

CLARITY AND CACOPHONY IN CANADIAN LITERACY DISCOURSE:

New directions for a national literacy policy

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the varied and often conflicting ways in which literacy is addressed in Canadian discourse in order to propose a progressive way forward for Canadian literacy policy. The historically conventional meaning of literacy, that of the ability to read and write, is increasingly falling out of favour among theorists, educators and policymakers alike. It remains, however, a dominant influence in how literacy is written about today, and more progressive theories, such as notions of critical literacy, multiliteracies, and literacy as communication across difference, rest in the peripheries. This thesis examines the ways in which current organizations in Canada are negotiating between literacy's conventional meaning and the myriad of progressive literacy theories that have been developed in academia. The conceptual framework that informs the research is influenced by cultural theorists Stuart Hall, Paulo Freire, Henry A. Giroux, Edward Said and Michel Foucault, and work that they have done relating to communication, education, difference and power. This thesis gathers data from the websites of three national literacy organizations, Frontier College, World Literacy Canada, and ABC Life Literacy, as well as from Bill C-401, "An Act to establish a national literacy policy." Taken together, they allow for generalized conclusions about what literacy theories have been incorporated into contemporary Canadian discourse, and what further work and challenges lie ahead for a progressive national literacy policy.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Until recently, I had assumed that literacy is the ability to read and write. That was what I had been taught in school, what I read in the dictionary, and what fit with my own perception of myself as a literate individual. I took this understanding of literacy for granted until two years ago, when I was exposed to literacy theory in books that I had hoped would be peripherally related to my proposed thesis. It was then that I realized that far from something simple and straightforward, literacy is a complex and multifaceted concept that engages not only with education, but also with politics, economics, public policy, and both the empowerment and oppression of peoples and classes of society. Literacy, how it is used, and what that means, went from a peripheral aspect of my research to the topic of my thesis itself.

The historically conventional definition of literacy is related to dexterity with written texts: a literate person is one who can read and write, decode and encode. It is a skill that one usually acquires through formal education, and its acquisition marks one's transition from illiterate to literate. Criticism of this view of literacy has grown over the last few decades, however, and educators and academics alike are refashioning literacy as a concept that is both more relevant to the current demands of society, its economy, and its multicultural makeup, and more honest about the power dynamics inherent to literacy itself.

To address literacy, it seems, one must adopt a theoretical framework with stances on communication, education, power, and differences. In this thesis, contemporary cultural

theorists Stuart Hall, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Edward Said, and Michel Foucault provide insights into the cacophonous controversy that makes up literacy discourse today.

Communication is an essential aspect of literacy because the style and efficiency of communication to which one aspires affect notions of literacy. Hall, a prominent British cultural theorist, has produced substantial work in the arenas of politics, media, cultural identity, and the power of language. In “Encoding/decoding” (1980), he investigates difference through an examination of television as a communicative medium. He uses the misunderstandings inherent to any communicative act to discuss hierarchies of discourse and narrative, which can vary across populations and lead to unexpected discrepancies between the meaning intended and the meaning received. In Hall’s framework, an understanding of discursive differences between communities becomes essential to clarity of communication. While Hall does not mention literacy in his article, his insights into effective communication across communities and through nontextual media are directly applicable to current literacy discourse.

Just as literacy is informed by how one views communication, so it is also affected by one’s perspective of education. Education, as Freire argues, is a political act (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 38): it establishes what is taught, who taught it and by whom, in what context and with what expectations of the future. Freire and Giroux address the politics inherent to education with their work within the critical pedagogical perspective of education. Freire himself is credited with the creation and popularization of critical pedagogy as a framework. Celebrated for his work among Brazil’s illiterate poor, he began writing books about his pedagogy in the 1960’s while in exile, and they continue to impact educational schools of thought today. Giroux, by contrast, is an

American professor whose work in critical pedagogy builds off that of Freire's, extending it to media studies, Cultural Studies, and the current political climate. Freire and Giroux are concerned about ensuring that education fosters democracy rather than stifles it. When Freire and Giroux speak of critical pedagogy, they are advocating for a view of education which steers away from the rote acquisition of facts which leaves reality unquestioned. More useful, they argue, is to develop an awareness of reality as constructed, deconstructable and reconstructable: if our reality is made and determined by men and women, then men and women can change it. Such a perspective encourages educators and learners alike to interrogate the discourses associated with authority, societal norms, marginalization and difference, and to see this critical standpoint as a gateway to awakening and practicing agency. In other words, critical pedagogy is structured around active citizenship and the application of one's democratic rights. To perceive education in this way ensures that literacy is also a matter of agency, rights, and the potential for societal change.

As Hall, Freire and Giroux articulate, communication and education do not occur in vacuums: they take place in complex relationships of power between individuals and groups. How those power dynamics become established, what maintains them, and how they can be changed are issues that the late Said addresses in his book *Orientalism* (1979). A Palestinian-American who specialized in literary theory, Said explores issues of colonialism and postcolonialism through literary criticism and the analysis of contemporary culture and politics. Like Freire and Giroux, Said is also concerned with the constructed nature of reality, particularly in the context of the West's relationship with the East. Writing from a postcolonial perspective, he describes the ways in which an uncritical acceptance of texts as truth can (mis)shape perceptions of others and

of self; he also speaks to the repercussions of equating speaking for others with understanding others. His notion of the “Other,” a body who one defines while defining oneself in opposition, is particularly pertinent to literacy discourse, which is saturated with “Others,” such as the illiterate, the low literate, and the culturally marginal, who exist in opposition to the literate culturally dominant majority. I make use of this opposition during the course of my thesis as I refer to the relationship between the Western/literate/us and the Other/illiterate/them. Said’s theory of Orientalism can be read as a warning of how identity can be affected by uncritical conceptions of literacy.

Relationships of power, however, exist not only between individuals and groups, but also between citizens and the state. This dynamic is especially important to examine in any treatment of new national policy, in which a state reformulates its priorities in order to create some degree of change within its population. French philosopher Foucault has written substantially on dynamics of power, applying his critiques to social institutions, discourses, and notions of knowledge itself. In his essay “17 March 1976,” Foucault (2003) is less concerned with how nations navigate their differences than with how states manage difference within their own borders. He addresses state control of individuals via discipline, and of the population via a regularization process he terms “biopower,” which works to strengthen a population by eliminating its weaknesses. His insights into state population management are particularly interesting in terms of the current state trend to define and manage the literacy of its populations.

Freire’s reframing of literacy has been particularly influential to contemporary literacy definitions. Freire argues that a conception of literacy that restricts itself to the ability to read

and write alphanumeric texts is both oppressive and inaccurate. Reading, Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) argue, cannot help but exceed a mere decoding of texts because it “always involves creative perception, interpretation, and *rewriting* of what is read” (p. 36; original emphasis). This process is necessarily critical. Language is so saturated in ideology that any reading that ignores the power dynamics implicated in the text cannot be called a literate act (p. 128). Literacy for Freire requires an awareness of the power and effect of language on the world: one’s sense of reality, identity, and the possibility of change. It is not surprising, then, that he views adult literacy education “as a political act, an act of knowledge, and therefore a creative act” (p. 34). It is only through the acquisition of this “critical literacy” that individuals can break from the binary of oppressor/oppressed and act as liberated human citizens. His conception of literacy conjoins the ability to read and write texts with the ability to read and write the world. This idea that literacy is connected to democracy, that it must be analytical and not passive, and that it is applicable to daily life outside of the reading and writing of traditional texts, is acknowledged if not always accepted by the mainstream discourse on literacy.

Freire’s position on adult literacy marks a stark change from the dominant perspective on adult education in the 1970s and 1980s, which portrayed literacy as a means of “modernizing third world countries” (Demetrian, 2005, p. 7). The modernizing view of literacy has since been substantially critiqued, for example by Shehla Burney (1989, 2002), who argues that while “non-literate” peoples in the so-called “Third World” may not have the literacy skills to actually read and write, they are nonetheless highly skilled in acquiring insights and deep meanings from complex ideas and social forums. In her comparative study of audience reactions to Brechtian theater, she interviews both non-literate workers in Hyderabad, India, and the literate patrons at

the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada. After noting that the understanding of the play in Hyderabad was indeed more sophisticated than that of the same play in Stratford, she critiques the term “illiterate” as undeservedly pejorative and dismissive of the sophisticated ability to translate the “theater of the street” into one’s reality, which is independent of an ability to read and write. Instead, she proposes the term “non-literate,” which avoids illiteracy’s heavy connotations and leaves space for the semiotic process that she calls a “spiral of seeing and knowing,” a meaning making process that is not reliant on one’s relationship to written text.

While Freire makes regular use of illiteracy terminology, he frames literacy as a means of empowering the traditionally disenfranchised, as the route to political engagement and liberation from oppression (Demetrian, 2005, p. 7). Critical literacy is not about developing “technical reading and writing skills” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 142), but rather about cultivating reflection about one’s world and the ways in which it is constructed by language (Freire, 1974, p. 81). This reflection prompts a growing awareness of existing power hierarchies and institutionalized instances of oppression, liberating students from the belief in a reality that is static and inevitable, and revealing instead one that is readily transformable (p. 71). As Freire writes, “I can see validity only in a literacy program in which men understand words in their true significance: as a force to transform the world” (p. 81). Through the process of learning literacy, individuals shed powerlessness for empowerment, and oppression for humanization.

Forty years after the publication of Freire’s seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), his concept of literacy remains influential in the discourses of literacy, education and activism.

Macedo (2004), a student and later colleague of Freire’s, calls him “the most significant educator

in the world during the last half century,” yet Macedo also acknowledges the persistence in many educational schools to dismiss the role of critical theory and thinking in education (p. xiii). Freire’s work has been dismissed as impractically Marxist (Demetrian, 2005, p. 8), and has been misrepresented as a teaching method rather than a theory (Macedo, 2004, p. xiii; Aronowitz, 2008). Accordingly, Freire’s critical literacy is often practiced only in part, resulting in classrooms, for example, that encourage student agency while discouraging criticism of classroom power structures (Macedo, 2004, p. xv-xvi).

Multiliteracies, difference and the dynamics of power.

The term “literacy” itself is increasingly dropped in favour of “literacies” as theorists and educators challenge the idea that a single literacy is relevant to contemporary society (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Hull & Nelson, 2009; Luke, 2000; Triebel, 2001). To access and critically engage with the modern world, one must be adept in multiple spheres of language use, conveyed through media that include and also exceed written language, extending into visual, gestural, and aural domains. As a singular noun, “literacy” implies a single skill, a concept that seems inadequate for such a myriad of necessary proficiencies; “multiliteracies,” by contrast, makes visible both the diversity of skills and their complicated and interconnected natures.

Acknowledgement of difference and the Other is also a recurring emphasis in many definitions of literacy (Broadkey, 1991; Farrell, 2009; Hull & Nelson, 2009; Street, 2009; Giroux, 1991; Giroux, 2005). More than to merely read and write, to be literate is to be able to dialogue with the Other: to navigate through language and realities that are not only strange, but where

meaning is not fixed. This is a particularly crucial facet of literacy in a time of increased global mobility and reliance on international and intercultural communications. To communicate successfully, it is not enough to have mastered how a particular language is used in one's own particular social and cultural sphere; one must have dexterity with difference, and be able to navigate between varying social, cultural and linguistic norms.

Current theories of literacy also acknowledge that literacy cannot be conceived or discussed outside of its relationships with the political, cultural, and economic spheres, removed from which it loses all meaning. Literacy, by how it is defined and so categorizes populations, is irrevocably related to power (Barton, 2009; Bennett, 1991; Broadkey, 1991; Daswani, 2001; Farrell, 2009; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Ghose, 2001; Gilmore, 1991; Giroux, 1991; Giroux, 2005; Solá & Bennett, 1991; Triebel, 2001). It establishes hierarchies, privileges certain skills and the individuals who acquire them, and stigmatizes those who do not. To acquire literacy is to become empowered with the ability to control language and other communication mediums, which is also the power to control one's identity in terms of one's self-perception and of how one is perceived by others (Willinsky, 2001, p. 46). When viewed through this framework of power hierarchies, the literate acquire much more than an ability to read and write, while the illiterate are denied the same.

Contemporary conceptions of literacies, then, incorporate both knowledge and awareness: knowledge of meaning-making systems that include, but are not exclusive to, reading and writing, are combined with an awareness of their manufactured nature, of their changeability across cultures and context, and of one's own power to manipulate that change. To consider

literacy(s) within this more intricate framework is undoubtedly messier than to work with its traditional definition. Yet this also allows for greater possibility, in terms of how literate/illiterate categories apply to populations and how literacy can be taught and encouraged. Today's definitions for literacy(s) are both more empowering and more demanding than traditional conceptions. They are not satisfied with the ability to read/write traditional texts, expecting their practitioners to actively read/write reality as well. They also allow space for the transference of literacy(s) from one culture to another, regardless of linguistic proficiency in a new language. To encourage literacy(s) within one's population instead of traditional literacy is certainly a risk, in the sense that a population taught to think and act critically is likely to apply its critical thinking skills to the political arena. It moves the focus of education away from credentialization, and as such, away from authority as well (Aronowitz, 2008). Yet this is a risk that must be seen as a benefit if the goal of literacy education is to increase Canada's competitiveness in the global economy.

Canadian literacy discourse

Literacy came to the policy forefront in the 1990s, and it remains a perpetual source of consternation for educators, governments, and policymakers alike (Howard, 2006, p. 32). To a certain extent, the drive to increase national literacy within individual countries has to do with reputations: national adult literacy levels are a measure of a nation's success. They reflect on its educational system, its economy, and its political and societal priorities. It is literacy's perceived ties to productivity, however, that may best explain the increasing urgency placed on raising national literacy levels (Daswani, 2001, p. 290; Farrell, 2009; Triebel, 2001). As

discourse around global economics privileges the knowledge-based economy over all others, higher literacy becomes a gateway to increased productivity. A literate individual is equipped to navigate and excel within a knowledge-based economy, whereas his or her illiterate or less literate counterpart is more likely to drain, rather than contribute to, government and community resources. In this framework, the literate are an asset; the illiterate, a handicap.

