ACCOUNTING FOR NOT COUNTING: ETHNOGRAPHY AND LITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

The title of this paper is a play on many meanings of the idea of counting and accounting in adult literacy. The paper presents findings from a range of ethnographic research projects that I have undertaken or been involved with over the past ten years in South Africa. The projects were conceived as research-driven interventions in the debate over policy formulation in post-apartheid South Africa (NEPI, 1993; CEPD, 1994; ANC, 1995). The issue that each of the studies turns on, is whether we set about constructing programs, assessments and studies which identify and encourage the diversity of meanings which adults participate in and create in their everyday “textually-mediated” practices, or whether we assemble a series of exercises which we put adults through as part of our programmes (O’Connor, 1994:29; Prinsloo and Kell, 1997:95). The paper makes a case for the value of ethnographic evidence in providing perspectives on this issue, and claims that policymakers may in the long run, have to account for not counting the value of this kind of evidence.

The projects were initiated as explorations into the “taken-for-granted” assumptions about adults who had not had schooling, their need to be taught literacy and the best ways for doing that. During the period of transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa (around 1992 to 1994) these assumptions had crystallised into a discourse about “need” and “deficit”, captured in the following quote:

It is estimated that about 15 million Black adults (over one third of the population) are illiterate... The lack of access to basic education, including literacy and numeracy, has consigned millions of our people to silence and marginalisation from effective and meaningful participation in social and economic development (CEPD, 1994:1; ANC, 1994: 87)

At the same time there were urgent debates about what factors would contribute to economic success as South Africa made the transition to democracy and became integrated into the global economy. An emerging discourse about human resources and productivity intersected with the discourse about needs and deficits forming a strong base for policy decisions in the field of adult education and training. The policies outlined an approach
for the mass-scale provision of adult literacy, this being constructed as having formal equivalence with schooling for children, and seen as the entry point to a national system, integrating education and training and based on standards, accreditation and a core curriculum, all set within the proposed National Qualifications Framework. “Competency-based education and training” (CBET), later renamed as outcomes based education and training (OBE) provided the rationale for this approach and was seen as the path whereby South Africa could address the key social problems of redress and development. Yet at the same time the figures indicated that adult literacy take-up in existing facilities was very low, teachers battled to keep up the numbers of learners and drop out rates were very high - the ‘masses’ in need of literacy were not pressing their claims.

It was in pursuing clarity around this largely disregarded conundrum that the central research question for the first two projects discussed below became an inversion of the familiar policy question – from “what can we (where the “we” are the planners and providers) do about illiteracy?” to “what are they (unschooled adults) doing in relation to print literacy?” The work was exploratory, but we did believe that an answer to this question would have a bearing on the debate over what the conditions of success and of failure are for adult literacy policy and provision.

The New Literacy Studies (Street, 1993; Gee, 1990; Barton, 1994) provided a theoretical frame within which the question could be pursued. The research proposals were written in the early 1990s, James Gee had just published his book “Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses” (1990) and Brian Street had just produced “Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy” (1993). So the projects were grappling with and testing the ideas of Street’s autonomous/ideological models of literacy and Gee’s notions of literacy as the acquisition of discourse. “Literacy practices” and “literacy events” became the main units of analysis, events being defined as “the occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies” (Heath, 1982); and practices as “a broader concept pitched at a higher level of abstraction and referring to both behaviour and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and writing” (Street, 1993).

Methodologically, the approach was grounded in linguistic anthropology (Duranti, 2001), and drawing on ethnography combined with discourse analysis (Heath, 1982; Street, 1993; Foucault, 1972; Fairclough, 1992). Without going into depth on the nuances in the definitions of ethnography I will summarise a few key features of the approach. Ethnography studies real-world settings, focusing on a particular place at a particular time, dealing with real people’s lives. The approach is holistic, it can be multi-method and it is interpretive, aiming to represent the participants’ perspectives (Barton and Hamilton, 1998:58). Ethnographers need to set aside their own definitions of actors, places, times, actions, events and other aspects of everyday life (Spradley, 1980) and identify and describe the emic (insider) terms for these dimensions of everyday life. Blommaert (2001) suggests that two main features have become central in linguistic ethnography. Firstly, it is materialist,
in the above sense of looking for real actors in real events, using real communicative codes with real effects in real life-worlds. An ethnographic approach to language is an approach that starts from concrete, non-idealistic and non a-priori phenomena. Secondly, it is dialogic. Ethnography constructs knowledge through dialogue, and while it might be the study of communication, it is also communication itself. Both of these features locate ethnographic epistemology squarely in the realm of everyday interpretive procedures. “Ethnographic knowledge is constructed by means of everyday, mundane interpretive procedures. Hence the frequency of inexplicable intuitive and autobiographical status of much of what ethnographers know about their subjects. Method is very often added afterwards, and the interpretation of field data is in practice often the reconstruction of meanings in data by means of post-hoc structuring, categorising and clarification.”

Bloome and Green (1994) make a useful distinction between firstly “ethnography of education” and “ethnography in education”. The first is often undertaken by researchers based in disciplines outside of education, bringing their methods and constructs to bear on developing understandings of people’s interpretations of education and learning. They define ethnography of education’s task: “as one of constructing a cultural grammar or abstract theory that describes the rules or norms that individuals within a society, community or group have to know, produce, predict, interpret and evaluate in a given setting or social group in order to participate in socially and culturally acceptable ways.” The second is undertaken by researchers within the discipline of education who explore the workings of educational settings within the pre-established norms and rules governing those settings.

In the following account of ethnographic projects in South Africa the first two and the last one focused their attention on the literacies of everyday life, deliberately turning their attention away from formal literacy instruction. The second two drew on ethnographic work that focused on the teaching of literacy in classrooms. The first presents ethnographic data at a micro-level; the second, ethnographic data across twelve case studies. Two others draw on data collected as part of an evaluation, and the final one is another single case study. Over a number of years and a series of different publications, my analyses and comparisons of the evidence across these two areas (literacy in everyday life and classroom literacies) generated the more interesting conceptual work, and it is here that I think the greatest effects of the work emerge.

Micro-ethnography: the literacy practices of an “illiterate” community leader

1 These projects were all undertaken during my period as a student and as a lecturer at the University of Cape Town. Two of them were funded projects. The Social Uses of Literacy Project was funded by the Joint Education Trust, and was co-ordinated by Mastin Prinsloo and Mignon Breier. The intervention component of the Literacy in Development project was funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The evaluation was undertaken as a private consultancy. Any citations that are not specifically referenced are from M. Prinsloo and M. Breier (eds) (1996) “The Social Uses of Literacy”.

