turn shaped and re-shaped. We often talk about moving from or making the link between theory to practice but we need also to reconnect back and complete the circle. Therefore I would advocate a greater emphasis on practitioner-led research and more interaction between university and practitioner spaces.

I would like to end by thanking the organisers for inviting me to this conference. The space provided to discuss such an important issue from a critical perspective was valuable and I see this as the beginning of a continuing exchange.

3. Concluding remarks by Alan Rogers (Visiting Professor, University of East Anglia)

I would like to start by congratulating the organisers of this conference which has been a well organised and most productive experience, bringing together a wide range of expertise and different views about literacy and inequality. I have always had hesitations about conferences which have parallel sessions: there has not been one of the alternative sessions during this meeting when I have not wished I were somewhere else! But even there, the value of the papers was remarkable. My comments are based on what I heard, not on all the papers.

But in view of the thousands of words written and the even more thousands of words spoken in connection with this conference, the possibility at the end of the conference of saying anything new is very remote indeed. I would like to make five points – all of which I am sure will have been considered by many in this conference already. In most cases, these are areas where I would like to have heard some more.

Inequalities

First, I was very pleased to see the word 'Inequalities' (in the plural) in the title. (I have more hesitation about the use of the word 'Literacy' as an adjective, for there is always the danger of essentialising it; and I noticed some papers added the word 'and' into the title, which makes it a quite different title). The relationships between 'literacy' (whatever that is) and inequalities is problematic; and I can imagine the discussions within the planning group over the title of the conference.

Inequality is of course related to power which is in all human transactions (perhaps we should have looked at the inequalities within this conference!). Inequalities consist in relationships, constantly re-negotiated relationships; and even between the same two individuals, inequalities can be different in different contexts (e.g. between partners in a business or partners in a marriage alliance). Inequalities are, as Brian Street would say, a 'verb'.

I see inequalities as being of three kinds, ascribed, perceived and internalised. I can take myself as an example of ascribed inequalities (I am supposed to introduce myself, to indicate where I am coming from). I am seen as white, male, from a Western culture, extensively educated and highly qualified, comparatively well off; and above all, as I have been very recently reminded, elderly - that is, in the sense of being of a past generation required to move over to make room for the younger generation!; in other words, in some senses as being highly privileged (unequal) when seen against others. But ascription often leads to resistance: thus, that is not how I see myself. I see myself as an adult educator with historian interests, with a passionate concern for understanding and using the informal learning which adults constantly engage in, and building on that to help adults to learn what they feel they wish or need to learn. My gender, origin, qualifications and age are irrelevant to me; my education is an advantage as well as a hindrance.

But there is a great danger that we shall internalise the ascribed inequalities; we feel unequal because we have been told we are unequal. And that applies not just to the subaltern but also to the privileged. There is in England a television comedy sketch in which three men, one very tall, one medium in size and one small, line up: the tall man says, *"I LOOK DOWN ON HIM BECAUSE I AM BETTER EDUCATED"*; the middle

one says: “*I LOOK DOWN ON HIM BECAUSE I AM RICHER*”; the third one says, “*I KNOW MY PLACE*”. Through the hegemony of the elites (especially through formal educational programmes), the existing inequalities perpetuate themselves by being internalised. [In passing, I note the discourse of inequalities used here in that when, in the papers of this conference, we use the word ‘inequalities’, we always mean the oppressed, the unequal being the inferior, not the privileged – only Freire, so far as I know, addressed the inequalities of the oppressor, the privileged. We try to neutralise the superior by speaking of it as ‘the mainstream’]. Mary Hamilton’s studies of discourses, showing how privileged groups use the language of ‘exclusion’ to strengthen their superiority, is an example of this. Thus ascription can be met by resistance, resistance built on aspirations.

Agency

At the end of the second day, I made a note to myself suggesting that ‘agency’ had been missing; but in the final day, ‘agency’ was a constant theme. How are resistance and aspirations negotiated and fulfilled in the face of inequalities? Such negotiations are of course limited within each person’s social interactions (Bourdieu’s *habitus*), by the need for communication (which is where a ‘literacy’ comes in, as part of communicative practices). But they can on occasion be successful in addressing and redressing inequalities. I am reminded of a case study which Judy Hunter made of a hotel in which the staff (reputedly non-literate or ‘semi-literate’) used symbols such as U30 to indicate that the conference room should be laid out in a U-shape with thirty places, and other symbols for their instructions. When a new manager came, with a university degree in hospitality management, she saw such practices as ‘inferior’, catering to the low literacy levels of the staff, and she required them to learn a formal literacy; but they resisted, suggesting that she learned *their* literacy which they saw as more functional (i.e. superior) in that context than her formal literacy. Inequalities can be changed when they are differently perceived.

Agency – re-negotiation – is of course based on an identification of what is seen to be in the self-interest. One area which I feel we need more research is how what is in the ‘self-interest’ of the individual or group is identified. I don’t know. Again, let me give an example: Sheila Aikman showed how two groups from the same cultural and linguistic context in the Amazon basin addressed the issue of formal schooling which was introduced to their communities. One group resisted it, as threatening their traditional language and culture; the other group embraced it, saying that they could use it to resist attacks on their traditional language and culture. Both had the same goal, the preservation of their linguistic and cultural heritage; but their self-interest was to be served in different ways. While the (superior) ‘authorities’ saw one group as unreasonable and the other as ‘co-operative’, Sheila explored and showed that such decisions were both justifiable in the light of the experience of the two groups. We need more (ethnographic-style) studies into why and how resistance to inequalities takes the forms it does.