Accordingly, literacy is a priority for both national and international communities. The Canadian Council on Learning routinely releases studies and reports on the state of literacy in Canada which highlight the relationship between literacy levels and economic prosperity. We are currently in the United Nations' Literacy Decade (2003-2012), 10 years dedicated to raising international literacy levels as a poverty-reduction strategy. National literacy policies backed by federal funding have become, if not commonplace, widespread among both developed and developing countries (Reder, 2006, p. vii). Governments and non-governmental organizations alike are interested in promoting literacy across populations.

Canada is not immune to the current climate of literacy rate anxiety. In 2007, the Canadian Council on Learning reported that approximately 42% of adult Canadians had literacy levels below that which success in the current knowledge economy requires (p. 8). These rates are not projected to improve in the next twenty years; the Canadian Council on Learning (2010) predicts that in 2031, 47% of Canadian adults will fall below the level of literacy required to succeed in a knowledge economy (p. 1). These numbers are perhaps unsurprising, as it is estimated that current literacy programming is reaching less than 10% of its intended population (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2006, p. 1). In the face of such statistics, literacy advocacy groups have

rallied for concerted federal efforts to increase literacy levels across the country, including the creation of a national literacy policy (Movement for Canadian literacy, 2006).

One way of demonstrating a commitment to literacy development is to create policy to that effect. Policy in its ideal form works towards “reducing inequality, and improving life chances” (Howard, p. 38). It demonstrates priorities and commits to upholding them. Policy relating to literacy reinforces the idea of literacy as a societal necessity, but it also demands that policy documents address what exactly literacy is. That act of definition is important. Literacy is no simple thing to define, let alone to cultivate, and the ways in which it is defined in policy have implications for what is funded, what is taught, and for who is considered literate or illiterate. Literacy definitions are varied, and policy and programming are slow to acknowledge and integrate the substantial educational advances in literacy theory over the last thirty years (Barton, 2009, p. 51).

Canada does not yet have a national literacy policy. Bill C-401, “An Act to Create a National Literacy Policy” (Silva, 2009), never reached its second reading in Parliament. The frequency of federal elections in the last few years has contributed to this. Former educator Mario Silva, the Member of Parliament (MP) who authored the Bill, introduced it as a private member’s Bill in both 2009 and 2010 to ensure that it maintained visibility and presence. The election in May of this year, however, saw Silva lose his seat and as such, the Bill remains a parliamentary archive unless revived and championed by a current or future MP. While the lack of national literacy policy reflects poorly on the attention that the federal government has paid to literacy up to this point, it is also an opportunity for Canada to capitalize on the wealth of literacy discourse that

takes into account changing communication media, multicultural and multinational populations, and global economy that so characterizes the contemporary Canadian reality. An analysis of Bill C-401 and current trends in Canadian literacy discourse may inform a future literacy Bill.

Clarity in cacophony: Moving towards a progressive Canadian literacy policy

I propose that proposed policy and programming move beyond outdated models of literacy, acknowledge multiple literacies, and promote critical literacy across their populations. They must also demonstrate such literacies in their own work, whether through the development of research, policy, curriculum, or programming. My project explores various notions of literacy and the theories that surround them, and compares them to the conceptions used by three Canadian literacy organizations and by Bill C-401 in order to propose a productive way forward for a national literacy policy.

In order to propose an alternative focus for a Canadian literacy policy, I examine the ways in which various Canadian literacy organizations and a Parliamentary Bill are addressing the changing nature of literacy. By exploring their conceptions of literacy, I am better positioned to frame the challenges faced by, and precedents already established for, a non-traditional literacy policy. I look at literacy in terms of its ability to empower or disempower individuals and groups, examining literacy discourse for the power relationships and hierarchies it creates, reinforces and/or resists among groups and individuals, and for its treatment of groups and individuals deemed “Other” than the mainstream. Where has theory already influenced practice? Where does work still need to be done?

I examine literacy as used by three national literacy organizations: Frontier College; World Literacy Canada; and ABC Life Literacy. Not only are they leading national literacy organizations, but they also address literacy as it applies to a variety of groups, such as children, adults, immigrants and employees. As such, they are forced to grapple with literacy at its most general, unlike other national organizations who focus specifically on adult literacy or early literacy among children. Using the information available on their websites, I discuss each organization's definition and descriptions of literacy and illiteracy, and the ways in which they dismiss or embrace conventional notions of literacy. I am particularly interested in the varying degrees of agency that each organization allocates to low-literate populations, program staff or volunteers, and current and potential donors. After performing this analysis, I address the same points in Bill C-401, and conclude by proposing a new direction that a national literacy policy may take.

Limitations

The scope of this thesis is limited to the analysis of the public website content of three leading organizations. Canada has other many other literacy organizations, especially at the provincial level, that were not included in this project. Similarly, Canadian literacy discourse ranges far outside of organizations themselves, and can be found in education periodicals, curriculum documents, as well as the news media. As such, this thesis is not a comprehensive study of the entirety of Canadian literacy discourse, but rather represents a consolidation of current general concepts and notions about literacy in Canada.

More importantly, the website data under analysis was written exclusively in English. Though Frontier College offers their website in both English and French, and ABC Life Literacy offers many of its pages in French translation as well as in English, no material offered in French was included in the research data. The monolingual nature of this study is not meant to prioritize English-language literacy discourse over that of French, but is rather a reflection of the difficulty of comparing linguistic nuances between languages within the scope of a Master's thesis, and an acknowledgement of the limitations of my own bilingualism.

The structure of my data collection, which draws material from organizational websites and a private member's Bill as it relates to literacy, combined with my text-based literature review, result in a thesis on literacy that is informed exclusively by literate individuals. It is important to note that this thesis lacks contributions from low-literate or non-literate individuals, the presence of which may have substantially revised both my discussions and conclusions.

Outline

This chapter has introduced the topic and the ways in which I approach it. In what follows, I provide greater detail on my theoretical framework, contemporary literacy literature, the three literacy organizations and Bill C-401. I conclude with an analysis of Canadian literacy discourse, and propose new directions and recommendations for future literacy research and policy in Canada.

Chapter Two presents the conceptual framework and methodology used in this thesis. It

describes the ways in which Paulo Freire and Henry A. Giroux's respective notions of critical pedagogy, Michel Foucault's "17 March 1976," Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" essay inform my treatment of literacy.

Chapter Three provides readers with a review of recent literature relating to literacy theory. It addresses key evolutions in the concept of literacy, such as the New London Group's multiliteracies and the socially constructed view of literacy. It also discusses the ways in which literacy discourse is grappling with notions of difference and power.

Chapter Four provides an overview of the data retrieved from the websites of Frontier College, World Literacy Canada, and ABC Life Literacy, which represent Canadian perspectives on literacy. Divided by organization, it provides a brief description of the organization's role, mission and vision. It surveys the ways in which literacy and illiteracy are defined and used in the website content, and offers a discussion and analysis of the website data.

Chapter Five explores Bill C-401 in greater detail, and discusses its definition and use of literacy. It then applies both the critical theory discussed in Chapter Two and literacy theory discussed in Chapter Three to the data in order to complicate and connect the conceptions of literacy as presented by Frontier College, World Literacy Canada, ABC Life Literacy, and Bill C-401.

Chapter Six grounds itself in the cacophonous Canadian literacy discourse addressed in Chapter Five, and looks forward at opportunities for clarity in a progressive approach to literacy. It

provides recommendations for further research and future policy development, and acknowledges challenges facing both.

Chapter Two

Conceptual Framework

The literature review, analysis and discussion to follow are informed by various critical theorists. I adopt Paulo Freire and Henry A. Giroux's concept of critical pedagogy as my perspective on education. I draw on Edward Said, Michel Foucault, and Stuart Hall to address problematics with the literate/illiterate binary, the state's engagement with literacy rates, and the difficulty of communicating across groups, respectively. The choices I made while constructing my research, and the challenges that prompted them, are discussed at the end of the chapter.

Critical pedagogy

A study of literacy also demands a study of education. For all of its variations, literacy remains something that is taught or learned; I have not encountered any arguments that describe literacy as an inborn characteristic of humanity. Any discussion of literacy, then, also intersects with a discussion of education: what is worth teaching; what is worth learning; what falls within the canopy of formal education; what learning is considered elective. Accordingly, I needed to conduct my research with a particular view of education in mind. I chose to work with critical pedagogy, an anti-oppression approach to education that is informed by the theoretical work of Paulo Freire and Henry A. Giroux. It focuses on agency, social justice, and the practice of democracy. It is a relatively new, innovative and critical framework about teaching and learning that centres itself around the importance of the question. Critical pedagogy expects that classrooms will provide a space in which questions can be asked, and that everything, from

curriculum material to institutional and state structures to student opinions, be open to critical questioning. This particular “spirit of inquiry [...] fosters rather than mandates critical modes of individual and social agency” (Giroux, 2005, p. 217). It encourages the questioning of inherited assumptions, especially in terms of designations of identity, power, and authority (p. 20).

Advocates of critical pedagogy are wont to criticize educational frameworks that focus on the accumulation of credentials, what Freire (1970) calls “banking” education (p. 71). Instead, they prioritize the development of independent critical thought (Aronowitz, 2008, p. 13). Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux are two proponents of critical pedagogy whose theories inform my research.

When Freire writes about education, and especially literacy, he is also speaking about democracy and politics, oppression and liberation. Far from an ideologically neutral space, classrooms are either the route to the humanizing liberation of future citizens, or to the domestication of future oppressors or oppressed (Freire, 1974, p. 52). He advocates for a critical pedagogy that works against oppression and towards what he calls a “liberation education” (1970, p. 118) or “problem-solving education” (p. 71). Such an education hinges on the creative act of dialogue (1970, p. 77). On the one hand, dialogue in the classroom opposes itself to the narrative tradition of teachers transmitting knowledge or skills to students; in a dialogic classroom, teachers and students share equal subjectivity and voice (p. 56), which necessitates discussion of realities familiar to students (p. 85). Dialogue also requires and produces a particular environment of love, humility, faith and trust that is essential to the development and practice of a critical consciousness (1970, p. 80). Instead of regurgitating the ideas of others, through classroom dialogue students learn to create and navigate with ideas of their own (p. 100).

With a dialogic environment in place, Freire's critical pedagogy coaxes students into the realization that reality and individuals alike are not static, but perpetually "in process, in transformation" (1970, p. 71), thus empowering them to act as agents of positive change (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 41). That reflective agency is praxis, the merging of "theory and practice [...] reflection and action" (Freire, 1970, p. 119), which is education's humanizing element (p. 58). "The prime role of critical pedagogy," Freire writes with Donaldo Macedo, "is to lead students to recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them" (1987, p. 49).

Like Freire, when Giroux (2005) discusses critical pedagogy, he is also discussing language. Language is important because it is the tool for the production and practice of agency (p. 11), and it must be handled in order to engage in dialogue (p. 21), critically examine reality and texts (p. 113) and, crucially, imagine more ethical futures (p. 71; p. 217). For Giroux, critical pedagogy is about "pushing to the edge of language" (p. 198). Such a pedagogy works within a perpetually shifting reality as it redraws borders against traditional grains (p. 22), "summon[ing] up the courage to imagine a different and more just world and to struggle for it" (p. 70). It cannot be surprising, then, that Giroux's critical pedagogy wants little to do with a tradition that expects language to strive for clarity. Not only does Giroux believe that clarity in language is impossible, but he argues that propagating such an ideal masks reality with the illusion of "an unproblematic comfort zone where all discourse meet with an equally shared response." Language, as "a site of struggle" (p. 199), should be uncomfortable (p. 198).

By adopting a critical pedagogy perspective on literacy, I will be working with a framework wherein literacy education is not exclusively related to reading and writing, but also to the understanding of social and political structures. It is not restricted to schools and institutional settings (Giroux, 2005, p. 74), wherein language itself “is always implicated in power relationships” (p. 143), and wherein texts must be read accordingly, for not only who they include and exclude, but also for the social and historical context in which they were written and in which they are now being read (p. 152). Critical pedagogy speaks to the opportunity for working against dominant meanings and making space for new understandings and identities (p. 178). Within a critical pedagogy framework, illiteracy can be viewed in two ways: as a demonstration of “political and ideological ignorance” (Giroux, 1987, p. 5), and as an undemocratic injustice (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. vii).

Foucault and Biopower

Because my research looks to match literacy discourse with government policy, I make use of Michel Foucault (2003)’s concept of biopower as described in the essay “17 March 1976.” Not only does this theory help to control for my bias that a national literacy policy in Canada is desirable, but it also provides insight into the language of illness and health that is often used in literacy discourse, and into government efforts to measure the literacy of its citizens. Based on his essay, Foucault (2003) may view literacy policy as yet another gesture on the part of the state to exert biopower, or its “right to make live and to let die” (p. 241). With increasing prominence since the eighteenth century (p. 241), states have been controlling their populations not only through disciplinary deaths, but by managing biological aspects of their lives (p. 242). Is

literacy education merely one of many “security mechanisms [...] installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life” (p. 246)?

Biopower manages populations not through discipline in the sense of individual imprisonment and death; rather, it is a means of control that focuses on improving and strengthening the population as a whole. In this way, biopower is particularly interested in areas where numbers and populations intersect, such as “the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity, and so on” (p. 243), but also with aging, “accidents, infirmities, and various anomalies” that impede a population from performing optimally (p. 244). Biopower is, writes Foucault, “a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes as man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined but regularized” (p. 246-247).

This notion of regularization is well entrenched in the Western state’s relationship with education, which works to ensure that “No Child [is] Left Behind” (No Child Left Behind , 2001). Definitions are of critical importance when one is working to regularize a population, and literacy, as discussed, has many competing definitions from which to choose. They are not all equal, however: despite the ways in which literacy is increasingly complicated by theory and practice, the dominant notion of what literacy “is” is that of an ability to read and write. This conventional meaning allows for superficial quantification and measurement: can one recognize and reproduce the letters of the alphabet? Can one draw meaning from authorized combinations of said letters, and apply those combinations to construct a meaning of one’s own? This criteria gives the impression of simple measurability, whereas other approaches to literacy, such as

Freire's critical literacy, multiliteracies, and the idea that literacy is socially constructed, substantially complicate measurement and the ability to - and desirability of - regularization.