2 Published in Kell, 1994; 1995; 1996b, 1996c.
Winnie Tsotso has been one of the key community leaders living in an informal settlement in the Cape Peninsula over the past twelve to fifteen years. I conducted an ethnography of literacy practices within her community, Masiphumelele, over a number of months in the early 1990s, just prior to our first national democratic elections. As one part of this study I interviewed Winnie in the rambling shack which she had built for herself and her family, I observed her participation in literacy classes over around 24 evenings, at a number of community meetings and for a while I visited her daily. This process of data collection resulted in an account of Winnie’s day-to-day life and literacy practices at a time of dramatic change in South Africa. In the account I focused on understanding the different and multiple roles that Winnie played, and what resources she could draw on in the accomplishment of these roles.

I found that within her family she played the role of mother, grandmother and partner. Within her immediate neighbourhood and community, she played the role of friend, member of a sewing group, member of the Baptist Church and member of the Catholic Welfare and Development (CWD)Creche Committee. She worked sporadically as a domestic worker in the homes of neighbouring white families. She ran a soup kitchen for pensioners for CWD and was active in the local Civic Association on the Youth and Development Committees. She had played an important role in co-ordinating a Supreme Court case whereby the members of Masiphumelele (who had been classified “illegal” were constantly hounded and harassed by apartheid authorities) won the right to permanent residence in the area. Winnie had also completed a First Aid Course and was often called out if people were injured in the community. She was an active member of the recently-established Development Forum as well as the organiser for the local branch of the African National Congress, for which she attended both regional and national meetings. Perhaps most importantly she played the role of local advice office worker, helping people get their pension cards, sorting out funerals, assisting people in their welfare grant applications, helping people to get their identity documents and so on. And finally she played the role of literacy learner in the adult literacy night school that had recently been set up, classified as a “beginner”, where I watched her night after night slowly spelling out her name and reading short sentences in isiXhosa like “Ndingu Winnie Tsotso” (I am Winnie Tsotso), “ndihlala eKapa” (I live in Cape Town) Winnie had never spent a day in school, and saw herself as totally “illiterate”.

I tracked Winnie through the various institutions and organisations to which she belonged. It appeared that Winnie had some difficulties participating in the development agencies and that she was starting to be left out of meetings. She herself expressed frustration; she felt she was excluded from getting a job as a community worker by the fact that she was not literate. It was for this reason that she had enrolled in the adult literacy classes, which were run by what was seen as one of the most professional, progressive and dedicated literacy agencies in South Africa. But over the months of my research I observed that Winnie was slowly withdrawing and had more or less stopped going by the time I left.
Stories to statements

This kind of ethnographic detail lent itself to three levels of analysis. Firstly, the development of an understanding of how Winnie achieved important purposes in her life, participating constantly in social practices which were textually mediated without being able to read and write. Secondly, how the literacy classes were unable to take this into account and what factors created the disjunction. Thirdly, how her achievements and difficulties were historically situated in the changing politics of South Africa. I will touch on these so as to demonstrate the ways in which ethnographic data can be transformed into systematic statements.

In order to answer the first question I recorded whatever literacy events (Heath, 1983; Street, 1988; Barton, 1994) had occurred in relation to each role, who participated in each event, what language was spoken or written, what domain (Grillo, 1989; Barton and Hamilton, 1998) they fell into and what discourses were drawn on (Gee, 1990). I mapped this coding against that which was gathered for the kinds of literacy events I observed within the adult literacy night school and the development agencies/organisations that were operating in Masiphumelele (both of which Winnie participated in)3. I then returned to some of the theoretical categories that had initially helped me focus the data collection, enabling me to see what counted as evidence, and was able to develop a redescription of Winnie’s literacy practices in terms of this theory.

I worked with the idea of literacy as having three dimensions which draw on four roles, with reference to the work of Reder (1994); Green (1998:160-163) Luke (1992), Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) amongst others. In the operational dimension, the role drawn on is “code-breaker”. In this dimension people need to be able to decipher print. In the cultural dimension, the roles drawn on are text users and text participants. In the critical dimension, the role drawn on is text analyst. Winnie could not really play the role of code-breaker, except in a very limited sense. However, she was clearly able to play the roles of text user and text participant and there were numerous examples from the literacy events which showed her doing this. It was less clear whether she was able to analyse texts, the critical dimension.

The next question to ask then is how did Winnie learn the roles of text user and text participant? My answer to this was to explore the ways in which Winnie had acquired what Gee (1990) calls secondary discourses. My interviews and observations showed that Winnie had participated in a wide range of political, cultural, welfare and community-based organisations over a period of around fifteen years. My own personal experience of being a member of a number of these types of organisations told me that during the

3 This makes it sound like a much neater process than it really was. There was a constant movement back and forth between data collection and analytical work, and coding makes it sound more decisive than it really was. The importance of indicating the sequence of operations is to foreground a valuable facet of the ethnographic methodology, that it enables tracking and comparison of people and practices across space and time, and to illustrate the constant movement between theory and data that is necessary in ethnographic work.
1980s these organisations would have drawn on informal routines and participatory approaches involving sharing responsibilities and tasks. Each of these organisations would have drawn on a number of the dominant discourse of the times, like the oppositional and upliftment discourses. I knew that Winnie’s fluency in speaking three languages and knowledge of a further two languages would have facilitated this. I knew that she would have been involved in numerous processes involving what Lave (??) has called “guided participation” and “legitimate peripheral participation”, and in these she would have been very adept at code-switching and switching between discourses.

If literacy practices involve all four roles what constraints were there on Winnie’s effectiveness seeing that she couldn’t draw on all four roles? My answer to this was that she was able to deal with code-breaking by drawing on literacy mediators around her (Wagner et al., 1986; Baynham in Street, 1993) in close social networks, and there was much evidence of this. Each time she drew on a mediator to code-break she enriched her own understandings of the uses and meanings of texts and participated more fully in literacy events. At the same time she also acted as a literacy mediator to others around her when she drew on her strengths as text participant and text user.

So this evidence seemed to show that Winnie, far from being “consigned to silence and marginalisation” by her “illiteracy” had played an important role politically and was living a productive and satisfying life. But the picture became more complex when Winnie’s literacy practices were mapped against the practices of the adult literacy night school and the development agencies and when Winnie’s movement was tracked through these three domains. It was here that the purposes for which I had collected the evidence about Winnie became more salient.

The domain of development was in a state of tremendous flux as Masiphumelele was becoming incorporated into local government structures, and there was intense engagement with municipal bureaucrats, NGO representatives and local do-gooders from the surrounding “white” suburbs. Most of these activities were textually mediated, and there was seldom translation from English into isiXhosa or Afrikaans. In contrast with the other domains that I identified the domain of development was saturated with texts. I watched Winnie starting to struggle to participate in this domain, and noted that in certain meetings her place was being taken by younger community activists. At the same time I watched her withdrawing slowly from the night school.

