The Alignment Of Skills And Practice Via Active Reading Methodology

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Abstract
How does the literacy teacher negotiate the tensions between skills and social practice? Negotiation requires engaging with the debate in which literacy is seen as a set of discrete, transferable skills, dependent upon cognitive development, to the notion of literacies which are bound to social practice, and adapting teaching practices which align these two perspectives. Literacy teacher training can facilitate this via modelling literacy pedagogy such as active reading strategies based upon authentic texts. This paper will discuss the skills and practice debate, and then illustrate the alignment of the two perspectives by reference to some specific active reading strategies devised around a restaurant menu.

Key words
Explicit Modelling; Active Reading Literacy Events; Literacy Practices; Genre-Based Approaches.

Background
As a literacy teacher trainer, I am conscious of developing training approaches which align social practice with skills development in order to promote literacy in socially-situated contexts. Alignment is not a matter of chance but requires tutors' sympathetic engagement with the skills and social practice debate, and the development of practical teaching strategies which draw the threads together. Teacher training can facilitate this through explicit modelling of literacy strategies, such as active reading. Explicit modelling by Teacher Educators '*is about us "doing" in our practice that which we expect our students to do in their teaching*' (Loughran and Berry, 2005: p. 194). However, as Lunenberg et al (2007) state, Teacher Educators should not automatically assume that their trainees either can or should replicate activities and/or approaches in their own teaching. What is more important is that explicit modelling should provide opportunities for reflection such as how activities and strategies could be applied in different situations. In addition, Teacher Educators should articulate not only the rationale behind such approaches, but make explicit the links between strategy and theory in order to help trainees translate what has been modelled into their own teaching practice.

What is active reading methodology?
Active reading methodology is based upon the discussion and analysis of texts, such as exploring their meaning in a social context, in order to help learners engage with the multifarious literacy practices of everyday life. Active reading uses strategies such as cloze or gap-fill, sequencing, summarising, creating graphic organisers, analysis, and pre-teaching of new and specialised vocabulary. Combining active reading strategies with different text genres helps to develop wider reading skills per se. In addition, the interactive nature of active reading strategies blends the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and this interdependency reflects the reality of everyday literacy practices. Lunzer and Gardner, pioneers of active reading methodology, argue that:

> '*It is through spoken language, discussion, that we come to terms with written language. When the matter is difficult for us, it is only in the process of talking and writing about it that we can overcome what is compact or opaque in the printed word*'.

<div align="right">(1979: p. 192)</div>

One way in which I illustrated this was with literacy trainees who were undertaking an in-service Level 5 Subsidiary Diploma Teaching English (Literacy) in the academic year 2011-12, devising some active reading exercises based upon a restaurant menu. But first, what is the skills and social practice debate?

What is literacy: discrete skills or social practice?
Traditional views of literacy define it as the ability to read and write (Gee, 2008: p. 42). The Moser Report, which underpinned the Skills for Life Strategy, defined literacy as '*the ability to read, write and speak in English...at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general*' (DfES, 2001: p. 3). This 'functional' definition resulted in the establishment of national standards for literacy, and qualifications '*to measure achievement against the standards*' (DfES, 2001: p. 1). Curricula for each of the three areas (that is, literacy, numeracy and ESOL) were developed, delineating 'skills' across five levels, Entry Levels 1 to 3 and Levels 1 and 2. For the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (ALCC), this included speaking and listening elements as well as the traditional elements of reading and writing. Despite the interdependency of these four elements, they appear separately in the ALCC, encouraging the view that literacy is a set of discrete skills, and that developmental literacy is a linear process. Whilst this is a rather simplified account, this view is often realised in organisational Schemes of Work (SoWs) for literacy classes, where the four elements are separated and de-contextualised, making transference between the learning environment and real-life contexts difficult (Purcell-Gates et al, 1998: p. 7).

In addition, a great deal of literacy teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) has been target-driven with a focus on summative tests. Whilst these have attempted to contextualise literacy, pressure to meet targets has left little time to fully explore literacy in social contexts, but rather has compounded the view that literacy comprises discrete skills, their acquisition dependent upon cognitive development and ability. In the classroom, this skills-based approach is often supported by the use of de-contextualised worksheets.