Indeed, Foucault's theory does not address literacy, and literacy does not mesh perfectly with his description of biopower. First and foremost, literacy itself is not a biological process, which puts it outside of biopower's traditional territory (Foucault, 2003, p. 243). But literacy has much in common with the realms usually relegated to disciplinary technology, biopower's counterpart. As much as literacy discourse speaks of the masses, obsessing over "forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures" (p. 246) of large demographic groups or the Canadian population as a whole, it anchors itself in the individual for whom literacy is a personal tool. According to Foucault, such treatment of the body as an individual unit, "as an organism endowed with capacities" that require training, is disciplinary (p. 249-250). Literacy, then, is not a perfect fit into the biopower mould.

An imperfect fit does not make biopower irrelevant to literacy, however. Foucault (2003) makes space for domains that are policed by both discipline and biopower, such as sexuality, which exist "between organism and population, between the body and general phenomena" and affect both the ability of the individual and its offspring to thrive (p. 252). Literacy may be one such domain, relating as it does to individuals and populations, to the present and the future. Regardless, the discourse surrounding literacy indicates enough commonalities with biopower to make it an interesting lens through which to carry out my research.

While literacy is not a biological process, it does affect biological processes, and pro-literacy discourse creates a connection between literacy and the biological arena to emphasize literacy's importance. Literacy is commonly related to one's ability to read and comprehend an aspirin bottle, for example, referencing the direct effect that literacy levels can have on one's ability to care for the health of oneself and one's family (Gee, 1991a, p. 123). Additionally, while literacy discourse does not call for the literal death of the "othered" illiterate, it does require the metaphoric death of the illiterate aspect of one's identity, as the literate and illiterate identities cannot exist simultaneously. There is certainly the implication in literacy discourse that fewer illiterate citizens would increase the overall "strength" of the population, if not biologically, than socially and economically.

An examination of the ways in which discourse treats illiteracy, however, demonstrates the alignment between Foucault's theory of biopower and literacy discourse most strongly. While literacy is associated with health, illiteracy is often described in the language of illness (Triebel, 2001, p. 43). Illiteracy within a framework of illness represents not the absence of literacy, but an unfortunate condition of which the individual or population must be cured if the population is to reach its full potential. Literacy in this discourse exists as a negative space, no more than "the institutional eradication of illiteracy among the general population" (Willinsky, 2001, p. 4). Illiteracy may double, in fact, as both illness and 'Othering' agent, identifying internal "threats [...] to the population and for the population" (p. 256). It is Canada's low-literate who are framed as holding back Canada's productivity at home and competitive capacity abroad (Silva, 2009, p. 1; Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2006, p. 1). As James Collins (1991) explains, "the recent alarms over mass illiteracy ... are sounded not simply out of altruistic concern for the

less fortunate, but because modern illiteracy is closely tied to conceptions of social, political, and economic order” (p. 230). The state is given an enemy at which to direct the “racism” from which Foucault argues it ensures its continued strength: its ““killing”” that is “also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (Foucault, 2003, p. 256). These are all fates commonly associated with illiteracy (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2006).

Said, Orientalism and the “Other”

I apply Said’s theory of Orientalism to the power relations between self and Other, which is easily comparable to power relations between the literate and the illiterate. Said’s theory provides insight into the power of text to create or contribute to identity, which is especially important when examining the literacy/illiteracy binary, which works like Said’s Occident/Orient dichotomy. One group is defined by its ability to work with the power of texts, and the other by its inability to do the same. Both literacy discourse and Orientalism rely on binary oppositions, and many parallels can be drawn between the literate/illiterate and the Western self/Oriental Other. Interestingly, many of the adjectives that Orientalist discourse uses to describe the Oriental are the same as those used historically by literacy discourse to describe the ‘illiterate.’ Both ‘Others’ are framed as “backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded” (Said, 1979, p 207), and as “irrational [...] childlike” (p. 40). Similarly, Said’s description of the way in which academia has treated the East could as easily be applied to its treatment of the illiterate: “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as

citizens, or even as people, but as problems to be solved” by the West (p. 207). The medium for such analysis was textual: Said describes the creation of Orientalism through the written word. The “Others,” whether Oriental or illiterate, are denied participation in this process. The Oriental authors are not welcomed into Western academic discourse, and the illiterate are not portrayed as engaging with written text.

Whether the treatment of the Orient in academic discourse represents instances of casual condescension or aggressive marginalization, it is important to Said because, regardless of intention, its treatment directly influences the sense of self of both the dominant group and its opposing ‘other.’ Identity construction, Said (1979) tells us, requires:

the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us.’ [...] Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of ‘other’ is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies. (p. 332)

The establishment and maintenance of identities associated with power and those associated with powerlessness are crucial to the identity-formation process (p. 327). Once an identity binary is created, it is very difficult to dismantle: the dominant group does not question this aspect of its identity, and the othered group does not have a voice. Though the particular words used in texts to describe the othered group change over time, the overall tone does not. Said describes *manifest* and *latent* Orientalism, the former of which incorporates new knowledge while the latter remains static and largely unquestioned regardless of change (p. 206). Latent Orientalism is cultural, permeating new generations like an ideological inheritance (p. 222) that establishes “a

set of constraints upon and limitations of thought” (p. 42). Until the structures of societal thinking are acknowledged and critiqued, they will not change.

Orientalism (1979) acts as a warning about the repercussions of such thought systems and power structures when they exist unquestioned and unchallenged (p. 328). While the book identifies this problem, it offers no specific solution (p. 325) beyond arming oneself with “a skeptical critical consciousness” (p. 327) and scholarly commitment to the acknowledgment of and respect for human experiences which work against Orientalism and its negative repercussions on the identities of non-dominant groups (p. 328). Literacy discourse shares historical similarities with Orientalism, and it is still struggling with inherited meaning, associations, and the literate/illiterate binary. While literacy discourse is changing on the surface, it is worth considering that a latent view of literacy is still restricting thought and doing a disservice to the individuals and populations at which literacy programming is aimed. Literacy discourse will do well to constantly question who is speaking and on whose behalf; whose voice is not included, and how can that be remedied.

Hall’s theory of encoding/decoding

Stuart Hall’s (1980) essay, “Encoding/decoding,” contributes to my theoretical framework by discussing discursive barriers to communication. Though he does not address literacy, he does speak to the difficulty of being understood, which is important both in the context of why learners engage in literacy education, and what literacy education is hoping to achieve in the first place. It is worth noting, however, that the paired terms “encoding/decoding” are not only the

title of Hall's essay, but are also commonly used to refer to the traditional read-write sense of literacy. As such, when referencing encoding/decoding in the context of Hall's essay, I refer to it as "Hall's theory of encoding/decoding."

According to Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory, no word carries a solitary definition but rather has several. A glance at the extensive and often unrelated entries associated with any one word in the Oxford English Dictionary gestures towards the myriad connotations that clamour on all sides of the dominant definition. Within and between cultures, coherent communication is thus more complicated than speaking and being understood, where no message can successfully represent "an instance of 'perfectly transparent communication'" (Hall, 1980, p. 136). What is 'understood' is inevitably corrupted, distorted from its original intention by the impossibility of both speaker and listener, author and reader, director and audience, attributing identically nuanced meanings to words, phrases, stories, mediums - to any and all of the scaffolding of communication. All this is further complicated when one is dealing with any sort of multimedia or new media, such as the television programming of which Hall is speaking: visual and aural codes are combined in order to make meaning (p. 131), and they have hierarchies of their own.

Hall's theory aligns well with current literacy theory in that both acknowledge that meaning making is not as simple as reading or writing a sentence; it requires other, broader knowledges, and gestures towards the existence of literacies relating to different mediums and spheres of life, which will be discussed further in the literature review. Of particular interest for my theoretical framework, however, is Hall's discussion of dominant and subversive discourse in the meaning-

making process. Though he speaks specifically of communication via television programming, his discussion has interesting implications for the aim and possibility of literacy education.

The producers of any particular message, Hall (1980) explains, work within a discursive framework that relies on a particular “social-cultural and political structure” (p. 129). At a basic level, “‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’” occur when an audience cannot intellectually comprehend the intended message (p. 135), for example, if the foundational vocabulary used in a message is unfamiliar to the audience. More common, however, and of greater concern to television producers, are the misunderstandings that occur when producers and audience prioritize their discursive codes differently (p. 131). The dominant reading in one culture may not be the preferred reading of all groups within that culture (p. 134), and while “encodings will [generally] have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate” (p. 135), they are far from guaranteeing a decoding that perfectly reflects the encoder’s intended meaning (p. 136). Any effective communicator, then, must know the discursive hierarchies of his or her audience(s).

When applied to literacy, Hall’s theory seems to indicate that effective literacy education must not only focus on teaching one’s community’s language codes, but also on learning about the ways in which other communities interact with codes. Hall makes learning about and across difference not an adjunct aspect of education, but part of its foundational structure. Without it, one cannot hope to communicate effectively, let alone eloquently or with sophistication, with groups different from one’s own.

Structural Choices: A methodology

The study of literacy provides a few methodological challenges. For one, as I have shown, literacy as a word is used to encapsulate ideas about education, politics and communication that are not only left tacit, unexplained and assumed, but that vary substantially between usages. Any study of literacy, then, must be able to navigate between multiple and shifting meanings. I proceed in this study accordingly, reconstructing the implications of each version of “literacy” used by individual theorists or organizations.

This thesis also necessitated that I determine a particular source or group of sources from which to draw my data; I could not explore every contributing aspect of Canada’s literacy discourse. I decided to focus on national literacy organizations and their websites because they, like policy, are wont to present their terms and make a case for their importance. Not only is this ideal for lexical analysis, as definitions are provided and/or supported by purposeful usage, but these similarities in content and exposition also simplify comparisons both between the organizations themselves and between the organizations and policy. Using multiple organizations has the additional benefit of providing three distinct manifestations of literacy discourse in Canada. In this way, the three literacy organizations provide evidence for how literacy is treated in Canada right now, allowing for extrapolations of what is permissible and what remains strictly in the realm of theoretical thought.

Organizational web sites are not academic treatises, but nonetheless, they make an argument: they exist to communicate to their readers why they should participate/enroll/donate. They make

a case for the importance of the organization's work. In today's internet networking age, they are also an increasingly popular means of communication between an organization and its donors, its participants, and the media. As such, it is in the organization's best interest to convey information clearly on its websites. An organization's website informs viewers of the organization's mission and history, its staff and structure, its past and current programming or initiatives, its community, and its volunteer, donation, and employment opportunities. This content can be condensed to contact information (phone numbers, addresses, e-mails, media liaisons), participation information (how to donate, how to volunteer), and stories (how we came to be, what we do, how we make a difference in the community). Websites are thus an educational tool, targeted at non-members who are interested in learning more about the organization. This information provides a background for journalists interested in capturing their own story, and for funders, donors, employees and volunteers who are interested in determining how the organization aligns with their personal and professional interests.

It is critical to non-profit organizations that their websites convey their message as coherently and compellingly as possible. They are competing with other non-profit organizations for the ideal result of website traffic: increased organization visibility, media coverage, funding, donations, and volunteer interest. They are also unable to guarantee which pages or portions of their website will be read by any one viewer. As Communications Professor James Lull (2001) writes, "the flow of today's technologically mediated interaction now emphasizes 'pull' (by consumers from information sources) more than 'push' (by information sources on to consumers)" (p. 135). Non-profit websites must provide the information desired by viewers while ensuring that it alludes to or includes the organization's own message and desired image.

I appreciate that working largely with text in a study of literacy only further privileges reading/writing over other ways of making and communicating meaning. I do not engage in an analysis of the graphics, videos, and visual layout of the websites. The choice to work exclusively with textual analysis has partially do with practicalities of time and space: an MA thesis is generous with neither. Yet they are also reflection of the unlikelihood that a policy document would contain images or videos. Restricting my analysis to text allows for more practical and direct comparisons and extrapolations than would inclusions of other aspects of the website content.

In both the organizational websites and Bill C-401 itself, I restrict my analysis further to examine only the text that refers to literacy or illiteracy directly. As each organization and Bill C-401 define literacy differently, I examine their definitions and explore their implications in terms of what is valued and what is dismissed. I also explore the ways in which they incorporate the literacy theories described in Chapter Three. Taken together, this analysis allows me to draw general conclusions about current literacy discourse in Canada. It positions me to make recommendations for a progressive literacy policy, as well as acknowledge the challenges facing such legislation.

Conclusion

The literature review and analysis to follow adopt a critical pedagogy view of literacy and education, aspiring to independent critical thought through dialogic teaching. The theories that inform my conceptual framework include Said's Orientalism, which leads me to look at how the

literacy/illiteracy binary is challenged or reinforced, and at how the non-literate “Other” is socially constructed and represented; Foucault’s biopower, which problematizes the notion that literacy is measurable, and that literacy discourse warrants medicalized terminology; and Hall’s encoding/decoding, which challenges the possibility of effective communication with knowledge and awareness of community differences. Based on the critical theoretical perspectives on literacy and my examination of the data of three leading literacy websites and Bill C-401, I attempt to clarify how literacy is viewed in Canada.

Chapter Three

Literature Review

Literacy is no stranger to contention and debate. Educators, theorists and policymakers cannot reach a consensus about the word's meaning and the contexts in which it should be used. Literacy's historically conventional meaning, strictly reading and writing printed text, has begun to fall out of favour, and educators and theorists alike are arguing that such a definition is increasingly inadequate for successful participation in contemporary society. Nevertheless, literacy's conventional meaning remains rampant in both policy and programming. Literacy researcher David Barton (2006) suggests that the word itself must go: rather than struggle against literacy's accumulated connotations, we might construct a new term to describe the more general "working with texts" (p. 26). In the absence of the coinage of such a word, however, literacy discourse today is a muddy terrain of myriad definitions and competing priorities. The following literature review divides a discussion of contemporary literacy theory into three thematic categories: the argument for multiliteracies; the role of difference in literacy education; and literacy's relationship to power.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, as literacy is treated as an umbrella term for a growing number of skills and abilities, the word would be reframed in a plural form. The notion of multiliteracies, introduced by the New London Group in the 1990's, argues for the advantages of viewing literacy as a plurality of skills. Yet the idea of multiple literacies extends beyond the acknowledgment of multiple skill sets. The school of New Literacy Studies views literacy as socially constructed, and therefore variable from one social context to another. Literacy, in this

perspective, is better described in the plural or as specific to a particular literate act. These arguments against a single view of literacy are particularly interesting in the way that they both validate skills sets and practices not acknowledged under the framework of encoding/decoding literacy, and challenge conceptions of what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century.

