Literacies for Learning in Further Education

The Focus of the Study

The literacy practices in which students engage are crucial resources for enhancing learning outcomes across the full range of the curriculum and, as they develop, are generic to emergent learning in the life course. This research focuses on the use, refinement and diversification of literacy practices as a student participates in a Further Education (F.E.) course. We define literacy practices as reading, writing and talk with, through, and about texts. Such practices involve particular capabilities of literate people that enable them to construct, interpret and inter-relate a wide range of texts. By 'text' we refer to any object that conveys meanings, even in part, through written language. One of the emergent requirements upon the literate person is the capacity to work with a range of new types of text *and* in different modalities – both visual and aural and in combinations of both (as this picture illustrates).

Figure 1: New Technology and Literacies

Diverse texts and diverse modes of exchange are becoming increasingly complex and increasingly part of everyday use. This study focuses upon those literacy practices – the knowledge and capabilities they involve and the texts and modalities they address – which support learning across the F.E. curriculum. We are not concerned with the learning of literacy as a basic skill, but with the diverse *literacies* that students may bring to their learning and those that their learning requires; with the diversity of practices through which positive learning outcomes will be supported and developed in a range of subjects and at a range of levels.

Figure 2: College Learner Development Centre

We will focus upon the interaction between informal vernacular literacy practices grounded in for example family:

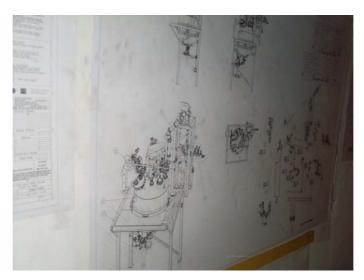**Figure 3: Study Bedroom**

or workplace:

Figure 4: Technical Drawing

and those practices entailed in the more formal institutional context of post-compulsory education and training in F.E. colleges. The research will be undertaken in F.E. colleges in England and Scotland to account for diversity in learning contexts, college curricula, student populations, and related diversity in literacy experiences. We will investigate the interface between: (i) the existing informal literacies that people may bring with them to support their learning in a variety of courses across the curriculum; (ii) the informal literacies that people control but which are not engaged in their more formal learning and the reasons why this occurs; and (iii) the literacy practices required in a representative range of courses in the F.E. context. Such interaction is at the heart of access, inclusion, retention and attainment in post-school learning opportunities and policy goals of supporting learning in the life course. The research will directly address the perceived gap between student achievement and the demands of the curriculum by investigating the interpretation, construction, and relating of texts – and the experiences, knowledge and capabilities that underlie these – as highly formative for, and integral to, learning outcomes during F.E. study and beyond. A major objective will be to uncover actual and potential overlaps and connections between sets of literacy practices that generate what can be described as two-way or 'border' literacy practices – practices which are hybrids of both informal and formal literacies. The purpose is to identify, with colleagues working in F.E. and their students, those 'border literacy practices' that can positively mediate between the students' everyday life and their learning in the F.E. context.

Border literacy practices occur in fluid, in-between spaces when someone is using certain text types, practices and capabilities in ways that overlap with, link to, are generic to, or provide foundations for another practice or practices in another context and/or for other purposes. For example, an unemployed man in late forties, with poor educational experience, describes himself as 'semi-literate' in a front room where, behind him, is a shelf full of copies of a monthly permaculture magazine. In a small garden and greenhouse he experiments with permaculture and he also goes to permaculture sites and meetings and talks with people. He keeps 'thinking about' doing a course in horticulture offered by his local F.E. college, but is nervous about this because of his bad educational experience and record. Border literacy practices are practices within his experience which have the potential to interrelate with the requirements of the course.

Rationale for the Research

Policy goals of increasing and widening participation in post-compulsory education and learning for the life course have resulted in a very diverse student body and provision of a wider range of learning opportunities. Our on-going consultations with colleagues working in the F.E. sector have identified concerns relating to access, retention and attainment. They have expressed strong interest in ways of integrating students' prior and informal learning into pedagogical practice and affirm that students' experiences and capabilities in the uses of literacy are pivotal in such integration.