In my analysis of the data I argued that what was being promoted in the night school was a particular type of literacy which has been called “essay-text” literacy” (Scollon and Scollon, 1981). There were three tensions involved in the transmission of this kind of literacy in Masiphumelele. Firstly, this kind of literacy was insulated from the literacy practices that I observed in other domains. Secondly, this insularity promoted pedagogical practices which were unfamiliar to learners, like answering questions in full sentences. These practices, in line with general orthodoxies in adult education drew on material
from “everyday life”, but recontextualised this material within the discourse practices of schooling (Bernstein, 1996; Dowling, 1990). Thirdly, in order to acquire the epistemological access to these kinds of practices, according to Heath (1983) learners would have to “recapitulate” the sorts of literacy experiences mainstream children acquire at home in their first few years, this is often done through apprenticeship to a literate person. For adult learners attending classes on average four hours a week this kind of socialisation would be very difficult. In analysing what discourse the adult learners were acquiring as they attempted to become literate I argued that they were acquiring the discourse and identity of being an adult learner which resulted in the personal acknowledgement, confirmation and internalisation of deficit in line with the discourse which was informing national policy and provision as argued above. I argued that this resulted in identity conflicts involving disempowerment and subjection, the exact opposite of what the literacy agencies wanted to achieve. Winnie explained that her children now knew that she couldn’t read or write:

But now they know. The one is going to school at Kalk Bay. He laugh now, he say ‘mama, are you Sub A [the first year of formal schooling for children]. Sometimes I’m sitting here and write my things and he say ‘Oooh look my mother, she’s Sub A. Come, come and look’. I close my...if he roep (calls) their friends, I just close my door.

This quote is a powerful indication of identity conflict, involving the way in which the arrival of the night school infantilised Winnie, foregrounding her deficit and backgrounding her strengths as an effective and powerful community leader.

Micro-studies and generalisation

My work in Masiphumelele became part of the broader research project, called the “Social Uses of Literacy” (SoUL), co-ordinated by Mastin Prinsloo and Mignon Breier and set up in relation to the questions outlined above and also framed by the theoretical constructs of the New Literacy Studies. The SoUL project involved twelve ethnographic research studies in settings and communities of people who could be considered the targets of the emerging adult literacy policy and provision: people living in shanty-towns, Black townships, housing schemes for ‘Coloured’ people, amongst mini-bus taxi drivers, a farm, a factory and so on. In doing the ethnographies each researcher did address themselves to two broad concerns, what were unschooled people doing in relation to print literacy and what did this mean for proposed policy and provision. However, the choice of ethnography as the methodology, the specificities of each research setting and the interests, skills and backgrounds of the twelve different researchers meant that these questions were answered in very different ways, leading to the highlighting of different themes and constructs.

Some examples (these summaries are all drawn from Prinsloo and Breier, 1996): Gibson’s study focused on the uses and perceptions of literacy amongst farmworkers on three farms, uncovering the way in which literacy
practices and perceptions of them were embedded in relationships of power between farmer and worker and between male and female workers (p31). Malan’s study focused on different forms of code-and mode-switching that mediators between local and dominant discourses engage in. Literacy mediation was seen as a social process which contributes to the formation of social identity and contestations between the agents of local and dominant discourses (p103). Breier at al’s study of taxi-drivers, who were mostly unschooled, chose to look at the strategies these drivers used to deal with or circumvent the literacies of their work, considering the discourses and narratives that support these strategies. Breier and Sait concentrated on literacy’s embeddedness in wider communicative practices in a factory producing goods made of asbestos. They focused particularly on what constructed the communicative gap between management and workers, and showed that issues to do with power and hierarchy on the factory floor rather than the technical abilities of workers to decode information played a role in enabling or constraining workers’ participation in literacy practices (p174). Robins studied a small rural group of communal farmers struggling against the central government’s attempt to introduce individually owned plots of land. The focus was the role of NGOs in mediating legal and bureaucratic literacies, and on how the largely unschooled residents asserted their local knowledge in resisting the authority of educated officials (p103).

In the book which was published (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996), the twelve case studies “spoke for themselves”, and were published as separate chapters with short introductions and an afterword. There was no sustained attempt at that stage to generalise the findings from across the case studies and bring these generalisations into an engagement with issues of policy and practice in adult literacy, nor was there much reflection on research methodology. However, the way that the individual chapters in the book were constructed was as highly condensed versions of the ethnographic studies, each one grappling with and deepening the different theoretical constructs as outlined above, and broadening the range of constructs by drawing on related social and educational theory. This is clearly one of the strengths of the book, and probably one of the reasons why it has been read and enjoyed so widely. It is an open text, it defied synthesis and its effect was not cumulative in an additive sense, but rather, to use Hammersley’s (2001) image, cumulative in the sense of pieces adding to an overall mosaic. The effect of this cannot be measured.

There was some criticism within South Africa, and doubts amongst some of the SoUL researchers, about the fact that the SoUL research did not address itself more explicitly to issues of policy and practice, and of the limitations of the ethnographic approach. Further analysis of the data then took place, in an attempt to construct models which could describe the empirical relations from across the twelve studies, draw methodological lessons and address the purposes more explicitly.

new policy and provision for adult literacy were based. I then trawled through the full reports from the twelve case studies, grouping whatever data could be coded into categories which I claimed were generalisable, that they could be used to study literacy in other settings and they could form a basis for recommendations to be made. Breier followed a similar process focusing only on the four workplace studies, and made very concrete recommendations about policy and practice. The following account is drawn from and synthesises these analyses.

Orientations towards schooling and learning

Much of the data in the SoUL studies addressed the issue of diverse orientations towards schooling, amongst different social groups and strata. Internationally field research (Besnier; Bloch; Reder and Wiklund; Kulick and Stroud; all in Street, 1993) has shown that the cultural and social circumstances under which groups of people encounter specific literacies will impact directly on how they take on these literacies, and incorporate them into or isolate them from their existing cultural repertoires.

Cultural and ideological orientations away from schooling were prominent in the narratives, particularly of older men, while older women felt that “their learning years had passed them by”, and expressed scepticism about the value of modern schooling. Younger people accepted modernist discourses around schooling, and would not resist it for cultural, historical and ideological reasons. However, many did indicate that they would not attend classes if they were offered, perceiving an incompatibility between going back to school and pursuing strategies for survival in an era of structural unemployment. The oft-cited “barriers” to adult learning like transport problems, child care arrangements and dangerous living conditions did emerge in the data but interestingly only amongst those who already had positive orientations toward schooling. Finally, despite these varying orientations many people did show a powerful sense of desire and yearning for the education they had missed out on. Literacy was like a sign representing that which people had been denied and which they desired. Yet there was no certainty that such desire would translate into intention and the data was full of stories about people’s unsuccessful encounters with literacy classes, with only one rather tentative success story presenting itself across all twelve studies (in Malan).