“Difference” figures prominently in literacy discourse partly because of the “global village” that demands communicative ability across communities and cultures. The prominence of international business and multinational corporations means that employees who can navigate linguistic and cultural differences are of significant value to their employers. Similarly, increased transnational migration between countries and continents ensures that even individuals who live and work locally will regularly encounter the challenge of communicating across differences, whether they be linguistic, social, or cultural. Literacy, literacy theorists argue, should take this reality into account by addressing the fluidity of meaning, the sometimes arbitrary nature of identity categories, and the importance of dialogue in communication.

Power relations are often present where difference exists, and this is especially true in literacy discourse, which is structured around a privileged “literate us” and an underprivileged “illiterate them.” Accordingly, theorists including Armin Triebel (2001) and Brian Street (2009) question literacy’s capacity for remedying the power imbalances and social injustices in which literacy is sometimes complicit. Others like John Willinsky (2001) and Henry Giroux (1991) argue that literacy can challenge unjust power structures by teaching awareness and encouraging ethical responsibility. Reframing literacy as a tool to be used by individuals, rather than as a catalyst for

positive personal and societal change, may also contribute to equalizing the power dynamics present in literacy discourse.

The pluralization and social construction of literacy

The term “literacy” is increasingly passed over in favour of “literacies” as theorists and educators challenge the idea that a single literacy is relevant to contemporary society. The idea of multiple literacies is not new in itself. Since the nineteenth century, institutions have distinguished between “normal or acceptable literacy versus other, unacceptable, non-normal forms of literacy ... between the literate, subliterate, nonliterate, and so forth” (Collins, 1991, p. 231). The current pluralization of literacy, however, is less concerned with the stratification of skills within the realm of reading and writing that James Collins describes, and more with the validation of literate acts that do not align with conventional encoding/decoding conceptions of literacy.

Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2000), members of the New London Group that coined the term “multiliteracies,” argue for the pluralized word because it acknowledges both “the multiplicity of communications channels and media” with which we interact on a daily basis, and also “the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” in our communities (p. 5). To access and critically engage with the modern world, one must be adept in multiple spheres of language use, conveyed through mediums that include and also exceed written language: visual, gestural, spatial, and audio domains (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 7; Hull & Nelson, 2009, p. 200). The internet, especially, demands an adeptness with such multimodality. Linguistic knowledge in

isolation can only result in a superficial meaning-making from online material (Luke, 2000, p. 73).

The idea that literacy applies to fields other than the strict reading and writing of texts is not limited to the theoretical realm. Common conversational terms like “computer literacy,” “financial literacy,” “media literacy” and “health literacy” allude to a more complicated bundle of capacities that combine encoding and decoding with additional knowledges (Barton, 2009, p. 24). These terms appear to be here to stay. They have their own programs and their own awareness campaigns, and they contribute to the idea that literacy is not only multiplicitous, but importantly so.

Theorists and educators are also increasingly acknowledging that literacy is socially construed, and that it varies accordingly across social contexts (Street, 2009, p. 24; Jung & Ouane, 2001, p. 321; Macedo, 1991, p. 147; Barton, 2006, p. 24). A socially-constructed view of literacy argues that each community, from the micro-local to the international, will have a particular literacy that is appropriate to it and that may not be appropriate elsewhere (Olson & Torrance, 2001a, p. xiii). Especially in the context of literacy education, educators and policymakers are learning that it is ineffective to impose one view of literacy onto a group for whom that perspective carries little meaning (Street, 2009, p. 22; Elwert, 2001, p. 64; Ghose, 2001, p. 312). The “historical tradition, everyday-life routines, and functional requirements of the social community in question” contribute towards a chimeric literacy that reformulates itself according to the way in which it is used in each community (Triebel, 2001, p. 33). Accordingly, meaningful communication with other communities requires navigation between multiliteracies (Jung &

Ouane, 2001, p. 324), and that an individual's literacy in one context cannot be assumed to translate into literacy in another (Rigg, 1991, p. 206). While the mutability of literacy is not a new development, the fact that it is being acknowledged by those who create policy and deliver programs is important, as the ways in which literacy is used by those individuals is wont to be different from how it is used by the people who they hope their policies and programs will serve.

As a singular noun, "literacy" implies a single skill, a concept that seems inadequate for the myriad proficiencies that communication today demands. The term "multiliteracies," by contrast, makes visible both the diversity of skills that modern communication requires and their complicated and interconnected natures. Rather than describing "a finite set of competencies," the term "multiliteracies" connotes an "adaptive generative capacity" (Hull & Nelson, 2009, p. 206). It also complicates notions of naming: rather than labeling individuals as literate, illiterate or low-literate, the concept of multiliteracies begs additional information: 'literate' in what domain, and within what context? One becomes at once both literate and illiterate, adept in certain domains and ignorant in others.

Literacy and Difference

Any literacy operating within a social justice framework must address differences (New London Group, 2000, pp. 9-10). To begin with, literacy discourse relies on difference. Structured around a "literate us" and "illiterate them" (Brodkey, 1991, p. 163), it draws meaning from its binary nature: like Edward Said's Orientalism, the two terms define each other by what makes them different and distinct. Literacy discourse plays into this by alluding to the benefits of literacy and

by listing the harmfulness of illiteracy. Literacy in each of its manifestations, conventional or progressive, is as much about “eradicating illiteracy” as it is about fostering literacy (Willinsky, 2001, p. 4). Even in the framework of multiliteracies, which allows for literacy in a variety of areas, one cannot be literate and illiterate in the same domain at the same time; literacy is achieved by the abandonment of illiteracy. Being able to distinguish the difference between the two is crucial to literacy discourse in policy, programming, and curriculum.

Increasingly, however, literacy is linked to difference in a very different way. A growing number of theorists are arguing that, more than to merely read and write, to be literate is to be able to communicate *across* difference: to dialogue with those different from and other than ourselves; to navigate through language and realities that are not only strange, but wherein meaning is not fixed. This is a particularly crucial facet of literacy in a time of increased global mobility and reliance on international and intercultural communications. For an individual to claim literacy, it is not enough to have mastered how a particular language is used in one’s own particular social and cultural sphere. Hull and Nelson (2009) speak to this when they write:

[...] we believe that being prepared, in both senses of being able and willing, to communicate and understand across differences in language and other modes and media for communication, in ideology, in culture, and in geography is at the heart of what it means to be literate now. p. 200

John Willinsky (2001), a prominent Canadian educator, writes about literacy education’s potential to move beyond difference. He is concerned that the power of labels and categories of identity goes largely unacknowledged and uncritiqued in classrooms, especially as they relate to

race. Colonialism leaves a legacy in language, Willinsky argues, and because it is language “by which we come to know ourselves and others,” it is essential that language, especially the ways in which it categorizes and identifies individuals and populations, must be examined and critiqued (p 84). If deconstructed, identity categories such as “culture, race, and nation” are revealed to be “an elaborate means for claiming place and position, for establishing advantage, for policing a boundary” (p. 94). According to Willinsky, without intentional deconstruction of these terms, from their sociocultural history to their relationship to dynamics of power, identity categories will continue to exist unchallenged “as a means of differentiating the distribution of power in this society” (p. 127).

Willinsky wants to highlight the historical differences between identity categories, and to discuss the ways in which those differences were and continue to be mistaken for the products of nature versus those of history (p. 131). He says that literacy should be about exploring the ways in which language draws barriers and borders between groups and individuals, about acknowledging their constructed nature, and about aspiring to move beyond them. Willinsky is particularly interested in this aspirational quality of literacy, saying, “In this we should not tire [...] in imagining and naming ways of overcoming the learned barriers that continue to distance and disadvantage some of us at the expense of us all” (p. 106).

Henry A. Giroux (1991) takes a semiotic view of literacy, adopting the tenet that meaning is always already in flux; more fluid than solid, it cannot be pinned down or indisputably determined. Literacy in this context indicates a comfort with communicating with and across difference, not only because language demands navigation between rival meanings and

connotations, but because communication requires continuous “dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences” (p. ix). Giroux’s equation of literacy with dialogue means that any literate practice demands a two-way interaction with an Other, with the non-self, “in which one speaks *with* rather than *for* Others.” The monologue and the speech are not meaningful literate acts within Giroux’s framework because, while communicative, they are not conversational; they do not expect a reply. Giroux argues for a redefinition of literacy, wherein difference is viewed “with the principles of equality, justice and freedom rather than with those interests supportive of hierarchies, oppression, and exploitation” (p. x). Literacy education is thus an ethical responsibility to Giroux; educators must equip “students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for establishing relations between the self and others that refuse acts of violence, aggression, and subjugation” (p. xii).

Giroux is not alone in his equation of literacy with communication across difference. Linda Brodkey (1991) calls it “dialogic literacy,” an educational perspective that is distinguishable from functional literacy in that it requires the reading of the unfamiliar as opposed to the familiar (p. 167). Malini Ghose (2001) discusses literacy in a similar vein, though she replaces Giroux’s contrasting terms *dialogue/monologue* with *participation/substitution* (p. 315). Consistent between these three portrayals is the emphasis on collaborative and reciprocal communication.

Giroux speaks of a literacy that is more and more applicable to the globalized economy in which we live and work. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2000) explain:

Dealing with linguistic differences and cultural differences has now become central to the pragmatics of our working, civic, and private lives. Effective citizenship and productive

work now require that we interact effectively using multiple languages, multiple Englishes, and communication patterns that more frequently cross cultural, community, and national boundaries. p. 6

Productive collaboration with others is more highly valued in a knowledge based economy than is independent work (Gee, 2009, p. 49), and the ability to work cross-culturally “is increasingly crucial for participating effectively in global communities” (Luke, 2000, p. 73). The internet has ensured that difference is integral to both the reading and writing of online material as texts are routinely accessed in environments completely different from that in which they were created (Farrell, 2009, p. 194). Communicative success requires not only the ability to “[notice] textual manifestations of difference” but, echoing Willinsky, also the ability to “[imagine] points of connection and synthesis beyond these differences” (Hull & Nelson, 2009, p. 205).

Difference is thus a prevalent part of literacy discourse today, whether as something to be overcome via the analysis of identity categories, or as something to be crossed via dialogic communication. In both situations, literacy’s relationship with difference is framed as particularly pertinent to today’s classrooms and economy, in which colonial legacies must be challenged in order to be overcome, and in which collaboration and cross-cultural communication is not only ethical, but increasingly rewarded and necessary.

Power

While literacy education may be used as a tool to resist oppression, it can also inadvertently reinforce dominant norms and power structures. Accordingly, many theorists argue for the

importance of acknowledging the potentially oppressive power dynamics that exist within literacy frameworks themselves. Literacy categorizes populations, naming them as literate or illiterate. As such, it is irrevocably implicated in relationships of power. It establishes hierarchies, privileges certain skills and the individuals who acquire them, and stigmatizes those who do not. To acquire literacy is to become empowered with the ability to control language and other communication mediums, which is also the power to control one's identity (Daswani, 2001, p. 290; New London Group, 2000, p. 23; Willinsky, 2001, 46). When viewed through this framework of power hierarchies, the literate acquire much more than an ability to read and write, while the illiterate are denied the same. While some theorists propose ways in which literacy education can work to overcome the influences of power dynamics, others argue that they are unavoidable.

As Armin Triebel (2001) writes, "Definitions of literacy are not innocent" (p. 23). He is gesturing here towards the politics at work behind the act of definition, to the benefits and positive characteristics traditionally associated with literacy, and the stigma and disadvantage associated with illiteracy. "Literate" and "illiterate" are heavily connotative words that label individuals and populations alike. Literacy definitions, then, benefit some groups while penalizing others, and they are unlikely to penalize the dominant group. More often than not, literacy definitions reinforce existing hierarchies of power. Triebel is not saying that this act is intentional per se; intention is not a necessary component of complicity. Both purposeful and careless definitions work to reinforce dominant norms and structures of power.

Indeed, literacy's tendency to reinforce existing power dynamics may be unavoidable regardless of the definition it takes. Brian Street (2009) argues that any view of literacy will always "dominate and marginalize others" (p. 23), and not only because of the term's binary nature: literacy programming is often bound by educational conventions and institutional power structures which reinforce and naturalize the dominant culture (Ghose, 2001, p. 314). No matter how empowering and liberating its teaching, "literate practices produce and entrench power hierarchies at local sites, as much as they challenge and transform them" (Farrell, 2009, p. 187). As such, literacy education may contribute to revealing instances of oppression but cannot guarantee their elimination.

Part of this difficulty stems from the reality that efforts to acknowledge untraditional literacies are themselves subject to struggles of power and dominance. The idea of multiliteracies may be increasingly accepted, but all literacies are not valued equally (Gee, 1991b, p. 8). They exist in a school-supported hierarchy: the literacies that are taught in schools remain or become "more dominant, visible and influential than others" (Barton, 2006, p. 26). Taught literacies become the universal standard in a discourse that aligns with, rather than questions, institutional and political power structures (Auerbach, 2006, p. 57). Schools cannot carry the sole responsibility for their influence in the valuation of skills, however, when they are expected to cater to both the workplace and society as a whole. The re-valuation of skills, surely, would require a concerted and coordinated effort between many facets of society to be successful.

The hierarchical relationship between languages themselves is also worth noting (Prah, 2001, p. 127). Languages are not deemed equally profitable, useful, worth learning, worth teaching, or

worth using on a regular basis (p. 128). This valuation scale has implications for individuals whose first language is not valued by their education system: these individuals may be discouraged from advancing their literacy in their first language, or find little existing or relevant written material to read. Such is the dominance of the English language in North America that English language learners are often classed as illiterate or low-literate, regardless of their sophisticated reading and writing abilities in one or more foreign languages (Roberts, 2006, p. 67). Publications on the state of literacy are wont to refer to low levels of literacy among immigrant populations without specifying that these levels pertain to literacy *in English*, or rather, to one's literacy as it relates to one's proficiency in the English language. Such a framing of the literacy levels of immigrants contributes towards the inaccurate notion of "the uneducated immigrant," and ignores the fact that the average immigrant to Canada is more educated than the average Canadian (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008).