The study is set in a context in which there is significant underachievement against current literacy demands in society, particularly among people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with poor educational experience, or with low levels of English. A recent survey of 1500 Scottish employers, for example, revealed that the majority identify the need for skills in ICT and literacy-based communication as the most significant requirements upon new employees and believe that current skill levels in these areas are generally lower than required. However, similar surveys of people of working age have revealed that the majority believe they have sufficiently high levels of literacy to be able to undertake their jobs. Furthermore, many respondents to such surveys do not see themselves as moving to positions in which demands upon their capabilities in ICT and literacy-based communication are greater. In a context when there is a growing shortage of skilled and professional people throughout Britain, people's self-assessments of their literacy capabilities appear to be grounded only in their present circumstances and therefore inappropriate for future mobility.

This project seeks to complement and inform a range of initiatives in both England and Scotland to enhance the attainment of literacy as part of the agenda for the improvement of 'basic skills', 'key skills', 'core skills', 'core competences', or 'learning to learn'. These initiatives are focusing on the induction of people of all ages into at least 'functional' literacy and numeracy. Embedded in such initiatives as Curriculum 2000 in England and Higher Still in Scotland and the frameworks for NVQs and SVQs is a focus across a range of subjects at different levels upon communication skills, computer literacy, and literacy-dependent transferable skills. By focusing upon border literacies and capabilities in using literacies that are generic to emergent literacy demands in the life course, this project addresses literacy-based practices that can enhance learning in the widest sense.

Current Theory and Research in Literacy

The standards frameworks associated with post-16 education have been criticised for relying on an under-researched and under-theorised understanding of literacy as a fixed set of skills. Literacy has tended to be defined as a set of technical skills developed independent of the context of learning and the subjects being studied and open to codification into standards and levels of achievement. Policy and intervention have, to date, focused upon this autonomous model of literacy in which links are assumed between measurable norms of literacy acquisition and employability. This orientation has displaced those informal vernacular literacy practices that people undertake daily by assuming a deficit at the level of skill, particularly on the part of low achievers. It also displaces the development of such practices as

the foundation for refinement in literacy practices that may be of particular benefit when interacting with literacy demands of formal learning. While pedagogic practice in F.E. may be based on a more complex understanding of literacy, there remains a need for research to document such pedagogy and its beneficial interface with both vernacular literacies and its impact upon the development of emergent literacies in the wider society.

Current theory and research on literacy has taken a number of directions that challenge a narrow technical skills perspective and which, in particular, address changing literacy demands and practices. The concept of 'multiliteracies' refers to the growing plurality of texts that circulate within culturally and linguistically diverse societies and to the growth and diversification of types of text associated with both multi-media technologies and with mass popular culture. Information and communication technologies imply new possibilities for learning which have been a major focus within F.E. and elsewhere. However, technically mediated learning generates new demands upon our interpretation and use of digital rhetorics. In the context of globalisation, access to emergent and diverse literacies implies changes in what it means to be a literate person in a democratic society. Challenges of the information age, the knowledge economy and globalising processes, including the increased mobility of both people and educational opportunities have a direct impact upon both students and staff in F.E.

Recent studies of academic writing in learning contexts have identified the consequences for identity of participating in culturally alien institutional and disciplinary discourses. They also reveal that students have to grapple with new literacies in the crossing and mixing of genres (i.e. of conventions for writing) as they move from course to course. To date, these studies have largely focussed on Higher Education: the parallel formation of disciplinary and professional identities through emergent literacy practices remains to be explored within F.E. One such example was a one-year M.Sc pilot project funded by University of Stirling and SFEU was carried out in a Scottish Further Education College. This project investigated students' literacy practices within a variety of contexts.