This skills-based perspective could be seen to be at odds with the social practice perspective, often embodied as the New Literacy Studies (NLS) which explore the cultural and social practices of literacy (Papen, 2005: p. 32). Literacy as social practice is defined by two key concepts: literacy events and literacy practices. Edwards and Smith offer the following definition:
> '*The use of the term "literacy event" ...describe[s] observable actions or groups of actions in which text plays a role. The use of "practices" extends this idea to include descriptions of values, understandings and intentions. As such, literacy practices are not static and one literacy event can be invested with multiple values and intentions*'.
>
> (2005: p. 50)

In other words, literacy practices do not just refer to the acts of reading and writing, but encompass a range of goals and values, negotiated within a socio-cultural context.

Street (1997), in support of the NLS, challenges the technicist view of literacy, arguing that literacy is social practice and language is 'dialogic': learners, then, need to be exposed to authentic texts in order to develop real-life literacy practices, and interaction is essential for such development. James Gee, a proponent of NLS, also opposes these traditional views because they promote a narrow and singular definition of literacy which is removed from real contexts. For Gee, literacy cannot be separated from the concept of '*Discourses*'

(Gee, 1992: p. 32) which encapsulate socio-cultural behaviours, including multifarious literacy practices: literacy is not confined to skills in reading and writing.   Different discourses require different 'skills', and acquiring these skills requires what Gee calls apprenticeship into both the dominant literacy practices of public life and the more personalised vernacular social practices of everyday living (Gee, 1992: p. 32; Papen, 2005: p. 148). As Gee states:

> '*When we read, write, or speak, we are always reading, writing, and speaking not "English" per se, but a specific form of English fit to and for specific activities (or practices) and connected to a specific socially situated identity (connected, in turn, to distinctive sorts of motivations, goals, and purposes)*'.
>
> (1999: p. 368)

Gee's overriding point is that literacy must relate to learners' lives if they are to improve their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, a view supported by a large body of research (for example, Purcell-Gates et al, 1998; Beder and Medina, 2001; Ivanič and Tseng, 2005).

Aligning skills and social practice
Research suggests that there is greater learner achievement if formal learning is linked to authentic literacy practices (for example, Green and Howard, 2007). Many literacy teachers across the sector, including the prison context, often have to support students on vocational courses. Work-based literacy practices can create barriers for learners whereby a social practice view of literacy is, arguably, more congruent in order to help them engage with the particular literacy practices of specific vocations. But if a learner is struggling with the basics of reading and writing, then clearly there is a need to address this at a 'skills' level. Of significance in the skills and practice debate is the argument of whether reading is a "top-down" process involving meaning and context, or a "bottom-up" decoding process requiring phonemic awareness: that is, a reader's sensitivity to the language's discrete sounds and their correspondences to the written code. Whilst this argument remains unresolved, there is a body of research (for example, McShane, 2005) which shows that Entry Level literacy students have poor phonemic awareness, and that proficient phonemic awareness and word recognition skills underpin wider reading skills such as fluency and comprehension. But literacy students should be taught these in conjunction with "top-down" skills because '*The process of reading involves interacting with the text, not taking "the" meaning from the text*' (Barton, 1994: p. 65).   An emphasis on "top-down" skills supports the social practice model, and, hence, the importance of using authentic materials with literacy learners; the "bottom-up" emphasis also highlights the importance of developing learners' cognitive skills. Whilst these definitions of "bottom-up" and "top-down" are an oversimplification of the processes we draw on to read, they serve to illustrate the alignment of the two perspectives, and why literacy teaching should combine the two.

The active reading activities described below are based on some of the literacy practices of the vocational area of Hospitality, taking the literacy event of dining out in an exclusive restaurant as a starting point. Such literacy events include the literacy practices of reading and comprehending menus, writing down orders, and listening and responding to customers' demands. Whilst not all literacy tutors support learners in this particular vocational context, the analysis of this literacy event and its associated practices, together with the meta-teaching following the activities, establishes firm links to both the concept of literacy as social practice and theories of developmental literacy in order to help trainees translate the explicit modelling into their own practice. The exercises were based on a bespoke menu emulating a certain celebrity chef's style, and were designed to illustrate

how '*literacy practices are not static and one literacy event can be invested with multiple values and intentions*' (Edwards and Smith, 2005: p. 50), and to emphasise the interdependency of the four skills.

The importance of genre in the alignment of skills and practice
Genre-based approaches go hand-in-hand with active reading methodology because of the variety of exercises which can be built around different text genres. They also complement the social practice perspective because of the emphasis on using authentic texts with learners. All texts, spoken or written, have some generic identity, realised through their structure, and word and grammatical patterns, and all have specific purposes inextricably bound to social contexts. Martin (1993: p. 142) defines genres as '*staged goal-oriented social processes*'; in other words, genres unfold in steps, or stages, and have specific purposes inextricably bound to social contexts. One genre integral to the literacy practices of Hospitality is the menu. My aim was to engender discussion about text purpose, and how important context is to meaning. Another aim was to illustrate how reading is a combination of skills drawing upon both "bottom-up" skills and "top-down" knowledge in order to read with meaning.