Literacy, identity and social competence

The idea that people without literacy were somehow socially disabled, incompetent or unproductive seldom emerged. People saw themselves as getting on with achieving important purposes in their lives, these may have been constrained by certain factors, but they themselves seldom complained that literacy was a key one. A sense of identity was achieved through other attributes for example, masculinity or leadership.

Acquiring literacy skills without formal instruction
Over and over again in the case studies the processes were uncovered whereby unschooled people developed literacy skills which enabled them to accomplish necessary activities in their lives. These involved learning to read and write outside of schooling or learning to manage literacy related demands in their lives without being able to code-break. Each of these strategies was embedded in a particular discursive context, so that the learner was not learning a disembedded skill but being broadly apprenticed into a discourse.

- **People teaching themselves**

There were a few examples within the studies of people who claimed that they had taught themselves to read and write as adults.

- **Apprenticeship learning**

There were numerous examples of people apprenticing themselves to others in order to acquire knowledge and skills that were part of literacy practices in their lives. These processes were context-specific and analogous to craft learning, involving "guided participation" or "legitimate peripheral participation", and involving the acquisition of any or all of the four roles associated with the three dimensions discussed above.

- **Localising knowledge**

The data included many examples showing that literacy was a significant part of the activities of people who saw themselves as being unable to read and write. Winnie’s participation in literacy practices provided many examples of this, as did a number of the workplace studies, where workers employ their own specialised and contextual knowledge to interpret and implement processes which include literacy.

- **Mediators of literacy**

SoUL researchers found that literacy tasks were commonly joint achievements, with aspects of the task being mediated within family and peer groups, as well as in broader social networks, organisations and institutions. Mediating literacies often involved code-switching (between languages) and mode-switching (between oral, written, visual and other sign systems) as Baynham has discussed (1995). Code-switching also, importantly, involved switching between varieties of the same language, for example, between Cape Afrikaans (an informal variety used by ‘Coloured’ people) and standard Afrikaans thought fitting for written communication. Such switching often required the capacity to cross from local or informal discourses to formal codes. Access to and familiarity with local discourses, as well as local legitimacy were seen as essential attributes of the literacy mediator.

*Literacy as social practice*

The research revealed that literacy is a situated social practice, complexly patterned and not a transparent neutral medium for the transmission of
information within standardised formats. While literacy pedagogies have focused on literacy as an individualised skill, social events that include literacy are most commonly seen to be collective events where the different dimensions of literacy are historically situated and deeply embedded in social networks, processes and structures. Literacy as a form of communicative practice is constituted through discourse and the uses of literacy are thus always the shaped products of interested social action, and not neutral, transparent or technical means of communication.

**Literacy for surveillance and control**

Literacy was often used for surveillance, where people were forced to inscribe their actions or behaviours into standardised textual formats which carried sets of relations from outside the immediate context into the context of inscription. These kinds of practices were either complied with, ignored or resisted. On the other hand people often developed their own texts, (lists, simple forms) involving the inscription of their behaviours or actions into non-standard or very idiosyncratic formats. They did not necessarily see these as literacy, and often hid them from public scrutiny.

**Perceptions of and problems with formal literacy instruction**

Schooled literacy tends to define what counts as literacy and this constructs the lack of school literacy in deficit terms – tending to obscure the presence of literacy in other forms. People called themselves illiterate even though they were clearly engaging in practices which involved the written word. They developed different ways of talking about these capacities, which they compared with school literacy. They talked about “filing things away in their heads” or about the difference between “book learning and common sense”. They were dismissive of adult literacy programmes but they never said that they were a bad idea, and they expressed yearning for the schooling they had not received.

Each of the twelve detailed accounts involved a description of literacy practices in a particular setting, while at the same time, through theory, connecting and extending those first descriptions with a world outside of the particular setting. The attempt to generalise from across twelve case studies is a second order description which frees the findings up from the particular, allowing the statements to be applied, extended or refuted in other particular settings. In my own work I tried to systematically bring these generalisations into an engagement with a further set of generalisations generated from ethnographic data collection as well, this time from the particular settings of literacy classrooms.

**Classroom Literacy**

I collected the data on literacy classes and their teachers as part of an evaluation of the National Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training, offered by the FET sector in South Africa. This had been initiated by a non-governmental adult literacy agency wanting to formalise and accredit its
teacher training in line with the new National Qualifications Framework. I adopted an ethnographic approach to the evaluation, using documentary evidence on policy development, observations of the teacher training sessions, of the literacy classes run by the in-service trainee teachers, interviews with all stakeholders and so on. This evaluation took place at quite a critical juncture (1996) when the effect of the new polices could just be traced within actual literacy classes, and it was this data combined with the interviews with the in-service teachers that was the most illuminating, providing something of an emic perspective on the emerging identities and practices of these teachers at a time of tremendous flux. These transcripts provided insights into the problems with the policy, and when analysed and juxtaposed with the (out of classroom) data from the Masiphumelele and SoUL projects I was able to identify and explain some of the key tensions; which I will present briefly.

By then (between 1994 and 1996) much work had gone into specifying the outcomes for the learning field called Literacy, Language and Communication at the four different ABET levels which are pegged at levels equivalent to those for schoolchildren in the formal system. At that stage the Government’s guidelines (Dept of Education Directorate, 1995) explained that the four levels are organised as “far as possible in a developmental continuum so that the exit outcomes of one level are also the entry requirements for the next level”. A personal letter is taken as an exemplar at Level 1 (and used for a gap-filling exercise) and the guidelines then show how the letter-writing process sequentially becomes more complex at the higher levels, and how assessment should be conducted accordingly.

Examples for some of the outcomes for “Literacy, Language and Communication” are as follows:

At level 2 (for writing skills)

- Demonstrate knowledge and control of various ways of organising text (headings, simple numbering, letter format, message format etc)
- Plan, draft, edit and rewrite her/his work in an effort to make the meaning clear
- Use fullstops and capital letters appropriately.

At Level 1 (for reading skills)

- Show literal understanding of a text (eg by answering Y/N questions, ticking T/F statements, filling in gaps, choosing an appropriate word from a box, matching words to pictures etc)
- Understand the ways we(sic) organise everyday information according to time, order of events, or other logical order
- Interpret pictures (clear line drawings or photographs) around a familiar theme.
I present three small extracts from the classroom observations, which illustrated how three different genres were taught: letter-writing, form-filling and narratives.