Power structures may be rampant within literacy discourse, but that does not mean they cannot be identified and critiqued by the very literacy skills it seeks to produce. Willinsky (2001) proposes an education that teaches the history, and thus the arbitrariness and changeability, of the words we use to classify race and culture. Giroux (1991) believes that a difference-focused literacy, one whose aim is discourse with others, and whose critical focus is on the redefinition and crossing of borders, may provide a way forward for literacy theory and education (p. x). This literacy would focus on ethical responsibility towards both the Other and the self (Giroux, 1991, p. xii). Candace Mitchell (1991) agrees that much can be done with an educational emphasis on the context of language and literacy. She encourages a critique of what may otherwise be taken for granted: "what is to be read, what forms writing will take, and what

language or dialect will be used in the process” (Mitchell, 1991, p. xviii). Gee, Willinsky, Giroux and Mitchell believe that literacy, if allowed to be critical of established power hierarchies and norms, can not only destabilize unjust distributions of power, but also contribute towards a more equitable and just society.

Another route to a more democratic literacy may be to treat literacy as a tool as opposed to a solution. Especially in the context of adult learners or learners in the Global South, literacy is often treated as a catalyst, as a cause: something that, once acquired, will change individuals and the societies in which they live. This focus on literacy programs as agents of change, rather than on the learning individuals themselves, may offer an explanation for the recurring calls for programming that focuses on the actual needs of communities, as opposed to those deemed necessary by programmers, educators or funders (Elwert, 2001, p. 64). Many theorists are arguing for a widespread adoption of the literacy-as-instrument model, which places agency firmly with those who practice literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 7; Jung & Ouane, 2001, p. 332; Olson & Torrance, 2001b, p. 5; Rockwell, 2001, p. 226). When literacy is framed as a tool, learners, rather than their educators or the concept of literacy itself, are credited with instilling positive change. It also leaves room for the possibility that literacy, once “achieved,” may result in no measurable change for the individuals or the communities in which they live, or at least not in ways that programmers or educators may expect. Connecting to the view that literacy is socially-constructed, how exactly learners choose to apply literacy in their lives will vary from community to community and individual to individual.

Literacy discourse, then, struggles with its own inherent hierarchies and dynamics of power even as it works to equalize existing social imbalances and injustices. Literacies are valued differently, and so are languages. Uncritical literacy allows those hierarchies of valuation, as well as social, political and economic structures, to exist untroubled under the guise of inevitability. Yet literacy can be framed and taught to be critical not only in the classroom, but of the classroom and the larger reality in which we live. While this potential does not negate the hierarchies that literacy may itself perpetuate, it offers even those up for critique, and in this way opens up the possibility for change.

Conclusion

Literacy discourse, then, frames literacy as many things. As discussed above, some authors argue that literacy is actually many literacies, whether they be various domains of making meaning or various ways in which literate practices manifest themselves into the lives of different individuals and communities. Others make the case that literacy must be framed according to its ability to work across difference, whether that be by critiquing the ways that language can be used to categorize or speak for groups of people, or simply by emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural communication in today's global economy and reality of increased transmigration. Power is also prevalent in literacy discourse as theorists debate literacy's ability to combat versus contribute to existing hierarchies of power within society. These points will be addressed in the next chapter as I analyse the particular versions of literacy that Frontier College, World Literacy Canada, and ABC Life Literacy choose to adopt.

Chapter Four

The Use of Literacy by Three National Literacy Organizations

It will be of no surprise to the reader at this point that myriad literacy definitions are in current use in Canada. Although the encoding/decoding notion of literacy remains the historically conventional definition, many literacy organizations are moving away from it as they embrace new theories, new research, and new organizational directions. Clarity and consistency are often sacrificed as organizations work to shape a customized literacy, however. The legacy of the historically conventional definition has been combined with new developments in literacy theory to produce hybrid literacies that settle into uncomfortable and often vague conglomerations of the conventional and the progressive. These organizational definitions warrant a closer look, especially in terms of what groups, skills and relationships they choose, inadvertently or not, to privilege and reinforce.

This chapter explores the ways in which literacy is used by three national literacy organizations: Frontier College, World Literacy Canada, and ABC Life Literacy. Each organization is non-profit, and stand-alone: though donation-based, they are not affiliated with a particular government department. This chapter introduces each organization by describing its mission and mandate, its website's structure and intended audience, and listing the definition(s) and description(s) of literacy and illiteracy. The profile is followed by an analysis of literacy's definition and use: in what ways does the organization embrace/reject literacy's conventional definition? What theories are reflected in the organization's use of literacy? This chapter lays the foundation for Chapter Five, which makes connections between the way in which literacy is

used by the three organizations in order to provide a snapshot of the current Canadian literacy discourse.

Organizational Profile: Frontier College

Founded in 1899, Frontier College (FC) is Canada's first and oldest literacy organization. True to its name, FC began work as a network of Teacher-Labourers, individuals who worked manual labour jobs in remote Canadian areas in order to provide other labourers with evening reading and writing instruction. While this manner of instruction remains an aspect of FC's programming today, FC's mandate has expanded to include program delivery, volunteer training and recruitment, and capacity development for other organizations that are interested in delivering literacy programming of their own.

FC's programming is region-specific and developed to meet the needs of each particular community. Any one FC program may target youth, or adult learners, or inter-generational family learning; newcomers to Canada; inmates; Aboriginal communities; or workplace learning. FC's programs tend to fall into certain structures, such as one-to-one or small group tutoring; reading circles and homework clubs; summer literacy camps; and training-based programming. While most programming focuses on English-language literacy, some regions provide programming bilingually in French and English, or in French with a focus on French as a Second Language (FSL) instruction.

FC addresses several audiences in its website. Its workplace literacy section, for example, is directed at employers and businesses who might benefit from having a more literate staff. Its Media Room section is directed at journalists interested in either literacy in Canada or in Frontier College itself. Primarily, however, FC's website is directed at individuals who want to learn about FC's role in improving literacy in Canada in order to participate in some way, either as a volunteer, staff person or donor. To a lesser degree, sections of FC's website are also directed at those interested in the state of literacy in Canada and the ways in which literacy education benefits individuals, employers and communities. FC's site does not directly address individuals who are looking to increase their literacy skills.

FC defines literacy as follows:

- “Literacy is more than just the ability to read and write. It’s the ability to understand the printed word and put it to use and to engage fully in activities and opportunities at home, at work and in the community. It’s about succeeding in today’s world.” (FC, n.d.a)

Illiteracy is not defined on FC's website, though FC does reference “those with low literacy.”

About low literacy, FC writes:

- “Low literacy skills are directly linked to poverty, poor health and high unemployment. Nearly one in six adult Canadians has trouble with everyday tasks that involve reading. That’s millions of Canadians who are not reaching their potential!” (FC, n.d.a)

FC does, however, describe its philosophy of learning:

- “Our philosophy of learning and teaching is guided by the following principles:

- ▶ All individuals have a right to learn and a right to literacy so they can better participate in their community.
- ▶ We go where people are rather than expecting them to come to us.
- ▶ We use a learner-centered approach whereby learners decide what they want to learn.
- ▶ We believe that every place is a learning place.
- ▶ We value a tutorial partnership where learner and tutor respect and learn from each other.
- ▶ We value the contributions learners, volunteers and partners make in the learning experience.” (FC, n.d.c)

Analysis

FC’s definition of literacy expands the conventional notion of literacy to embrace what initially appears to be an empowering, agency-focussed view of literacy. FC’s definition shows the influence of many theories discussed in the previous chapter: the instrumentalist model of literacy, for example, and the notion that literacy is socially constructed, which both contribute towards a learner-focussed literacy. Ambiguous phrasing, however, not only restricts FC’s definition from achieving any sort of clarity, but leaves space for oppressive interpretations that seem counter-intuitive to its critical pedagogy-inspired philosophy.

FC (n.d.a) begins its definition by very clearly differentiating its literacy from the encoding/decoding conception: “Literacy *is more than just* the ability to read and write” (my

emphasis). Here FC works to build upon the conventional notion of literacy. The organization's language indicates that though today's literacy incorporates the ability to read and write, it does so only to exceed that ability, becoming "more than": more valuable and more relevant than an ability to read and write taken in isolation.

The implications of literacy's "more than"-ness are teased out as one explores how FC continues and expands its definition. FC (n.d.a) does not mean "more than" in the sense of expanding literacy beyond the realm of the written down; it is very clear to specify "the printed word" and alludes to no other means of communication or meaning-making. When FC (n.d.a) calls literacy "more than just the ability to read and write," it is distancing literacy from a distinct skill set and towards a socially-constructed view in which literacy is the product of intentional and purposeful use of the written word.

FC's definition emphasizes agency: not mere reading and writing text, but understanding and using text. These verbs are not only used to imply reading and writing ("to understand the printed word"; "[to] put it to use"); they also locate them within an active framework of purpose and intention (FC, n.d.a). Reading is not the object of literacy, and neither is writing; they are two means to the end of comprehension and communication. According to FC's definition, reading without understanding, and writing without intention, are not literate acts. This reframing emphasizes the role of individual agency in literacy, proposing a literacy that exists according to the needs of the individual. Literacy is not a static acquisition; it is an instrument, a tool, something used to achieve an end.

The agency present in FC's definition is only further emphasized in the remainder of FC's literacy definition, which I will call "the engagement clause." In it, FC (n.d.a) states that literacy is more than reading and writing because it is also the ability "to engage fully in activities and opportunities at home, at work and in the community." Words like *engage*, *activity* and *opportunity* contribute to the idea that literate individuals are active individuals, participating in the domestic, professional and larger community facets of their lives. Literacy is further emphasized as a tool that is tied to agency and participation.

Simple and ambiguous phrasing, however, undermine FC's emphasis on agency. The simplicity of the engagement clause allows for vastly different interpretations of what literacy means to FC. "Full engagement," for example, could refer to several distinct perspectives on what it means to "engage" in a community: to one's satisfying participation; to one's successful integration into dominant cultural norms; to the responsibility of applying one's education to the betterment of one's community. Each constructs a very different notion of what constitutes literacy. One's interpretation of the engagement clause will have no small implication for organizational programming and curriculum.

Ambiguities aside, the very brevity of the engagement clause simplifies the complicated space in which we live and masks the difficulties it poses for many individuals. To talk about one's ability to fully engage in home, work and community is to speak not only about one's skills with language and other communication mediums, but also about one's social skills and physical and mental health. The idea that full engagement is an ability taught and learned is problematic when

it ignores institutional or systemic barriers that make the participation of some more difficult than that of others.

I have similar qualms with the vagueness of the engagement clause's use of "the community." FC could be speaking of the Canadian community, one's neighbourhood community, one's ethnic community, one's socioeconomic community, the global community, or any number of other communities to which an individual might attribute him- or herself. Who determines the community or communities with which one ought to engage? Who determines whether one's engagement in it is full? These questions are left unanswered, yet they have implications not only for programming and curriculum, but also for the agency that FC's literacy definition allocates to its learners. Like the ambiguity of "full engagement," "the community" could be a learner-determined category, further emphasizes learner agency and empowerment; it could also, however, be determined by programming, curriculum or individual instructors, which takes control away from learners and threatens the socially-constructed view of literacy that FC appears to embrace.

FC (n.d.a) summarizes literacy in the final sentence of its definition: "It's about succeeding in today's world." The phrase itself is vague and ambiguous: in what way is literacy "about succeeding in today's world"? Is literacy a prerequisite to success or a result of it? Is success the larger, most important concern to which literacy is related? Most troubling to me is the relative nature of the word "success," which can be equated with, among other things, money, happiness, careers, relationships, and any combinations thereof. While literacy may simplify the acquisition of the things associated with success, it neither guarantees them nor the feeling that,

once acquired, one will feel successful. This concluding sentence is not helped by the phrase “It’s about,” which gives the impression of clarification while providing no evidence or explanation for why literacy and success are linked, and to what degree. Speaking as though FC’s definition of literacy is the prerequisite to success is dangerous, and not only for the challenges it poses from a program evaluation standpoint. It negates the possibility of a relationship between non-literate and low-literate individuals and success, however one chooses to define it. Such a framework can only work to disempower those who have not achieved or do not practice FC’s definition of literacy.

The ambiguities in FC’s definition have interesting implications in terms of who it empowers and ignores. The literate are portrayed as actively engaging in literate acts with intention and purpose. The evaluation of their success, however, and selection of the community arenas in which they are acting as literate individuals, are left murkily undescribed. FC gives the impression, then, of engaging in progressive literacy inspired by critical practice, while leaving space for traditional power dynamics in which the determination of a literacy learner’s “success” is allocated outside of him- or herself, to the already-literate in an established position of power.

While the literate are relegated to ambiguity, this version of literacy leaves no positive space whatsoever for those who are not yet deemed literate: those who do not apply agency to their reading and writing; who engage only partially in their homes, workplaces and communities; or who are not “succeeding in today’s world” (FC, n.d.a). I am not lamenting the lack of illiteracy discourse in FC’s website. On the contrary, talking about literacy in the absence of illiteracy works to weaken the binary structure that binds them by presenting an alternative framework in

which literacy exists independent of illiteracy. I also do not mean to say that FC does not make reference to individuals whose literacy skills need or could use improvement. FC references individuals with “low literacy,” acknowledging the existence of those whose literacy skills need improvement on the one hand, and invoking literacy as a gradient of skills and abilities on the other. As a program-based organization, FC’s existence as a literacy organization also revolves around the existence of low literate populations: solutions without problems serve little purpose. My concern, rather, is that the low-literate are referenced only in terms of the harm they do to themselves (“poverty, poor health [...] not reading their potential”) and the economy (“high unemployment”) (FC, n.d.a). Low-literate individuals are not associated with agency, engagement, or success; by contrast, they are defined by negatives and the absence of positive traits. While such a framing works to promote the importance and value of literacy programming, it only further entrenches traditional power dynamics that disempower the illiterate.

As much as FC’s concept of literacy is informed by the instrument model and the notion of literacy as socially constructed, it remains theoretically conservative when one considers the theories it ignores. FC’s vague language problematizes even its efforts at an expansive and inclusive definition, and risks undermining FC’s implied commitment to critical practice and social justice.