Values

My third point is that inequalities are based on values, comparative judgments of 'worth'. There seems to be a basic human tendency to see values in terms of hierarchies rather than differences (as Lynn Mario de Souza suggested in the opening presentation) – "scaled values" was a phrase which Jim Collins used. Why? This is where we need more ethnographic studies. For example, 'informal' is widely seen as 'inferior' to 'formal'. Informal learning is seen as inferior to formal learning: there are still adult educators – reputable ones at that – who speak of adults who have done no learning since leaving school: thus denying to all the informal learning which everyone does the validity that belongs to formal and non-formal learning. The informal literacy practices which Bryan Maddox and others have discovered, the use of text messages on mobile phones, the informal notes kids send round under the desk are all seen as inferior to the formal literacy practices which the school teaches. In a forthcoming book which parallels the ethnographic studies of Nirantar and of the Ethiopian LETTER programme, *Hidden Literacies: ethnographic studies in literacy and numeracy practices*, Dr Rafat Nabi (in research conducted while at the University of East Anglia) shows that men and women who are ascribed as being 'illiterate' and who have internalised that 'inequality' nevertheless use literacy and numeracy while often denying that these are 'real literacy'. Their literacy and numeracy practices are hidden, certainly from adult educators and often from themselves, precisely because they are felt to be 'inferior'. When Rafat asked to see a notebook, the reply was, "This is not your literacy"; what they were doing did not count as literacy in their context. Such practices were invisible, unconscious and certainly not valued in that context.

Context

No-one who has attended this conference can ever now deny the importance of context. Right from the start, Lynn Mario de Souza indicated the significance of context; and throughout the papers, the importance of understanding the local when considering the global has been stressed. Malini Ghose asks that the findings of the conference should be related to the learning programmes which concern many of us. Here is one lesson – that a one-size-fits-all programme can never be effective with adults. Adult literacy learning programmes must take account of context; horses for courses.

Movement

One major sense I go away with is one of movement – not just in the sense of Cathy Kell's movement of texts and meanings but on a wider front. Goody is moving towards the New Literacy Studies (Street's paper); Maddox is moving towards a rapprochement with economic development in a 'thresholds of capability' approach; and Kell is asking us all to move in a new understanding of 'literacy'. It seems to me that within the field of literacy studies, a search is being conducted similar to that in the 'natural sciences' (which are anything but 'natural'!) for a unifying 'theory of everything', for one overarching concept which will mean we are all saying the same thing. I am not worried by that: for if we do manage to find a common platform on which we can all stand, a common vocabulary by which we all mean the same thing, my guess is that a group such as the UEA group will within one year mount yet another conference to challenge its general validity. Perhaps we should conclude by suggesting that we must keep things unequal to make progress.

4. Reflections by Clinton Robinson (UNESCO, UN Literacy Decade)

1. A thread running through the conference was whether literacy was empowering or disempowering. Organising a conference with the title '*Literacy Inequalities*' makes some assumptions: that literacy matters, and that it may reduce or exacerbate inequalities. These assumptions led quickly to asking what kind of literacy leads to what kind of outcome – the multiple literacies we are all familiar with. What was interesting in this debate was the emphasis on movement between literacies. Many examples cited in the presentations had to do with this dynamic nature of literacies – migrants who move from one context to another and find their written documents have quite a different value; students and writers facing the new demands of academic literacies; moving across languages, scripts and cultures. In fact, we all spend our lives moving between literacies in one way or another, and so find ourselves empowered at times, and disempowered at others, or learning new literacies and so empowering ourselves afresh. This question is important for literacy acquisition – to know which literacies will reproduce social inequalities, so that programmes are clear in what they may achieve and how they might promote empowering rather than disempowering literacies.

2. Another theme of the conference was the dialogue between literacy theory and literacy policy – those who primarily seek to develop deeper understanding of what literacy means, and those who are concerned to promote literacy. As far as the New Literacy Studies are concerned, this dialogue is a further indication of a concern to address not only literacy use, but also acquisition, initially downplayed in such circles. So the conference addressed what the literacy challenge means, how to understand what lack of literacy signifies, even how to determine what moral obligation 'we' have and who should act. In the theory-policy debate, one strand has been lacking – advocacy. This is particularly the role of UNESCO, on an international level. Advocacy targets specific groups and institutions to invest in literacy – donors, agencies, partners in EFA or the MDGs, for example – and this results in messages that are not subtle or complex and where the underlying theoretical position is rarely explicit – this is simply the nature of advocacy. Thus advocacy statements must be carefully unpacked for their theoretical underpinnings, not merely branded as unhelpful or exaggerated slogans. This conference showed that the theorists are engaging with policy issues – and so by implication also with promotion and advocacy. Certainly, the promoters (from my recent experience at UNESCO) are engaging with theory. This is leading to a much richer dialogue – the process exemplified in this conference must continue!

3. My third point is more in the way of a personal dilemma as I have listened to some of the presentations. In discussing the place and role of literacy for 'smaller' groups of people such as indigenous people or ethno-linguistic minorities, we have looked at how literacies (in various languages, etc) are part of the dynamics of power between such groups and larger or mainstream majorities and their institutions. However, I would like to ask the question as to where literacy fits in the internal purposes of 'smaller' groups, in their own language. Will literacy have a role alongside orality in exploring and validating their knowledges and cultures, and as a learning process? Will literacy serve to express, transmit and further develop the richness of their heritage? Can or will literacy be a useful and relevant concomitant to existing oral practices, for their own purposes with the group/community? I don't know the answer, but if literacy, as communication involving text, is to be as meaningful as possible, I would hope so!