“Story-writing” was taught in a literacy class with a group of four middle-aged women. The teacher explained that her goal was to get the learners to write a story using title, introduction and paragraphs. She explained that the learners had previously written a story when they first started classes, but that the stories had not been formally structured and that the learners needed to be able to do this for their exam with the Independent Examination Board. These learners were placed at Level 2A, roughly the equivalent to Year 4 of schooling. The teacher asked them to think back to their first stories and what they had been about. They answered, and one explained that her story had been about cats and dogs. The teacher told the learner that this was not a suitable story for adults, only for children and that adults needed to write about community issues and problems like health or housing. She then asked them to talk about other stories they had read. Two mentioned stories, one had nothing to say and the fourth spoke about the story she had written when she started the class. The teacher then asked them as a class to decide on a topic they would each write about. They decided to write about their problem which they described as having no jobs and being illiterate. The teacher then compared the structure of narratives with that of letters, going through each element and giving examples. (They had done a letter in class a few weeks back). For the “conclusion” of the story she gave the example of “So we call on the women to ...(unclear)”. She then asked them for words that they could use in their stories, and they came up with “no jobs”, “illiterate”, “suffering” and “impatient”. The learners then attempted to write the stories. One had simply listed words, the others had written a few paragraphs, in places they had written the “elements” in isiXhosa as part of the story, like “1st paragraph”. The teacher went round looking at each but did not comment on them at all. Finally she spoke about the structure of the exam they would soon be writing, telling them not to be scared of the exam. She also spent some time explaining that the exam would contain T/F questions about a text (extracted from Kell, 1996d).

In another class (in an adult education centre with a group of twelve Xhosa-speaking learners) the teacher had simply given the learners the ‘mock’ exam paper at Levels 1 and 2. The Level 1 paper contained a short dictation, a generic simplified form with some personal details on it, a short narrative from which sentences were extracted and learners had to tick boxes for “Right” and “Wrong” as well as multiple choice questions, a personal letter with six gaps learners had to fill in choosing from a box, a set of lines where learners had to write sentences about their family, and an exercise where they had to tick T/F boxes about sentences based on an advert for the Housing Consumer Protection Trust (extracted from Kell, 1996d).

After observing a class that aimed to teach letter-writing, I then studied letter-writing in detail (Kell, in Barton and Hall, 2000) showing how the focus in classes was on what was called the elements of the letter (which were always personal letters at level 1 and 2) – like the “address”, the “greeting”, the
“opening sentence”, the “acknowledgement” and so on. The data showed that these were fetishised, and that long-established patterns of communication were being over-written by standardised Western forms, particularly with regard to the expression of affect. As the learners adopted the new form, it seemed that they were constituting themselves within the gaze of schooling. What were called the "old ways" by one of the literacy teachers interviewed were seen as deficient, the new form was naturalised as what was called by an interviewee "the standard". In this process, the emphasis fell on the learning of procedures (the elements of the letter) and these seemed to stand for content.

I then compared this schooled letter-writing with the letter-writing practices of unschooled migrant workers communicating with their families living up to a thousand kilometres away in rural areas. A very different picture emerged from that painted by the literacy teachers, a picture of resourceful people who did not seem to see stigma in their individual lack of literacy skills, drawing on complex, inter-locking social networks at different levels to accomplish communication between urban and rural areas. Literacy skills were distributed across these networks. Letter-writing played a central role in this communication, even amongst those who had never been to school, for whom at least four letters passed back and forth between family members per month. Encoded within these letter-writing practices were deeply etched cultural and historical patterns, some of which may have emerged over the past two hundred years, and which have formed part of the repertoire of skills and resources which have ensured survival under the harsh conditions set by conquest, colonialism and apartheid. A substantial volume of correspondence was suggested, very little of which entered into the South African Postal Service. The workers explained that they preferred to send their letters with the buses that travelled weekly between Cape Town and their homes in the rural areas, as these were totally reliable. Despite the literacy teachers’ insistence that there was compliance with the elements of the letter like the address, date, initial greeting, acknowledgement, and the end greeting, none of the letters shown me by the workers had any such elements, and there was a strong rationale for why those elements were not necessary.

**Looking at in-classroom literacy through out-of-classroom eyes**

I then brought these observations together with the data from the SoUL research, in order to foreground some of the tensions in the formal system. To take the issue of filling in forms: The SoUL data provided a number of examples of situations where unschooled people have had to deal with forms. Breier et al’s research amongst the taxi-drivers demonstrated the complexity of bureaucratic literacy and form-filling. Taxi-drivers often drew on mediators of literacy to deal with these difficult demands, and developed alternative ways of “working the system” which circumvented the need for individual code-breaking skills. Malan showed that even those who were ‘literate’ often got mediators to fill in forms for them, for reasons unrelated to the issue of literacy competency, but rather because of the complex “self/other” alignment constructed for participants in the literacy event by their relative social positions. In Masiphumelele a chosen literacy mediator might know a more
effective way of “working the system” on the client’s behalf than any number of years in a literacy class.

The data on letter-writing illustrated that two parallel systems of letter-writing were going on, and they were fairly well insulated from each other. Yet, the pedagogic letter-writing made claims that it ‘empowers’ learners to deal more effectively with everyday demands in their lives, by recontextualising everyday practices in the adult literacy curriculum. So the literacy providers would not recognise that the systems are parallel but would have it that learners take a loop out of everyday life within the institution of the family and into pedagogical life within the institution of education. After that they go back into everyday life and the family, supposedly as more effective family members – the “modernist discourse” of educational reform is here at play (Luke, 1982:2). They may go back with a changed subjectivity but whether that can be called empowered may be questioned. Rather, what would seem at stake here is the “discursive construction of a distinctive schooled subjectivity” (Green 1993:196). This research extended the analysis of the problems with recontextualisation (Bernstein, 1996) originally raised by Kell in the Masiphumelele research and by Breier (1996).

The “range” statement for Level 1 states that “this level does not constitute a level of even survival language communication and literacy. Yet it suggests that learners will be required to read a simple text…coming from everyday sources such as simplest forms…written instructions, product labels, medicine bottles. A now well-known analysis of the safety instructions attached to a medicine bottle (Gee, 1990:xix) indicates that the coded messages require a highly sophisticated “reading between the lines”. The written instructions placed on the walls in the factory studies by Breier et al (1996) were not complied with by workers, not because of their “illiteracy” but because of high levels of alienation in the workplace. On the other hand, unschooled farm-workers had learnt to read complex product labels through a process of enculturation in the workplace while simultaneously rejecting a workplace literacy programme because it “taught us nothing” (Gibson, 1996).