Influential literacy theories are prominently absent from FC’s literacy definition. For one, FC’s emphasis on the “printed word” seems to exclude the possibility of multiliteracies: FC’s website neither mentions other forms of communication, nor alludes to the possibility that other

knowledges may inform one's understanding of print material. Difference, both linguistically and culturally, is not a part of FC's literacy. Most importantly, though FC challenges the literacy/illiteracy binary by making no references to illiteracy in its website, its language regarding literate and low literate groups emphasizes traditional power dynamics that privilege the literate over the less-literate.

Organizational Profile: World Literacy Canada

World Literacy Canada (WLC) is the first Canadian literacy organization to offer programming internationally. It concerns itself with adult literacy development as a means of poverty reduction and social justice advancement, and partners with local organizations and individuals in order to develop and deliver programming. Gender equality and the rights of women are of particular importance to WLC, and as such its international programs focus on developing literacy skills in women and children. WLC (2011b) works according to its development philosophy, which promotes "a holistic, integrated approach to literacy and community development, and [tries] to develop [its] programs with sensitivity to the needs and the cultural context of the communities in which [it works]." It works, then, as both a literacy and development organization; it uses literacy as a route to development.

Its current international work is concentrated in Nepal and India, especially in the Indian northern province of Uttar Pradesh, where WLC has a second office. Programs include pre-school programming in under-served areas, adult literacy programs, health and nutrition

programs, community libraries, literacy teacher training and mentoring, and small business support for women.

International programming manifests WLC's literacy and social justice focus in the promotion of global citizenship, especially among children and youth. Its domestic programming includes an excursion-based day-camp for children in Toronto's troubled Jane and Finch neighbourhood; recreational programming that uses learning about global issues as a framework for literacy education; leadership training for children in grades 4, 5, and 6; an annual creative writing competition for children; and an international youth internship program, which brings Canadian youth to WLC's India office for a fixed work term. WLC's website is directed at potential and existing donors. With the exception of a section on the organization's history, each page is structured around a way in which site visitors might participate in WLC's ventures, whether through financial contributions or through advocacy or volunteering.

Literacy

WLC describes literacy as follows:

- “We see literacy as an essential element in the struggle for equality. We believe that literacy is crucial to achieving peace and security, promoting respect for human rights and dignity, and for communication in an increasingly interconnected world.” (WLC, 2011e)

- “World Literacy’s concept of literacy goes beyond one of reading, writing and numeracy to one of ensuring that people acquire the life skills and knowledge necessary for human development and empowerment.” (WLC, 2011e)
- “... literacy is an essential tool to overcoming oppression and barriers to equal participation.” (WLC, 2011e)
- “Literacy is an essential factor in the struggle for justice, human dignity and equality.” (WLC, 2011e)
- “Literacy is about much more than just reading and writing - it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Literacy - the use of written communication - finds its place in our lives alongside other ways of communicating and takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on television, on posters and on signs.” (WLC, 2011c)
- “Literacy enables a person to exercise his or her right to participate in governance, to affect decision-making [sic], and to make one’s voice heard. Literacy gives a person confidence that his or her opinions and contribution matter. This is the essence of democracy. Development for human beings must include empowerment. Literacy is a central vehicle for achieving this goal.” (WLC, 2011c)
- “Literacy is simply the most important tool you can give a person on the road to self-sufficiency. It’s the pre-condition for access to the market, for gaining economic independence, and for being able to make plans, execute them, and stand up for oneself. WLC passionately believes that literacy is a basic human right. Literacy is not a side issue - it’s a central engine of human development.” (WLC, 2011d)

WLC describes illiteracy as follows:

- “Illiteracy is linked to poverty, disadvantage and exclusion.” (WLC, 2011e)
- “... illiteracy is both a cause and consequence of poverty and disadvantage.” (WLC, 2011c)
- “It is important to remember that without literacy, there is no freedom, and there is no true implementation of democratic principles and practice.” (WLC, 2011c)
- “... illiteracy is both a cause and consequence of poverty and other social injustices, such as poor health and gender inequality.” (WLC, 2011d)

Analysis

WLC (2011e) is very clear: its “concept of literacy goes beyond one of reading, writing and numeracy.” It reiterates elsewhere: “literacy is about much more than just reading and writing” (2011c). WLC fails to acknowledge that even reading and writing are “about” more than reading and writing, and that they also are “about” the social practices, relationships, language and culture that WLC associates with literacy. Like FC, WLC proposes a literacy that exceeds the conventional definition.

Also like FC, WLC is comfortable with ambiguous associations when it comes to literacy. WLC’s ambiguity, however, has less to do with vague terminology and more to do with unexplained relationships between literacy and other concepts and ideas. For example, WLC relates literacy to “the struggle for equality,” “overcoming oppression and barriers to equal participation,” “the struggle for justice, human dignity and equality” (2011e), and “freedom and

[...] the implementation of democratic principles and practice” (2011c) Never mind exactly how literacy is related to or contributes towards achieving these things; WLC has associated it with them, and rests its case at that.

Such language may be intentionally sparse in order to gain donor consensus and support. While WLC’s use of “it’s about” and other generalizing techniques do not provide concrete expansions to its definition of literacy, they succeed in immediately associating literacy with ideas that the conventional meaning ignores, or at least obscures. Potentially both intentional and beneficial, such evasions highlights the fact that WLC’s website is structured to engage with current and potential donors. In a discursive space where definitions are contentious, vague generalizations such as “it’s about” allow for consensus rather than division, and may provide WLC with a larger platform of support than more specific elaborations could offer.

Despite such linguistic obfuscation, WLC (2011c) defines literacy clearly and firmly as “the use of written communication.” Immediately, what might be deemed “multiliteracies” elsewhere are firmly relegated to “other ways of communicating” by WLC, and are therefore other than and exterior to literacy. While WLC’s emphasis on the ‘written down’ stays true to the conventional definition, WLC’s definition of literacy is less a skill or ability than it is the agency required to apply it. This emphasis on agency and the socially constructed nature of literacy represent progressive integrations of literacy theory into organizational practice. Literacy’s conventional legacy remains strong, however, in WLC’s clear comfort with the conventional literacy/illiteracy binary and the power dynamics that the two terms create.

WLC routinely refers to literacy as a “tool” (2011d; 2011e), “vehicle” (2011c) or “engine” (2011d), all items that are not useful unless they are being used. Left dormant, they are at best ornamental. Their value comes when they are applied to a certain task, a particular purpose. This view, that literacy only exists to the degree that it is used, is increasingly prevalent in literacy discourse (Jung & Ouane, 2001; Rockwell, 2001). In the instrument-based view of literacy, it is literacy learners, rather than literacy programming or the intangible literacy itself, who are credited with creating positive change.

It is unsurprising, then, that the majority of WLC’s programs are not “literacy programs” per se. They run under different titles and may not even include the word “literacy” in their descriptions. WLC’s (2011a) adult literacy classes are not an end in themselves but are described as “a doorway to participate in a full range of our [WLC’s] integrated development program.” WLC’s literacy is empowerment. As WLC writes, “Literacy enables a person to exercise his or her right to participate in governance, to affect decision-making [sic], and to make one’s voice heard. Literacy gives a person confidence that his or her opinions and contribution matter.”

While WLC frames literacy as a tool, it is a tool meant to be used in prescribed ways. For instance, WLC’s continued invocations of literacy as the foundation of democracy seem to ignore the success of literacy programs, and undermine the literacy that exists, in non-democratic countries. Cuba, for example, is often lauded in literacy discourse for its dedication to literacy education and its enduringly high literacy rates. One Cuban program, *Yo si Puedo*, has been incorporated successfully into literacy education methods in other “democratic” countries, including Canada and the United States (ArrowMight, n.d.). While literacy, especially if

practised critically, is wont to contribute toward active citizenship within a democratic framework, it is not the exclusive property of democracy, particularly when defined as “the use of written communication.”

As a tool, literacy is neither the exclusive property of democracy or even of socially-minded governments. As Jung and Ouane (2001) write, “Literacy may underwrite democracy in one context, it may underwrite authoritarian rule in another” (p. 321). WLC’s sweeping statements such as “without literacy, there is no freedom” are as problematic as its unexplained linkage between literacy and democracy. Are those unable to use written communication by default enslaved? Paulo Freire has ensured that the language of oppression and liberation is linked with literacy discourse, so there is a precedent for literacy’s association with freedom, but unlike WLC, he also makes a case for his choice of words. The notion that literacy can only be used toward positive ends - the acquisition of freedom - is also disappointing; as a tool, which is neutral, surely one can use written communication for both good and bad. According to WLC’s definition, the automatic association between literacy and the positive is unwarranted. While I appreciate the grandeur of WLC’s statement, it contains no clear meaning or argument, and only further muddles what exactly WLC means literacy to be.

In WLC’s (2011e) mission to “[use] literacy to fight poverty and advance the cause of social justice,” it has opted for domestic programming that teaches literacy alongside global citizenship and community responsibility. This is a common thread between both WLC’s domestic and international programming: the idea that literacy education benefits not only the learner, but those with whom the learner interacts. WLC’s international program is structured to create self-

sufficient expansion wherein learners are equipped to become teachers and leaders in their own communities, increasing not only the literacy levels within the area, but also its sense of community.

WLC doesn't talk about literacy as something that manifests differently according to the ways in which it is used, but its entire organizational structure speaks to the influence of the socially-constructed view of literacy - and of illiteracy as well. The differences between WLC's domestic and international programming, and the varying ways in which they address literacy and illiteracy, speak to the social construction of literacy, but also reveal weaknesses in WLC's conception or handling of literacy.

For one, the structure of WLC's domestic and international programs are in stark contrast to each other. A static view of literacy would have no explanation for this: why would a single organization run two completely different groups of programs and curriculums from its two offices? Not only does this appear to be an inefficient use of resources, but it presents complications for organizational branding and donor communications. From a socially-constructed view of literacy, however, WLC's two "streams" of programming not only make sense, but are the only plausible way of delivering meaningful programming in two distinct locales. According to this perspective, because children in Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood will use literacy - "written communication" in the case of WLC - differently than will women in India's Uttar Pradesh region, literacy programming must differ accordingly if it is to be useful, meaningful and effective.

It follows that, if literacy varies between communities and contexts, so must illiteracy. WLC (2011e) seems to speak to this when it writes that “illiteracy is rooted in the prevailing social, cultural and economic conditions of a country.” Because these conditions will vary between countries and the communities within them, one can expect illiteracy to manifest itself differently from one location to another. It is worth repeating here, however, that WLC’s website does not define illiteracy directly, which makes it both an easily mutable term and also one that could require multiple and varied eradication strategies.

One way that WLC approaches illiteracy differently in its domestic and international programming is by talking about it differently. Illiteracy in the “developed” world is described with the language of low literacy, wherein “adults possess only a limited ability to read, write, and handle simple math” (WLC, 2011c). Perhaps this is a reflection of the understanding that illiteracy in the conventional sense - the complete inability to encode/decode meaning with and from text - is rare in Canada’s population. When WLC (2011c) quotes a statistic referencing the percentage of Canadian adults who “fall into the lowest level of literacy,” they are not labelled as illiterate.

It is worth noting that despite WLC’s liberal use of the word “illiteracy,” the organization does not label any individuals or groups as illiterate. In Canada, the learners with which WLC works are not low-literate Canadian adults; its domestic programming focuses on children and youth, and has no referenced stipulations regarding participants’ abilities to “use written communication.” Internationally, while the women who attend WLC’s adult literacy classes are described as often lacking the ability to read and write, WLC does not identify them as illiterate

or low-literate. This labelling hesitancy may be a tacit acknowledgement of the stigma attached to illiterate individuals by the Western world. Similarly, donors may not be easily convinced that traditional literacy programming for Canadian children and youth is something that requires their financial support. By offering programming that is distinct from traditional educational curriculum, WLC avoids questions of duplication while contributing to the value-added of novelty and the possibility of progressive thinking. WLC seems nonetheless content to capitalize on the rhetoric of the “illiteracy crisis,” demonizing illiteracy without defining it and without giving voice to the illiterate for whom this alarmist discourse is so concerned.

These notions are complicated by the fact that WLC offers international programming as well. That Canadian children are treated with programming so dramatically different from those directed at Indian adults leaves WLC vulnerable to criticism that it portrays Western children as more “advanced” than Eastern adults. Likely WLC’s two-stream programming is a result of a socially-constructed view of literacy, yet it may also be attributed to a notion that the participants of its international programs must be “brought up” to the literacy level of Canadian youth before being expected to be concerned with global citizenship.

Perhaps most poignantly, WLC’s domestic programming and its emphasis on global citizenship draw attention to the inadequacy of its literacy definition. If literacy is no more than “the use of written communication,” then WLC’s focus on global citizenship is unconnected, unexplained, and bizarre. If, however, the notion of literacy is related to anti-oppression action and conversations with others across difference, then WLC’s domestic program makes more sense. In the absence of any articulated connection between WLC’s domestic programming and its

literacy definition, however, literacy remains relatively conventional and the inexplicable harbinger of positive change; and WLC's domestic programming remains only peripherally associated with literacy.

Internationally, by focussing its programming on women and children, WLC uses literacy to upset a layered power hierarchy wherein women represent the bottom strata. Here in Canada, WLC's focus on urban and underprivileged youth works to empower a group that is traditionally disenfranchised. In a framework wherein heightened literacy skills allow for increased democratic practice and development and decreased poverty and exclusion, WLC is working to equip the disadvantaged with the skills to ameliorate their political, social and financial situations.

At the same time, however, WLC is caught reinforcing the assumption that language is power, and that the illiterate are best empowered by being educated out of their illiteracy. On the one hand, this is to be expected from a literacy organization whose mandate is to increase literacy levels. What is disappointing about WLC's treatment of illiteracy is not that the organization is working to eliminate or reduce it, but rather that there is nothing in WLC's website to indicate that its programming reduces the stigma of illiteracy. By contrast, the division between the literate and illiterate is emphasized by the repeated use of language that attributes the best of society to literacy and the worst of it to illiteracy. Literacy is described as "essential," "crucial," "central," and "the most important," whereas illiteracy is associated with "poverty, disadvantage and exclusion." Such framing certainly promotes literacy, but does little to ameliorate the situations of low literate or illiterate individuals.

