

## TO PONDER

### 1 On the challenge to policy makers of contextualized literacy theory

The more those ethnographers explain the "complexity" of literacy practices, the more policy makers find it impossible to design programs that can take account of all that complexity. The more ethnographers demonstrate that literacy does not necessarily have the effects that the rhetoric has suggested—improved health, cognition, empowerment – the harder does it become for policymakers to persuade funders to support literacy programs. The more ethnographers focus on specific local contexts, the harder does it seem to "upscale" their projects to take account of the large numbers of people seen to be in need. So how can contemporary literacy projects bridge this apparent divide between policy and research in general and in particular between large scale needs and micro ethnographic approaches?

The Community Literacy Project Nepal aims to do precisely this. Based on a spirit of engagement between theory and practice, academic and applied concerns, it aims to make a contribution at the interface, clarifying conceptual issues, and enhancing knowledge on the one hand and aiding policy making and program building on the other (cf Rogers, 1992). The participants approach the issues in a spirit of reflective and critical enquiry, less concerned to advocate particular approaches, methodologies and theories than to extend current thinking and thereby facilitate informed local practice. Anna Robinson-Pant's book about Nepal, *Why Eat Green Cucumbers at the Time of Dying? Exploring the Link between Women's Literacy and Development* (UNESCO, 2000), which won the UNESCO Literacy Prize, provides some of the answers to the worries about ethnography that some literacy campaigners might express. "Why eat green cucumbers at the time of dying?" – Why take on the luxury of new literacy practices when your communicative repertoire seems already sufficient? Because, says Anna Robinson-Pant, "learning to read – like eating cucumber in rural areas – is both a luxury and a challenge when you are old" (indeed, at any age) (p. 1). Taking on reading, new readings, and new literacy practices, broadening the communicative repertoire, and challenging dominant epistemologies are continuing processes, not a oneoff shift from "illiteracy" to "literacy," from dark to light, as the early approaches to literacy work would have it. There are always new things to experience and learn and life can always be enhanced—even at the time of dying!

Brian Street (2003). What's "new" in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* [online], 5(2). Available at <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/articles/bs152.htm>. Downloaded September 20, 2003.

### 2 On what tests fail to measure in adult learning

We have come a long way as a group of adult learners... Many of [the] skills that we have learned are taken for granted by most people. Most of us learned how to laugh at ourselves and to laugh together. We have now come to enjoy life and the fear of living life is going away. We have stopped blaming ourselves for not learning

how to read. We understand it was the system that did not reach out far enough to teach all the people in our country how to read. By now many of us as adults have reached the level of reading that we will stay at. Probably that's as good as we are going to get. We are not going to make the research charts look any better. The gains that we make bring about a big difference in our lives, but they are small in the eyes of the people who keep statistics. The most important thing we have learned is the joy of living life. We get involved in society and we give back to others.

How can you measure something like someone's joy or happiness? How do we measure giving back to others and the lack of fear in our lives? The people who have developed tests for adult learners need to look back at their tests and to go deeper before they come to a conclusion about where adult learners are at. They need to add new measurements about life in their testing. Try and tell the people who have come to these conferences that they are not better off, that the tax payers' money is not well spent on adult literacy. Going back to testing, there are those in the medical field who feel literacy testing should be done to receive medical attention. From your viewpoint it looks like a good idea, but you need to look through the eye of the person who has literacy problems. As a dyslexic and an adult learner with reading problems, I speak for many other adult learners. We hate having to take another written literacy test. People with other kinds of handicaps are not continually asked to expose their weaknesses to whatever degree they are handicapped. There is no physical pain in taking a written test, but when we have to go back and take a written test there is a lot of frustration inside each of us. We grew up feeling humiliated because we had poor literacy skills and now we are adults. More written tests are seen as another step backward for us and it turns us away.

Archie Willard, adult learner & advocate, commenting on the 2003 Iowa New Readers Literacy Conference on health literacy and Plain English. Message to the NIFL-Health listserv, [nifl-health@literacy.nifl.gov](mailto:nifl-health@literacy.nifl.gov), Downloaded October 15, 2003. Printed with permission.