One could be forgiven for thinking that we inhabit a world of literal language users, where readers and writers go about their work each day reading, quite literally recalling and doing as texts tell them – telling and writing truths, reading “acceptably”, “efficiently”, “appropriately” and "often".

From the SoUL research we knew that potential learners have differing and divergent orientations towards schooling, and yet they only have the option of entering a discursive space (the classroom) that is filled with the discourses of schooling. Much of what they are doing is simply geared towards further learning rather than towards the already positive roles they play in their homes, families and communities and workplaces.
Writers on children acquiring literacy like Heath (1982) and Gee (1990) have shown that schools are good places to practise mainstream literacy once you have the foundations, but they are not good places to acquire those foundations if you have not already had the chance. The compatibility between home culture and literacy practices and school culture and literacy practices in mainstream families puts mainstream children at an advantage when they enter school. The SoUL research showed that outside of school there were few opportunities for adults to be socialised into “essay-text” literacy. Few texts were around which required that kind of literacy, those that were around were usually very specific to particular social practices often with a formulaic quality like invitations, posters, forms. The privatised, individualised reading and writing that is often taken as literacy hardly existed in the SoUL field-sites. Where it did, it was often seen as marginal and hidden away because of the way it had become gendered. Finally, the chance to practise the literacy that some people had managed to learn was often did not exist or was withheld or denied, because of gate-keeping processes. The most substantial category of SoUL findings related to the ways in which people managed literacy related tasks through apprenticeship and mediation. Morphet (in Prinsloo and Breier, 1996: 260) claimed that the research showed that:

...learning text literacy is for adults analogous to learning the practice of a craft or the dispositions of familial relations...The effect of this is to question the long-standing and unexamined homology between schooling practices and literacy learning. The social technology of the school it would appear is not able to provide an adequate set of procedures within which the apprenticeship and mediation processes can be lodged.

Furthermore, the classroom observations indicated a set of problems with the outcomes-based approach, where the teachers seemed to fetishise the procedures needed to meet the outcomes rather than focusing on the content of the task. In the example of the narrative, the learners seemed to have little idea of how to bring content into a story, while their teacher focused on the “elements”, similarly with the letter-writing and the exam paper. This led me to argue, drawing on the wider set of data from the evaluation that the move towards outcomes-based approaches for literacy teaching was not the correct way to go and that to expect teachers (who especially in South Africa often had very little formal education themselves) to meet the outcomes without having sufficient inputs into the system would set it up for failure.

The outcomes based approach seemed to construct the learners in these examples as “already competent” with regard to content, but since they could not be “already competent” a vacuum was created. The vacuum was then filled by the teachers with the emptied out procedures. On the other hand, and just as insidiously, the learners were constructed as “incompetent” with regard to their everyday or non-school practices. The way in which these two trends interacted meant that provisioning fell exactly in between two stools – the formal and the informal. It was not formal enough to anchor potential learners who wanted a second chance at learning, and who wanted to progress
vertically. But at the same time it was too formal to meet the needs of learners who wanted help with reading and writing in relation to everyday demands in their lives. There were two different sets of principles regulating the pedagogy in the classes and these were somehow being conflated with the result being that little effective learning was going on. This suggested that what was at issue was the problematic of the relation between the formal vertically-orientated system (second chance schooling) and the assumed need for the widespread promotion of contextualised literacy at grassroots level (mainly amongst NGOs and civil society).

I had argued that the NQF was like a huge virtual jungle gym positioned over South Africa (Kell, 1996a), the rhetoric stated that the vertical and horizontal ladders were to lead the path away from “illiteracy and ignorance” but the irony was that most South Africans who, to use the policy-speak mentioned above “had been consigned to silence and marginalisation” probably would not and could not take that first step onto the jungle gym.

The version of literacy contained within the jungle gym was that of literacy as fundamental building blocks necessary for further learning to occur. In Kell (2001a; 2001b) I called this Domain One, in which literacy becomes a kind of virtual image (created through the standardising procedures of fixing levels, writing unit standards and setting performance criteria) which is projected onto the jungle gym framework of the NQF where it lives as a uni-dimensional autonomous phenomenon accredited with the power to effect changes in people’s lives. However, getting on with their lives on the ground and underneath this are millions of people who have opted not to engage with it. It becomes possible then to describe another discursive domain (Domain Two) where people are embedded in the everyday literacy practices (of the horizontal), where powerful distributive networks operate to counteract literacy problems and where unschooled people achieve important goals in their lives.

Wilson, in her work on literacy amongst prisoners (in Barton, 1999), develops what she calls third-space theory, drawing on the cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha (1994). Wilson claims that in between Literacy and Prison, and literacy practices and particular prisons, exists a third space. This space could potentially or perhaps ideally, lie between, or overlap the two discursive domains described above, providing a context for literacy learners and teachers to appropriate from each, as the prisoners in Wilson’s study did (see Figure 1). This is the potential pedagogic space in which the capacity for critical literacy (Lankshear, 1997; Luke, 1992) or meta-learning (Gee, 1992), or “reflection literacy” (Hasan, 1992) could develop. And maybe people will appropriate from each domain, carefully and consciously moving in between the two in their teaching, knowing how this space is constructed and what its boundaries are.
But what seems to be happening in the meantime is that a phenomenon which I call “literacy as sign” (or perhaps “simulacrum”) interposes between the two domains, creating a barrier to the emergence of the “third space”. This could perhaps be conceptualised as ‘virtual literacy’, or perhaps as a version of Bernstein’s performance model: the “generic mode”.

Bernstein claims that “generic modes” are constructed and distributed outside of pedagogic recontextualising fields. These involve a set of general skills which underlie a range of specific performances, and are directly linked to the instrumentalities of the market, to the construction of what are considered to be flexible performances. The identity thus created becomes recognisable through the “materialities of consumption, by its distributions, by its absences”. Furthermore, Bernstein suggests that the identity constructed by generic modes is socially “empty”, and emptied of the “possibility for critical thought”:
The specialized recontextualising field produces and reproduces imaginary concepts of work and life which abstract such experiences from the power relations of their lived conditions and negate the possibilities of understanding and criticism.

Coming back to Domain One in Figure 2, people try to learn this hyper-pedagogised literacy, but it bears little resemblance to what goes on in their everyday lives. It seems that they engage with it for the purposes of exchange value rather than use value, and this is characterised by the fetishisation of procedures above content, which I touched on above. The form that this generic mode takes seems to involve a technologisation of language, which turns knowledge of language into procedures to accumulate credits. Indeed, it has been suggested that learners' credits could be registered on a smart-card.

**Purposes**

At this stage I want to pause in the narrative and ask what purposes had the research achieved thus far?