The illiterate or low-literate are not portrayed as able to achieve literacy, however, without the help of donors. WLC's website does not provide information regarding how to become a participant or volunteer in their programming, with the exception of their youth internship program. As such, we can assume that the website content - the information it provides and the arguments it makes - is crafted to engage and appeal to donors. WLC's donor-centred website also promotes an environment in which literacy is the responsibility of the donors. Donors are in the position to relate to the website headings, which read "supply a classroom," or "buy a teacher a bicycle," and so enable those who "cannot [otherwise] use literacy" (2011c).

WLC's international programming plays into a saviour model of donations. Donors are invited to invest in programs that WLC totes as life-changing to its participants. By donating the money to buy a bicycle, or stock a classroom, donors are giving the gift of literacy to those who would otherwise be without. The donor becomes the gatekeeper between literacy and those without it. The agency of those unable to "use written communication" lies seemingly dormant until activated by the donation that allows for access to WLC's programming. This sort of framing of programming purpose, donor relations, and participant agency makes questionable the type of social justice with which WLC is working.

As unconventional as WLC's concept of literacy attempts to be by associating literacy with social justice, democracy and freedom, its prominent use of the literacy/illiteracy binary is an embrace of the conventional power dynamics inherent to much of literacy discourse today. WLC appears to undermine its own definition of literacy by vague associations and absent explanations. Though WLC treats literacy as a social construction, the unexplained differences

between its domestic and international programming leave the organization vulnerable to criticism that it is reinforcing power hierarchies between “industrialized” and “developing” countries.

Organizational Profile: ABC Life Literacy

ABC Life Literacy (ABC LL) is a non-profit Canadian organization that advocates for increased literacy rates in Canada. It delivers literacy programs, provides access to literacy resources, and works with the private, public, and non-profit sectors to build partnerships and increase public awareness of literacy concerns. It considers itself to be “the leading national literacy organization in Canada” (ABC Life Literacy, 2010, p. 7).

Programs and initiatives spearheaded by ABC LL include “Financial Literacy Week™,” which draws attention to both the need for increased financial literacy and the availability of tools and resources to achieve it; “Family Literacy Day®,” a celebration of adults and children reading together every day; “Good Reads,” a collection of non-fiction and fiction books by Canadian authors directed at adults interested in improving their literacy skills; “Money Matters,” a financial literacy program; “LEARN,” a national literacy campaign aimed at connecting adult learners with local literacy programs; and “Letters for Literacy” and “the ABC Life Literacy Media Sale,” two fundraising ventures that raise money for literacy programming, research, and awareness campaigns.

The majority of ABC LL's site is directed at those who are interested in improving their own literacy skills or those of others. ABC LL text often poses questions directly at the reader, such as "Interested in brushing up on your life literacy skills?" and "Have you considered taking a course to upgrade your career skills?", that assume the reader is a potential learner (2011d). In other instances, the text is more generally directed at learners and/or those interacting with learners, such as employers or parents. Select pages of ABC LL's site are directed at audiences other than learners, however. The "Support Life Literacy" page of the site is directed at potential donors, volunteers, sponsors and partners. The "News and Events" page is directed at journalists or fellow literacy organizations.

ABC LL offers the following definitions for literacy:

- "‘Life literacy’ signals the importance of life-long and life-wide literacy and learning. It’s the literacy skills you need to live your life and the new skills you need to acquire throughout your life." (ABC LL, 2011d)
- "To be literate means that you have the skills to understand what you read, communicate with others and engage fully and confidently in life’s activities and opportunities - at work, at home and in the community. Literacy is a tool that opens up a world of opportunities to an individual." (ABC LL, 2011a)
- "Literacy is defined as ‘the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.’ (Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society: Further Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey, Organization for Economic

Co-operation and Development, Human Resources Development Canada and the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada, 1997).” (ABC LL, 2011a)

- “Financial Literacy is having the knowledge to understand personal and broader financial matters, skill to apply that knowledge and understanding to everyday life and the confidence to use the skills and knowledge to make responsible financial decisions that are appropriate to the individual’s situation. (Task Force on Financial Literacy).” (ABC LL, 2011b)

ABC LL defines illiteracy as follows:

- “There are very few people who are ‘illiterate,’ meaning they cannot read at all.” (ABC LL, 2011c)
- “Having low literacy does not mean that you ‘can’t read.’ Reading comprehension is not like an ‘on-off’ light switch. The vast majority of people with literacy issues can read to a certain degree, but not at a literacy level required for full engagement at work, at home and in the community.” (ABC LL, 2011c)

Analysis

ABC LL’s definition and use of literacy addresses some of the things seen before in FC and WLC’s websites: it works with an instrument-model view of literacy, for example, as well as with the notion that literacy is socially-constructed. Its definition for literacy even incorporates much of the same structure as FC’s definition. What ABC LL does that is in stark contrast to FC

and WLC, however, is to include multiple literacy definitions in its web site. This section will explore the implications of working with multiple definitions.

ABC LL provides four definitions for literacy. The first two are found on the organization's "Adult Literacy" page. The page begins with a literacy definition: "the skills to understand what you read, communicate with others and engage fully and confidently in life's activities and opportunities - at home, at work, and in the community" (ABC LL, 2011a). Reminiscent of FC's definition in both structure and diction, this definition is followed by a variety of links to other pages of the website, and by a section titled "Literacy Definition." Here is where ABC LL provides its second definition, that used by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC) in a joint publication on the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey. It reads: "Literacy is defined as 'the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential'" (ABC LL, 2011a). ABC LL has just framed literacy in two very different ways.

These definitions share many similarities: they both privilege written information; they emphasize the home, workplace and community as sites in which literacy comes into play; and, most interestingly, they place literacy's importance on its ability to impact future endeavours - an individual's opportunities, goals, potential. The two definitions are not, however, two mere paraphrases of the same ideas. Notably, while working with "printed information" is clearly the crux of the OECD/HRDC literacy, ABC LL's definition leaves space for a collection of skills

that places reading alongside communicating and engagement. The two definitions, while similar, describe a literacy that has two very different scopes.

While there are risks to including multiple definitions, there are benefits to it as well. Whether gamble or boon, defining literacy in multiple ways in an interesting and honest way of approaching the multiplicity that exists within literacy discourse itself.

The benefits of including a second definition stem from its cited authors: the OECD and HRDC. There are a few potential benefits to associating one's organization with an international body, especially when one is a literacy organization and the international body has been and continues to be actively engaged in large-scale international literacy studies. Referencing the OECD associates ABC LL with that international authority, legitimizing its own definition by virtue of their similarities. The resulting repetition of similar ideas, and in such quick succession, also serves to emphasize those very similarities. The two definitions provide reiteration through echo as they declare literacy's role "at home, at work, and in the community," and in the future self-improvement and development of literacy individuals.

The inclusion of two definitions is risky nonetheless. While ABC LL may benefit by associating itself with the OECD, it also risks diluting the power of its own definition by displaying the differences between the two. The pairing may be a gesture of respectful disagreement, one that acknowledges their differences but does not apologize for them. The inclusion of OECD/HRDC's definition also prompts the question of which definition informs ABC LL's

programming. There can be no conclusive finding here, as ABC LL offers no explanation for, or comment on, the inclusion of OECD/HRDC's definition.

Benefits and gambles aside, the inclusion of two definitions is undoubtedly a reflection of the cacophony present in literacy discourse today. It makes very clear that specific meaning cannot be assumed when one is working with literacy: the concept is redefined and rephrased by each organization or individual who uses it. ABC LL demonstrates literacy as a contentious topic, as a word whose meaning is not fixed and cannot be assumed.

Not only does ABC LL include the OECD/HRDC's definition of literacy immediately below its own, but it goes on to define two literacy varieties: life literacy and financial literacy. It portrays literacy as one in a set of stacking dolls: just as there are smaller, more specific versions of literacy, there are also larger incarnations that encompass greater more expansive domains. The incorporation of multiple literacies allows for programming that may not clearly align with ABC LL's definition of generalized literacy. It also emphasizes areas that are of particular importance to the organization.

ABC LL defines life literacy as both "the literacy skills you need to live your life and the new skills you need to acquire throughout your life" (ABC LL, 2011d). Life literacy therefore encompasses and exceeds even the broad definition of literacy used by ABC LL. And unlike literacy, life literacy is rooted in necessity. In ABC LL's (2011a) definition, the skills that constitute literacy are framed as prerequisites to very particular things ("understand[ing] what you reading, communicat[ing] with others and engagin[ing]..."). In the HRDC/OECD definition

(ABC LL, 2011a), literacy is similarly presented as tied to particular, albeit broader, activities (“to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential”). Life literacy is also framed as a prerequisite, but its definition is framed to eliminate any notion that it could be an elective acquisition. It emphasizes the verb “to need,” not in the context of achieving or completing an action, but in order to live one’s life.

Within a curriculum framework, life literacy seems impossible to teach, as “the new skills you need to acquire throughout your life” are, to a large degree, unpredictable (ABC LL, 2011d). Presumably, the skills demanded by one individual’s life will differ from those of another. More broadly, as technology continues to advance and incorporate itself into the workplace and everyday communications, the skills that the future requires may not yet be widely known or even conceived. The ins and outs of internet searches and e-mail were not part of classroom lessons 20 years ago. Faced with the impossibility of teaching skills required by uncertain futures, curricula interested in promoting or developing life literacy must focus on generalized literacy as well as adaptability, preparing learners to engage in lifelong learning in order to keep pace with unforeseeable change.

Financial literacy, by contrast, is one of the sub-categories of literacy, like computer literacy, health literacy and media literacy, that has worked its way into dominant discourse. The fact that ABC LL would reference only one speaks to the value that the organization assigns to the particular skills associated with financial literacy. ABC LL defines it as a combination of knowledge, skill and confidence.

Confidence comes up earlier in ABC LL's (2011a) general literacy definition: literacy is "the skills to [...] engage fully and confidently in life's activities and opportunities." According to ABC LL, it is confidence that allows the application of knowledges and skills that are otherwise dormant. Confidence can be conceived of in two different ways: as the result of practising a skill, applying a knowledge, and reliably achieving a desired result; and as the result of self-assurance and belief in one's worth and value. ABC LL does not reference critical literacy, but its inclusion of "confidence" into its literacy definitions is reminiscent of Freire's emphasis on literacy education as anti-oppression and pro-liberation. According to ABC LL's framework, the higher one's literacy level, the greater one's ability to succeed and thrive in society.

Also of interest is the fact that ABC LL is the only organization under analysis that defines illiteracy. FC, not using the term, could not be expected to define it, but it is not uncommon for illiteracy to be left undefined by anything but its opposition to literacy, as seen in WLC's website. ABC LL, however, uses illiteracy very briefly, dismissing it as soon as it describes it. ABC LL argues against the usefulness of the literacy/illiteracy binary when it writes, "There are very few people who are 'illiterate,' meaning they cannot read at all" (ABC LL, 2011c). The quotation marks around the word visibly alienate it from the rest of the sentence, marking it as separate even as ABC LL frames it as inapplicable to the bulk of Canada's population, of which we must assume ABC LL is writing. Rather than work with terminology that applies to a "very few," ABC LL prefers to use literacy as a gradient in which individuals who struggle with reading comprehension are those with low literacy.

The switch from literacy/illiterate binary adjectives to the noun-based phrasing of having a certain literacy level is important. To be literate or illiterate appears absolute: it is part of one's self - one's identity and reality. By contrast, to have a certain literacy level is much less dramatic or essentializing. It also acknowledges the existence of individuals whose skill levels fall between illiterate and literate.

ABC LL's literacy is most notable for its multiplicity: its double-definitions and its supra- and sub-categories. Although so many definitions complicate efforts to clarify literacy, they are an honest reflection of the myriad definitions in current use and allow for a wide range of programming and investment opportunities. ABC LL is nonetheless comfortable with several aspects of the conventional notion of literacy. While ABC LL leaves space for multiliteracies, it does not challenge the superiority of reading and writing.

This chapter has explored the ways in which three Canadian literacy organizations define and discuss literacy on their websites. Taken together, they can provide insight into current Canadian literacy discourse, including what theories are established in practice, which are more tentatively incorporated, and which remain exclusive to the theoretical realm. The next chapter discusses the Canadian Bill C-401's own treatment of literacy, and frames it alongside the previous analysis of FC, WLC, and ABC LL. The four divergent literacies are taken together in an effort to clarify what exactly makes up literacy discourse in Canada.

Chapter Five

Clarity in the Cacophony of Canadian literacy discourse

So far, this thesis has examined contemporary literacy theory and explored its relationship to three national literacy organizations in order to get a sense of Canadian literacy discourse today. Based on what Canadian literacy organizations are saying about literacy, what space is made for a Canadian literacy policy to do the same?

Bill C-401

Defunct as of the election in May of this year, Bill C-401 progressed only as far as its first reading in Parliament, despite being introduced in 2009 and 2010 in two different parliamentary sessions. As Mario Silva, the author and champion of this private member's Bill, did not retain his parliamentary seat in the last election, it is unlikely that Bill C-401 will move beyond parliamentary archives. That said, Bill C-401 marks a precedent for how a future Canadian federal government might approach a national literacy policy. It also indicates that there is federal interest in literacy.

As a Member of Parliament's policy proposal, Bill C-401 is written to a different audience than that of a national literacy organization's website. Bill C-401 must sway politicians, not an awkward combination of potential donors, participants, volunteers, and members of the media simultaneously. It might expect a different reception from its audience, as well: as the textual instigator of future policy rather than descriptive text on a website, Bill C-401 must expect

critical focus on its wording and the implications thereof. It is also worth noting that, as a Bill in its first reading, Bill C-401 would have been subject to opportunities for revision; it is perhaps best conceived as a draft.

Bill C-401 describes literacy as follows:

- “... literacy is a prerequisite for social and economic development and should be recognized as a basic human right” (Silva, 2009, p. 1).
- “‘literacy’ means the ability to read, write, speak, understand and calculate in a language at the level necessary to function in the community, the workplace and the home” (Silva, 2009, p. 2).

Bill C-401 describes illiteracy as follows:

- “... illiteracy facilitates and perpetuates the economic stagnation of those whom it affects, which will in turn severely impede Canada’s ability to maintain its position as an innovative and competitive world leader” (Silva, 2009, p. 1).

Analysis

Bill C-401's definition of literacy contains echoes of what we have already seen: it ties literacy to social and economic success, and references the community/workplace/home as key environments in which literacy comes into play. Yet it also contains nuances not addressed in the earlier literacy definitions. Not only does Bill C-401 list the specific skills that constitute literacy, it also marks literacy as specific to a particular language.

