

To Ponder

1 On Making Power Visible

Literacy that obscures the power relations inscribed in its construction ultimately disempowers. It treats as technical what is in fact socially and politically constructed and is therefore misleading. In one sense, therefore, powerful literacies have to be oppositional. They have to open up, expose and counteract the institutional processes and professional mystique whereby dominant forms of literacy are placed beyond question. They have to challenge the way “literacy” is socially distributed to different groups. They have to reconstruct the learning and teaching process in a way that positions students in more equal social and political terms. In another sense they should be propositional, in that they have to construct alternative ways of addressing literacy practices and interests grounded in real lives and literacy needs. They need to be critical and political too. The agenda for developing powerful literacies has to be informed by issues of social justice, equality, and democracy in everyday life rather than be limited to a narrow, functional definition primarily addressed to the needs of the economy.

Jim Crowther, Mary Hamilton and Lyn Tett, “Powerful literacies: an introduction,” *Powerful Literacies*, edited by Jim Crowther, Mary Hamilton and Lyn Tett. (NIACE:Leicester UK), 2001. p.3.

2 On signatures and the lettered world

...So far I have been exploring a little of the mystery behind the apparent simplicity of signatures as a measure of literacy. Far more mysterious than this, I believe, is the personal significance of being able to write our own name. Given the opportunity, we learn young to make marks and draw, later – with help—turning these into the shapes and lines which might, later still, correspond to our names. Once we can do this, many of us repeat the experience over and over again, in idle moments during lessons or meetings—copying, re-copying, trying our styles and shapes until we find the one that pleases us. But what if we find ourselves unable to do it, and others can? What, then, might be our sense of loss? Ursula Howard has a suggestive answer. In her study of self-educated working class women and men in the nineteenth century, she writes of the determination (and evident loneliness) of some of these individuals to teach themselves, in the absence of any other teachers. Reflecting on their autobiographical writing, she concludes:

The self who lived without a signature and without a voice in a lettered world was a different self than the one who could write. (Howard, 1991:107)

For any of us who happens to have grown up in a society full of writing, she suggests, to be unable to write our own name is equivalent to being unable to inscribe our selves in that society; for to write our names is to write our selves into the world.

3 On a framework for understanding power

Writing by Starhawk (1987) and Cranton (1994) provided an initial framework for me to examine and learn from my efforts to share power. Starhawk writes about three kinds of power: power-over, power-with and power-from-within. Powerover is often thought of in terms of persons, groups or institutions having power over others. Such power is sustained by social, political and economic systems and by policies and assumptions about which groups have a right to power. These assumptions are often reflected in prevailing discourses, which help sustain existing power relations. According to Starhawk, powerwith is one's influence in a group. It is 'the power of a strong individual in a group of equals, the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to...' (1987:10). Power-with is based in respect, not for the role or position, but for the person...

Cranton writes about a particular form of power-over, namely the position power of an educator. In my position as paid co-ordinator and facilitator at the Learning Center I have certain formal authority and control. As well, because of common discourses about school, teachers and students, I am accorded 'teacher' power. Such factors as my Anglo-Norman heritage and my middle class language, education and income provide access to power in many contexts outside of the Center. These factors intersect with the position power I have at the Center.

Cranton distinguishes between position power and the personal power that educators – and students – have in the form of skills, knowledge, personal attributes and attitudes. Personal power shifts into powerwith, or sharing power, when others both value and are open to receiving what is being offered. As I interpret them, personal power and power-from-within are related but different concepts. Power-from-within has to do with being able to say 'I can'; it is a belief in ourselves and our capacities that enables us to use and further develop our skills, knowledge and attributes, and to offer them to others.

Mary Norton, "Challenges to sharing power in adult literacy programmes," *Powerful Literacies*, edited by Jim Crowther, Mary Hamilton and Lyn Tett. (NIACE: Leicester UK) 2001, pp.167-168.