What is Text Purpose?
Determining text purpose is a skill learners are assessed on in Functional Skills, as they were under the old National Tests. Indeed, such text-focused activities feature throughout the ALCC, and at every level, with an evident developmental process: at Entry Level 3, learners need '*to recognise the different purposes of texts*' (DFES, 2001: p. 70); at Level 1, learners are required to '*recognise how language and other textual features are used to achieve different purposes*' (DFES, 2001: p. 80); whilst at Level 2, learners are expected to '*identify the purpose of a text and infer meaning which is not explicit*' (DFES, 2001: p. 90). If these linear processes were taken literally, then it is at Level 2 only that learners are expected to know that texts have more than one purpose, and to consider the subtext. However, literacy as a socially situated practice cannot be so easily compartmentalised.

Mirabelli (2004: p. 149) describes the predictability of restaurant menus, for example, they are generally divided into sections which are usually delineated via headings, there are often prices, drinks options, and so forth. But, as with all genres, there are many sub-genres within this overall structure, with each having a different social purpose. One of the activities I modelled involved comparing the celebrity chef menu with others, including that of a fast-food outlet drive-in. It could be argued that the primary purpose of the fast-food outlet's menu is to solely inform potential customers of the meal choices in as transparent a way as possible in order to fulfil its role as a fast-food outlet; on the other hand, a celebrity chef-style menu is multi-purpose, encompassing layers of meaning in order to entertain, persuade and inform its customers where the text itself forms an important part of the literacy event of dining out. Time in the exclusive restaurant is not a factor.   Figure 1 is an extract from the celebrity-chef menu.

Figure 1

> Hand-dived Scottish King Scallop with Beluga
> caviar and avocado purée,
> served with basil-infused tomato coulis
>
> Line-caught seared Cornish Hake
> on a bed of crushed Lincolnshire new potatoes,
> accompanied by a stir fry of
> pak choi and tenderstem broccoli

The celebrity chef menu assumes a very technical, or specialised, vocabulary, whilst the fast-food outlet's menu presents a more 'commonsense' or everyday lexis (Eggins, 2004: p. 107). For the celebrity chef menu, an exclusive experience is being sold to the potential diners, where the language choices are far more complex and have more complex messages: for example, the adjectival compounds 'line-caught' and 'hand-dived'. On a propositional level, these inform diners that their fish has been caught by a line or by diving. There are also higher levels of meanings which suggest that the fish has been individually caught for the diner, thus emphasising the exclusivity of the restaurant and that the nature of entrapment was environmentally friendly; a message encoding current societal ethics. This shows how meaning is often construed outside the actual form of the language (Cook, 1989: p. 42), and again shows the importance of context in defining meaning where '*one literacy event can be invested with multiple values and intentions*' (Edwards and Smith, 2005: p. 50). One way in which this can be translated into trainees' own practice is when they are discussing text purpose with students. To reiterate; understanding text purpose is an assessed "skill" in the new Functional English tests. Whilst teachers have to address this at its most basic level in order to meet the assessment requirements, they can explore with students how texts – both written and spoken – often do not have a single purpose, and that writers and speakers make language choices accordingly in order to position their audiences (Fairclough, 2001: p. 45). This more critical approach cannot be divorced from context.

To extend the discussion of text purpose, trainees compared the paper-based menu with those on a celebrity chef's website. The internet has had a significant effect on how we read, providing a multi-modal experience as readers navigate text in a more interactive and often non-linear way. Whilst reading web pages draws upon the same cognitive processing mechanisms (Horning, 2002: p. 11), the multi-modal aspects such as images (both static and moving), sound, and hyperlinks extend a text's meaning (Horning, 2002: p. 12; Luce-Kapler, 2007: p. 218). Web-based literacy also extends the traditional definition of literacy as discussed, particularly in terms of what counts as being a measure of literacy competence (Cervetti et al, 2006: p. 379), and the importance of introducing it into literacy provision is emphasised in the LLUK standards (2009: p. 53).

Word reading: "bottom-up" or "top-down"?
The above text illustrates some of the issues in understanding the discourse of the menu, where social context is an overriding factor. But what of actually reading the words? For this, trainees were arranged into pairs, each pair provided with a set of words comprising a

dish from the celebrity chef's menu. They then had to sequence the words in order to recreate the dishes.