Although Bill C-401 incorporates the home/workplace/community trinity into its literacy definition, unlike FC and ABC LL it does not refer to literacy as one's ability to "engage fully" in those three spaces. Bill C-401 avoids the term "engagement" completely and opts for the more concrete and measurable phrasing of "at the level necessary to function." "To function" has none of the vagueness of "to engage with," but neither does "function" have its sense of agency or self-driven activity. "To function" speaks of practicality and the meeting of needs, which is unsurprising in a Bill that hopes to result in problem-solving policy creation. If something functions, it works, and, to borrow a colloquialism, if it ain't broke, why fix it? This Bill is not concerned with those whose literacy skills do not impede their ability to function in society, and as such the word choice seems apt.

One's functionality is, however, a relative term: one can function well or poorly in a situation or an entire area of one's life, and how well one functions can influence the degree to which one is able to succeed, whether that be in one's home/work/community. Similarly, to return to Bill C-401's phrasing, "the level [of skills] necessary to function" will change alongside one's community/workplace/home and one's role therein (Silva, 2009, p. 2). Bill C-401's language portrays as static what is clearly evolving, context-dependent and individual-specific.

It is notable that Bill C-401's literacy relies on speech (Silva, 2009, p. 2). Though listed after the ability to read and write, its inclusion in the definition of literacy is nonetheless an important gesture that reframes spoken and written communication as related, rather than in opposition to

each other. It also bodes well for a focus on dialogue across difference, as dialogue is more closely associated with acts of speech than acts of writing.

Bill C-401 also includes “the ability to [...] calculate” in its list of literacy components (Silva, 2009, p. 2). If literacy incorporates numeracy, then it relates to numbers as well as words. In this framework, financial literacy is no poor cousin to literacy, but rather a key component of literacy itself. This conflation has implications for funding and curriculum content, but also for theory: it is perhaps worth considering similarities between the ways in which we communicate with language and the ways in which we communicate with numbers. Do numbers shape our world in the same way, or related ways, as words do?

The pragmatist may say that numbers can have an even greater effect on our realities than can words in that numbers are much more easily associated with money. To be “good with numbers,” for example, is easily conflated with to be “good with money.” In the current political and economic climate, economic health and stability are trump. Thanks to substantial, if not uncritiqued, literature tying higher literacy rates to stronger economies and more resilient workforces, policymakers are in a good position to push literacy investment as an economic investment.

Bill C-401's literacy is language-specific: it refers to one's “ability to read, write, speak, understand and calculate *in a language* at the level necessary to function in the community, the workplace and the home” (Silva, 2009, p. 2; my emphasis). Those three words are no casual addition to the Bill's definition of literacy. For one, they ensure that this definition works to

equalize the hierarchy that exists between languages. According to Bill C-401, it is inaccurate to label an individual who can function effectively in a Mandarin and Cantonese environment as illiterate because he or she cannot read or write in English. In this way, the Bill C-401 definition argues against the common conflation of literacy with skills in a country's dominant or official languages. Such a framework requires that one's literacy be language-dependent, existing within the context of the language(s) required to function in a particular community, workplace and home environment.

This language-specific perspective of literacy poses interesting challenges for those interested in collecting the literacy statistics of a population, such as Canada's, in which multilingualism is both common and encouraged. How is one to determine how literate a community is, or how many literate individuals it contains? Instead, Bill C-401 establishes a framework in which one must ask, "How literate is this community in English? And how literate in French? And how literate in Lebanese?"

Clarity in cacophony: a general summary of Canadian literacy discourse

While FC, WLC, ABC LL and Bill C-401 each incorporate aspects of the literacy theories discussed in Chapter Three, other theories are omitted completely from their definitions and discussions of literacy. Notably embraced are notions of literacy as a tool and as a social construction, while more cautiously incorporated are literacy's multiplicity and its relationship to adaptability. Yet left almost completely unacknowledged by all three organizations is literacy's

relationship to difference and power. While the integration of certain theories into practice is encouraging, other theoretical omissions are unsurprising in some cases and alarming in others.

Though Bill C-401 does not present literacy as a tool, all three organizations incorporate this aspect of literacy theory. Whether specifically, through word choice, or tacitly via emphasis on an individual's personal agency, each organization's definition and description of literacy gestures towards the notion that it is the literate individual, rather than literacy programming or literacy itself, who creates change. They do this to varying degrees, of course: WLC may call literacy a "tool," but it does not frame it neutrally and attributes everything from democracy to freedom literacy, as opposed to literate individuals. FC emphasizes the purpose and intention behind literate acts and ABC LL's multiple definitions stress literacy's mutability in the face of various tasks and challenges. It seems, however, that all three organizations focus literacy around the individual learner: the user or practitioner of literacy. Literacy is largely framed in terms of its importance to the individual. This framework is beneficial because it empowers the literate and learners of literacy by focusing on their capabilities, goals and everyday activities. Literacy, then, is less about what might be prescribed by a particular program or curriculum; it derives its meaning from the individuals who use it.

It is also encouraging to see the socially-constructed view of literacy so thoroughly incorporated into literacy conceptions; each organization and Bill C-401 adopt this approach to literacy. FC, ABC LL and Bill C-401 relate literacy to one's home, workplace and community, leaving space for literacy to manifest itself differently according to the environments in which one moves and lives. While WLC does not refer to multiple environments in its literacy definition, its

dramatically different programming between its Canadian and international operations demonstrates an awareness of and commitment to the ways in which literacy functions differently in different locales. These allusions to literacy as a social construction speak to a bottom-up approach that, like the instrument model of literacy, privileges participants over programming. They validate non-traditional literate practices and work to make fluid the hierarchies inherent to literacy by complicating what constitutes literacy in any particular place.

FC and ABC LL leave space for multiliteracies in the sense that their definitions gesture at skills required to engage in work/home/community, which can plausibly include adeptness in domains of communication exterior to that of reading and writing. They, like WLC, nonetheless privilege reading and writing and the printed word as the realm most relevant to literacy. Bill C-401 is the only one to specifically list multiple skills, and its position as a parliamentary Bill rather than an organization website may explain its solitary position regarding multiliteracies. It is difficult to fault the literacy organizations for grounding themselves in the conventional notion that makes their cause recognizable to their donors and participants. That multiliteracies are not advertized specifically may speak to the riskiness of embracing a theory that has not, at this point, infiltrated Canadian coffee table conversation. Literacy remains rooted in the ability to read and write print material. Diverging too far from this model may weaken a literacy organization's perceived ability to "fix" the problem of illiteracy or even to improve the levels of literacy in a population. It may also alienate potential participants who are specifically interested in improving their reading and writing abilities, or even donors for whom reading and writing is a cause of choice. A more explicit endorsement of multiliteracies, perhaps, cannot be expected by literacy organizations without the support of provincial and territorial educational systems, bodies or

government, or the media, to mitigate the risk. The unspecified nature of the “skills” that FC and ABC LL attribute to literacy, however, may be a gesture of cautious generosity towards the notion of multiliteracies. Though FC and ABC LL remain grounded in print-based literacy, their definitions are open enough to allow for programming that teaches or encourages other types of literacy.

Perhaps to be expected, none of the three organizations are comfortable with a definition that acknowledges or critiques the power relationships that literacy definitions create. While anticlimactic and even disappointing when one considers the amount of critical attention currently given to literacy and power, it is also unsurprising when one considers the position from which Canada’s national literacy organizations are speaking. As charitable organizations, they are not in the business of critique: they work to solve tangible problems. In this way, discussions of power relations propagated by literacy discourse is theoretical in the negative sense, overly abstract in comparison to the practicality of immediate problem solving. It is also dangerous for literacy organizations to frame themselves as implicated in a negative power structure, when their organizational viability relies on being perceived as a solution. Bill C-401, as a part of Canada’s power structure, is on the one hand in an exceptional position to challenge the power dynamics at play in literacy discourse. The fact that Mario Silva was a Liberal Member of Parliament and thus a member of the opposition, however, may have affected the efficacy of such a critique, or jeopardized the Bill’s ability to pass through Parliament.

Nonetheless, each organization and Bill C-401 take their own strides towards mitigating the power structures that literacy discourse creates. Efforts by each organization to frame literacy as

a tool, as previously discussed, contribute towards empowering both literacy learners and untraditional literacies, both of which destabilize traditional hierarchies of power. The mere fact that ABC LL and FC distance themselves from illiteracy weakens the binary, and FC's philosophy of learning indicates an effort at equalizing traditional classroom power dynamics. Bill C-401's language-specific literacy uproots the notion that one's degree of literacy is defined by one's proficiency in a country's dominant language. Their position as non-profit organizations, or as a private member's Bill from the opposition, may put them in an awkward position for explicit structural critique, but it does not restrict them from more subtle manoeuvres to subvert the power relations of literacy.

While glazing over literacy's relationship to power dynamics may be understandable, the literacy organizations' omission of difference's importance to literacy is startling, especially considering the increasingly multicultural nature of Canada's population. Each organization does take literacy as a social construction, which implies literacy's use differs between individuals and communities, but the fact remains that none of them refer to cross-cultural communication or to dialogue. The closest the organizations come to acknowledging difference is the WLC domestic program that addresses global citizenship, but that program is problematic on its own and may or may not involve or emphasize dialogue across difference. For literacy organizations to ignore both the necessity of communication across difference and the skills required to do so, also ignores the context in which the bulk of Canadians live and work today. As with multiliteracies, FC and ABC LL's talk of the skills needed to work in the environments of home, work and community leaves space for dialogue and communicating across difference. Bill C-401 touches

on dialogue across difference in its inclusion of speech in its list of literacy skills; it lacks any specific reference, however, to the increasing importance of cross-cultural communication.

Chapter Six

Where We Stand

Between FC, WLC, ABC LL, and Bill C-401, it is clear that some literacy theory has infiltrated into Canadian literacy discourse. Future Canadian literacy policy is in a good position to capitalize on the advances already made, such as increased normalization of the instrument model of literacy, and literacy as a social construction. It will have to work, however, to reframe literacy as related to difference, dialogue, and relations of power. The Canadian literacy organizations examined in this thesis do not allocate much attention to communication across difference, and are not well positioned to address literacy's inherent hierarchies of power. A Canadian literacy policy, however, is an opportunity to capitalize on under-utilized literacy theory and research. Its position as government-endorsed legislation allows federal policy to break from convention in ways unsafe for donor-based non-profit organizations. Bill C-401 has already done substantial work in its definition that portrays a language-specific literacy that depends on skills not conventionally associated with literacy, such as speech and numeracy. Future policy, however, could and must go further.

Further Research

While this study's textual analysis offers a beginning, interviews with organizational staff, educators and program participants regarding their views on literacy would add a human element to further research on Canadian literacy discourse. What people are writing about literacy is one thing; what they are saying about it may be quite another. Interviews would also provide an

opportunity to incorporate the views and voices of Canada's low-literate, which were absent from this project.

The analysis of national literacy organizations should be complemented by further exploration of the ways in which Canadian provinces and territories define and discuss literacy. What do Ministries of Education say, for example, and how does one's region affect the way in which literacy is interpreted? Especially interesting would be an exploration of the influence of their varying official languages, which range from English in Ontario and French in Quebec to English, French and Inuit languages in Nunavut. An expanded study of this nature will better inform a national policy that aspires towards reflecting the role of literacy in all areas of the country.

As addressed in Chapter One, this thesis does not explore the ways in which literacy is conceived in Canada's francophone community. Further research into Canada's national francophone literacy organization, La Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français, and exploration into the nuances of literacy in a nation with two official languages, is essential to any comprehensive study of Canadian literacy discourse. Similarly, albeit more ambitiously, further research might explore the various ways in which Canadian's First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities engage with literacy in English, French, and aboriginal, Inuit and Métis languages.

Recommendations

My research has led me to conclude that in order to promote a literacy relevant to Canadian society today, future attempts to create a national literacy policy should strive towards the following:

- Commit to unambiguous terms and meanings. Future policy should continue to make clear what it supports, what it aims to improve, and who it endeavours to help.
- Work against the literacy/illiteracy binary by embracing more specific terminology like low literacy.
- Complicate international literacy surveys and their statistics by acknowledging their critics when using international statistics as evidence and support.
- Acknowledge, or continue to leave space for, multiliteracies.
- Abandon the health/illness vocabulary when discussing literacy and illiteracy. Literacy is not about the health of the population, and it is dangerous both to label individuals as ill/infectious/less than, and to frame literacy as a cure.
- Focus on communications across difference. Literacy should be presented as involving working and speaking with others.

Challenges

The creation of a national literacy policy in Canada will be a challenge for policymakers, especially if it is to be a progressive and empowering policy. Paulo Freire's critical literacy, for example, and other progressive views of literacy that break with convention and critique

established power relations, are not a simple sell to policymakers, who work to appease both government and citizens. Policymakers interested in working towards an empowering view of literacy, then, must be willing to take risks, stand by their commitments, and provide detailed and convincing arguments to justify their unconventional approach to literacy.

Similarly, an inclusive Canadian literacy policy should be informed by all Canadians, regardless of literacy level. The means by which individuals participate in policy tends to rely on literacy levels, however, whether they be the reading skills to comprehend a notice of consultation, the writing and computer skills to compose an e-mail to a politician or civil servant, or the critical literacy skills to see policy as a re-writeable aspect of reality. Future policy will have to look for ways to empower and incorporate those with low literacy.

The demographic makeup of Canada poses its own challenges. The variety of languages present in Canada, let alone its two official languages and many indigenous languages, further complicate how literacy can be approached while also being comprehensive and inclusive. Canada's multicultural nature combined with its economic involvement in the global knowledge economy indicate that an emphasis on dialogue across difference would be useful in a literacy policy, yet there is no strong precedent for this in the data analyzed in this thesis. To be reflective of and relevant to Canada's population, future policy must address the country's diverse languages and cultures.

Having no Canadian precedent is an additional challenge, as a future literacy policy will not be able to learn from the lessons of former policy. Yet if precedent cannot guide this new policy, then

neither can it inhibit it. An inaugural policy is well placed to take advantage of the advances made, among others, by national literacy organizations and former Bills, and establish literacy in Canada as a nation that is empowering and practical for Canadians.

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