**Policy**

The main purpose all along had been to try to have an impact on the homogenising and standardising tendencies associated with outcomes-based approaches necessary for bringing adult literacy provision within the National Qualifications Framework. Three submissions to policy forums and the National Department of Education were written, and numerous policy forums and conferences were addressed. These submissions cautioned strongly against “putting all our eggs into the basket of formalised provision” stating that this would not solve or even address the “literacy problem” in South Africa. We argued that while there are some adults without schooling who both stand to benefit from ‘second-chance’ learning and are likely to commit themselves, at least initially to such a process; there are significant numbers and groups of people who are both less likely to benefit and unlikely to present themselves for such learning. Notably, those less able/ disposed to attend and benefit from literacy provision include groups identified as priority target groupings within the Government’s Multi-Year Implementation Plan, including some rural women and some women in squatter communities. There was dissatisfaction emerging amongst practitioners with the NQF and outcomes-based approach, and the call continued to emerge for a national literacy campaign.

I had argued on the basis of the ethnographic findings for a three-pronged approach. Firstly, for diversifying strategies for informal promotion and for supporting, scaffolding and sustaining literacy learning within existing contexts of use, in the informal economy, development projects and civil society. This would involve de-linking literacy promotion from the formal system, and setting up explorations into ways in which apprenticeship and mediation processes could be lodged within either local grassroots structures or organisational processes. Structures like libraries, advice offices and resource
centres, the staff of which could both mediate literacy demands and facilitate diverse strategies for promoting literacy. Organisational processes like development activities, for example - income-generation, building, health care and early childhood development. Articulation could occur between these opportunities and the formal system if necessary.

Secondly, overhauling communicative practices and strategies within the state and the formal economy. This would involve a greater commitment to South Africa’s policy of multi-lingualism, expansion of translation services and production of texts in plain English.

Thirdly, strengthening the formal system. This would involve growing the system slowly, resourcing it well, and producing strong administrators, researchers and above all, well-trained teachers, while at the same time recognising that it would not provide quick fixes for the “literacy problem.” There was no alternative to higher education in order for teachers to be able to overcome the emptying out effects of the outcomes-based approach and to grasp the possibilities for critical literacy practice within that third space mentioned above.

In a different submission we argued strongly against a national literacy campaign, reiterating the need for the above three strategies, and suggesting that if a campaign was necessary for the government to demonstrate commitment then a limited “literacy awareness” campaign could complement the above strategies.

There was little explicit recognition of the research in relation to policy in South Africa, and for a long time it seemed that the NQF machine was steam-rolling its footprint over adult basic education. However, with the appointment of a new Minister for Education, the problem of the disjuncture between the formal system and the need for grassroots contextualised literacy provision was recognised, and a national literacy campaign was launched. It has limped along for a few years now, and is currently undergoing a major overhaul. In addition, important changes have been made in the formal system at entry levels, making it less formal and bound to the outcomes, the possibility for doing away with the exams and so on.

Whether any of these changes could be attributed directly to the ethnographic research is highly debatable, but the fact remains that most if not all of the problems predicted by the research finally were recognised as problems and accommodations within policy have been and are being made.

Theory, research and teaching

There is evidence that the research has had an impact at the level of theory and research, especially outside of South Africa. Many later studies built on and extended the SoUL findings, for example, in the area of literacy mediation (Jones, in Barton et al, 2000 ) and the findings on literacy, surveillance and control (In-Sites, in press). The book is widely prescribed for course reading in
higher education, and in further education, in many parts of the world, including South Africa.

Organisational literacies: texts, movement and participation

After doing the studies described above as out of school literacies and classroom literacies, in 1999 and 2000 I turned to the arena of organisational literacies for further ethnographic exploration. The context for this study was a participatory development project in which 240 families who were living in backyard shacks came together in local savings clubs and accessed a government subsidy in order to build proper houses. This occurred within an organisational context of a wider housing association and the support of a service organisation. I concentrated on the literacy tasks associated with development and the constituent elements for participation in those tasks (footnote). The main technique within the ethnographic approach here was intensive participant-observation (and attempts at interventions to mediate the textual demands) in sequences of events in the house-building process, which involved the members, builders, architects, engineers, NGO staff and local government officials. Data analysis is still very tentative, but the following themes are emerging.

The initial frame for analysis was that of “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) in which groups of people act together over time in the social negotiation of meaning through processes which involve mutual engagement towards the fulfilment of a joint enterprise, involving the development of a shared repertoire of ways of doing things. The concept seems to have become valued because it brings into a particular configuration a range of very topical concerns, each of which has relevance to literacy: namely, the centrality of context; the role of ‘membership’; learning as socialisation and the importance of both tacit and explicit ways of knowing and learning. Wenger claims that meanings within communities of practice are negotiated through a combination of participation and reification. Participation refers to a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process, suggesting both action and connection. The term reification on the other hand has a long history but Wenger defines it as “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into thing-ness... We project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own”.

Every activity I observed at the housing project could be described as participating in and/or reifying the decided meanings, with the building of the house being the ultimate reification. I observed community meetings which took place two or three times a week, committees were elected, a constitution drawn up, minutes were kept, there were processes of ordering building materials, there were architects’ plans, quotations and models of houses. Yet beneath the rhetoric of participation, development, community, was another very ugly side involving powerful forces of gate-keeping and patronage, set against the constant struggle for survival.
The ethnographic research showed up a number of problems with the theory of communities of practice, although these have not yet been fully analysed. The problems centred around boundaries and power. Rather than focusing on the interactions within the site (the community of practice) it became necessary to trace how texts carried meaning from context to context, crossed boundaries, and how issues of power and identity gained salience in these crossings and recontextualisations. This is leading in the direction of greater consideration of the materiality of text and the ways in which meaning is constantly recontextualised in practice, but expressed in traces in the ongoing flow of texts (Pahl, 2001; Brandt and Clinton, forthcoming). These have been called “text trajectories” (Blommaert, ; Silverstein and Urban, 1996). As in the SoUL research code- and mode-switching is an important part of these trajectories.

This line of inquiry is giving rise to a further question which may have implications for adult literacy policy and practice (Kell, 2002). If literacy teachers are not to teach say, filling in a form using a generic form, as discussed above, but a real form borrowed from a bank for example; and if they are not to limit their teaching to the code-breaking role; would they not be required to follow through on the text user and text participant roles by going with the learners to the bank and ensuring that the learners are familiar with and adept at using the text in context and participating in its meanings? They could then critique their experiences back in their literacy class, developing their roles as text analysts. This would be an example of working in the third space as presented above.