Informed by methodologies derived from applied linguistics and social anthropology, 'New Literacy Studies' conceptualise literacy as a set of social practices located in the context of social relations, and situated within broader community or organisational goals. There is growing evidence from such studies that people engage in a remarkable diversity of literacy practices in family, peer-group, work and community settings. Furthermore, people who manifest low levels of literacy against standardised criteria also reveal a repertoire of literacy practices that, whilst being neither recognised nor explicitly called upon in certain educational contexts, reveal levels of activity and sophistication that can provide the foundation for life course learning in both informal and formal settings.

The Research Questions

1. What kinds of literacy practices - their contexts, textual means, and outcomes - are undertaken within family, community, workplace, popular culture, and other informal settings by those participating in F.E.? What knowledge and capabilities do such vernacular practices call upon?

2. What are the literacy demands and their underlying knowledge and capabilities that are related to successful learning in representative areas of the F.E. curriculum - including planned work/professional placements?

3. What is the nature of the on-going interaction between students' informal literacy practices and those institutional practices required during the teaching and learning of curriculum subjects?

4. What are the underlying dispositions, knowledges, and capabilities that enable students to negotiate literacies across formal and informal activities and settings?

5. What is the nature of the literacy practices that exemplify this negotiation thereby serving as 'border literacies'?

6. What is the relationship between such 'border literacies' and successful learning across a range of curriculum subjects within F.E.?

7. What do students and teachers see as the relationships between such 'border literacies' and emerging requirements upon literacy in the wider society beyond F.E.?

8. In what ways can the more explicit negotiation between informal and formal literacies - emerging border literacies – serve as an intervention within subjects across the curriculum thereby being engaged by teachers and students with the objective of enhancing learning experiences and outcomes?

9. Which features of such intervention can be generalised across F.E. sites so that both policy and future curricula may be informed by these?

10. In what ways can the research potential of F.E. practitioners be engaged in partnership with experienced researchers in the investigation of students' literacy practices and in the development, delivery and evaluation of evidence-based intervention?

11. What are the capacity building outcomes from this kind of engagement and in what ways can such engagement in the particular research sites be recontextualised into other F.E. sites to achieve beneficial and sustainable research across the sector?

The Phases of the Research

Phase 1: 'Induction' (January-July 2004)
The research team will undertake a 'mapping' of literacy practices associated with learning across a wide range of courses in each college. The research in this phase will provide a context for more detailed research in Phases 2 and 3, and lead to the identification of focal curriculum areas.

Phase 2: 'Literacy practices' (August 2004-July 2005)
The research team will undertake the close specification - to a level of detail so far not attempted by research - of literacy practices that have positive effects upon learning outcomes in Further Education.

Phase 3: 'Interventions' (August 2005-July 2006)
From the findings of Phase 2, the research team will identify and trial new ways in which the Further Education curriculum can mobilise such literacy practices. This intervention will be closely evaluated in order to disseminate ways of building upon such border literacy practices more widely across the sector.

Phase 4: User Engagement, Communication and Impact (August 2004-December 2006)
This phase will run simultaneously with the others, starting towards the end of Phase 1. It will involve activities which communicate the understandings reached by the research to others for whom they might be useful – students, lecturers, managers, policy-makers and researchers.

The Aspirations of the Research

The project will investigate the inter-face between:

(i)   the existing informal literacy practices that people may bring with them to support their learning in a variety of courses across the curriculum;
(ii)   the informal literacy practices that people control but which are not engaged in their more formal learning and the reasons why this occurs; and
(iii)   the literacy practices required in a range of courses in the Further Education context.

Such interaction is at the heart of access and inclusion in relation to post-school learning opportunities and policy goals of supporting learning in the life course. The research will directly address the perceived gap between student achievement and the demands of the curriculum by investigating the interpretation, construction, and relating of texts as highly formative for learning outcomes during. A major objective will be to uncover actual and potential overlaps and connections between these sets of literacy practices that generate what can be described as two-way or 'border literacy practices'.