This activity calls on both "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches to reading: the "top-down" approach requires an understanding of this particular sub-genre of menu and recognition of the subject specific words relevant to the catering industry. In turn, this necessitates an understanding of word classes and how they can be ordered syntactically. As some of the words have to be decoded, especially those which do not reflect the sound and spelling patterns of English, readers have to draw upon "bottom-up" skills. To reiterate, decoding relies upon being able to blend and segment the individual sound and letter correspondences of a language, a skill which many novice readers lack but one which is deemed essential to achieve reading fluency. In this particular exercise, there are also French and Spanish loanwords, so the correspondence rules differ from the usual, requiring even more developed decoding skills.

The points of punctuation?
Other exercises were developed using the celebrity chef menu as the central text, including identification and discussion of the function and meaning of different punctuation marks. Punctuation is another area of literacy in which the need to combine skills development with social practice is transparent. Punctuation marks are problematic for many literacy learners: reading punctuation with meaning requires both an understanding of its logical uses within the grammar of a sentence (skills) and an understanding of its, often, more rhetorical functions within different genres (social practice). As Swales (1990: p. 4) states, text meaning is not just about exploring *what* is written; *why* something is written is of equal importance. In the menu, for example, capital letters indicate proper nouns as well as the starting point of each dish. The hyphen functions frequently: *what* is it, and *why* is it used in compounds such as 'hand-dived'? Commas are also used extensively in order to separate items within each dish. But in this text there are no full stops. Why? In terms of literacy teaching, exploring punctuation graphemes within a text with learners, rather than via a de-contextualised worksheet, engenders discussion, which can promote a deeper understanding.

How can I help you?
In this activity, trainees composed brief scripts in which an inexperienced waiter/waitress has to help a customer negotiate the menu. Mirabelli asserts that the language of a restaurant, both written and spoken, is a particular social practice which necessitates those working front of house to be able to '*read the customer*' (2004: p. 145) as well as the menu. The aim was to explore some of the spoken language features that might occur in this literacy event, and how an understanding of the recognisable generic patterns of spoken language (here, the genre of service encounters) might facilitate structured speaking and listening activities with literacy learners. It was also a means of illustrating how contextualised writing tasks are embedded within active reading methodology, once again highlighting the interdependency of the four skills.

Conclusion
The bespoke menu used in the activities illustrates how a professional kitchen will have its own discourse. In real life, texts are not constructed according to levels of readers' ability, and those in vocational contexts often '*take the form of a series of specialised languages*' (Bernstein, 1999: p. 159). The menu, for example, includes a range of complex subject-specialist vocabulary for which explicit instruction is necessary, such as via pre-teaching new terms. Such instruction draws together skills development and social practice via active reading strategies. Research (for example, McShane, 2005) shows that active

reading is crucial for text comprehension, and, therefore, should be common practice in literacy pedagogy.

To reiterate, active reading strategies illustrate the interdependency of the four skills. Texts, for example, often involve talk around text. Pring (2007: p. 24) argues that a problem facing some young people with poor educational achievement is their inability to express ideas clearly and to respond to others appropriately, but this issue is equally valid for many older literacy learners. As well as encouraging students to articulate their own ideas, active reading strategies also promote effective interpersonal language, which should be an integral part of speaking and listening practice in Skills for Life contexts (Carter, 2007: p. 22). This is of particular significance for those working within offender learning, where research suggests that poor intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, together with low literacy and numeracy skills, can lead to recidivism (DfES, 2006: p. 6). Whilst the ALCC does emphasise speaking and listening skills, in practice this is often only tacitly addressed for a number of reasons, such as the emphasis on summative assessment. In addition, research suggests there is a correlation between reading ability and listening comprehension (Stitch, 2007: p. 41): those with poor listening comprehension skills are often poor readers. Thus, active reading provides opportunities to develop active listening strategies, as well as providing springboards to writing.

Finally, raising trainees' awareness of the literacy practices of one vocational area, and modelling strategies which combine skills with social practice, can help them to translate the theory and complementary strategies into their own practice so that they can support learners in other vocational areas, as well as those attending discrete literacy classes. Such learners will already be taking part in, or will wish to take part in, a variety of literacy events, these events requiring knowledge of different literacy practices, as well as the skills to participate. Active reading exercises designed around authentic texts provide a bridge between the seeming oppositional perspectives of social practice and autonomous skills, and can enhance the assessed functional learning experience by encouraging learners to be critical readers.

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