**Organisational literacies: workplaces and the tacit dimension**

There are some echoes of these ideas in the successful and convincing workplace ethnographies that are starting to emerge. In particular, an early ethnography done by Gowen (1992), a later one by Hull et al (1996), and the set of ethnographies completed by the In-Sites research group in Canada (in press). Each of these also combined ethnographic data collection of workplace processes with some collection of data in literacy classes, and many of the findings are comparable with the South African findings. These studies seem to extend literacy studies in two linked ways.

Firstly, they outline how the codifications that are required by workplaces sometimes do not reflect the processes of production, while at the same time they draw attention to the fact that in emerging knowledge societies, “documenting work” has become the equivalent of “doing work” and that work is becoming increasingly textualised (Jackson in In-Sites, forthcoming; Scheeres and Iedema, forthcoming). Given that the documentation processes involve a kind of codification that has almost peeled off from the work process, there seems to be an echo of the two domains of literacy that I have described above, in which a kind of virtual but emptied format is supposed to account for something that it no longer represents, the simulacrum again? At the same time these formats are designed to standardise production and service processes (through systems like HACCP and ISO) around the world, and therefore link the local with the global (Mulcahy, 2000; Farrell, 2000).
These studies have drawn attention to the importance of tacit knowledge, and to the interaction between tacit and codified knowledge. This echoes in the interesting work of some scholars in the field of business studies, who, after a deluge of publications focusing on “knowledge management” have indicated that more management of knowledge is not what is at stake, but rather “knowledge creation”. In analysing why some firms do this better than others, Nonaka (1994) suggests that these firms take seriously the role of tacit knowledge, and its interaction with codified knowledge, while acknowledging the limitations of codified knowledge (see also Nonaka and Nishiguchi, 2001; Antonelli, 1999; Nootboom, 1999; Hopkins and Maglen, 2000; ).

**Visibles and invisibles**

I have tried to indicate in relation to each of the above projects what the special affordances of the ethnographic method were, what I/we were able to “see” using this method, that others couldn’t. I have also tried to show that ethnographic data in itself is not enough, and that it needs to be systematically built into descriptions and statements before conclusions can be drawn. In this I hope that I have built a case for it to be seen, not as a set of “methodological procedures that transmit validity from premises to conclusions” (Hammersley, 1997), nor as stories from which unfounded conclusions are drawn.

I have not brought out the advantages of ethnography too explicitly in these accounts. I have hoped that the evidence generated speaks for itself with regard to what kind of data ethnography can uncover, issues of richness, of insider perspectives, complexity, diversity, the understanding of unintended consequences. I have indicated how important it was to move from stories to statements, developing redescriptions of the data from the ground. I have also indicated the importance of work across the edges and boundaries of the different projects, comparing, contextualising and periodising the data. Just as I explained in the housing project, where the focus is shifting to the study of the movement of texts across contexts; the learning may occur in between, in spaces or fields that are not bounded and measured, in experiences and processes that may at times defy codification. Just as I have learnt that codification of knowledge for adult learning in terms of outcomes, unit standards and performance levels may not describe learning, and that learning may manifest itself weeks, years or even generations later (Strathern, 2000), when it didn’t or couldn’t count; so I believe that the learning from research in particular projects may not always be able to be described in outcome/output statements.

The backdrop to these considerations is the kind of location and research culture within which researchers are working, and the kinds of auditing procedures that have entered into higher education. The drive for more and more information, the imperative of visibility, accompanied by the loss of trust in expertise (Giddens 1991; Strathern, 2000), these cannot be separated off from broader shifts in society. As globalisation and the development of the network society (or ‘information societies’ or ‘knowledge economies’).
restructure the world under our feet, we have to question where is knowledge going? How are its bases changing?

Gibbons et al (1994) provide a useful heuristic for debating these questions. They describe a global shift from what they call Mode 1 knowledge to Mode 2 knowledge. They call Mode 1 knowledge “disciplinary knowledge” and Mode 2 “problem-solving knowledge”. In Mode 1, knowledge is formal and coded according to the canonical rules and procedures of academic disciplines. The development of this knowledge has traditionally been associated with universities and other institutions of higher education. Its reference points are academic peers and the canonical rules and procedures internal to the discipline. In Mode 2 knowledge is problem orientated, it attempts to solve problems by drawing on multiple disciplines which interact in real-world contexts of use and application. It is produced in multiple sites by teams from higher education institutions, R&D laboratories, state institutes and NGO think tanks. Many of the problems addressed by these trans-disciplinary and trans-institutional knowledge workers are of great social importance or commercial value (Kraak, 2000).

This caricatures it rather, but the distinction is useful. The research reported on in this paper was carried out in a university; it did address itself to real-world problems, but it tried to bring the strengths of disciplinary work in collecting the data and developing the arguments. In doing this it became less able to address the original problem, policy development, in a short feedback loop but more able to address theory development which may feed back into the original problem through a longer loop.

South Africa is a country that is still very divided, even though the old divisions of race are no longer the central ones. To draw an analogy from a different field, that of urban planning in South Africa:

Since 1994 the divisions have not been blurred through the efficacies of principled, moral, urban administration or planning as might have been expected, but rather through new, less normative logics – those of necessity, speculation and crime. A new city is emerging in which certain of apartheid’s social and spatial divisions are being deepened at the same time as other, largely illicit ways of controlling, managing and using urban space challenge its rules. Necessity has driven the urban poor to reinvent the city in ways that challenge the utopianism of modernist planning (Bremner, 1998).

Ethnography offers a way into the understanding of these divides. In South Africa it is not an easy way. It involves grappling with issues of identity and risk, and the conflicts involved in representing ‘the other’. But just as we discovered the importance of the role of mediators and cultural brokers in the different projects, so can ethnographers play the same kinds of roles across and between these divided worlds. If the “modernist planners” in the world of adult literacy are not to be seen as “utopian” they have to engage with the whole notion of a multiplicity of worlds.
At the final count...

In this paper I have touched on ways of seeing the literacies of everyday life that seemed not to count and on problems with counting at the level of adult literacy learners needing to meet pre-established outcomes in order to pass exams and be counted in the steadily amassing statistics. I have tried to account for research which could only indirectly address itself to these problems, but which did try to develop descriptions which were ‘true’ to the data and did seem to “speak (some kind of) truth to power” . I hope these descriptions have counted in other places in different feedback loops. I have described how codified formats cannot always account for what it is they are representing, and the dangers in the peeling away of these representations from everyday social practices while claiming that they can account for “improved productivity” or “increased social participation” for example.

Strathern (2000:309), writing about auditing procedures in higher education, while acknowledging that the work of anthropologists, for example, is centred on making invisibles visible, quotes Tsoukas (1997:839): “That more knowledge could cause problems, that light might prove another tyranny….were not thoughts the philosophers of the Enlightenment were prepared to entertain.”

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