2. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE USE OF TERMINOLOGY IN ADULT LITERACY: A RATIONALE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the ELINET network distributed a questionnaire about the use of terminology in adult literacy work. The results of this questionnaire were discussed at an ELINET seminar at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg in January 2015. The Hamburg Seminar provided the opportunity for ELINET partners to air challenges and concerns, and share good practice, in describing and referring to adults who may have literacy needs or goals. ELINET can play an important role in guiding the wider population, including politicians, policy-makers and the media, in their use of such terminology. The seminar participants recognised the vital importance of ensuring that in our advocacy, research and practice around adult literacy we are mindful of the impact our use of language can have in shaping impressions of the needs and capabilities of adult literacy learners. We considered the range of terminology used to talk about adult literacy and adult literacy learners and agreed upon seven guiding principles that should inform our choices of language when writing or speaking about adult literacy.

This short paper explores the reasons why we need principles for our use of adult literacy terminology and examines the thinking behind the particular principles we have chosen.

1.1 Why do we need guiding principles?

As is the case with many educational topics, adult literacy is something claimed by many, including politicians and the media. This means that a great many of the statements written (or spoken) about adult literacy are made by those who, potentially, do not have great knowledge or experience of this area, and who may potentially underestimate its complexity. There are several problems with and challenges around the use of terminology concerning adult literacy needs and provision, within ELINET and beyond.

1.1.1 Precision

Much of the language that is commonly used to talk about adult literacy lacks precision and it is not always clear what is intended by certain terms. For example, what does 'low literacy' mean? What should we understand when we hear that someone 'lacks the literacy to function in daily life'? If we read that 25% of employees in a particular industry have 'low literacy skills', what does this mean? One person may read this as meaning that 25% of employees cannot read a rota pinned to a notice-board telling them which three days they work that week. Another person may take this to mean that 25% of employees are limited in their promotional prospects because they make errors with punctuating sentence-boundaries. We will each interpret such an expression in different ways, with the danger that the issues which we so much want to discuss, explore and strategize over become clouded, lost, confused, and conflated. One problem, then, is that the language we use is often not sufficiently precise. If an advocacy or policy organisation refers to the 'problem' of 'the low-skilled population,' and if by 'low-skilled' what is actually meant is adults with literacy skills below a certain level or expectation, this is an

example of language lacking precision. If we mean literacy skills, we should specify literacy skills.

We will return to this crucial issue of precision later in this paper.

1.1.2 Respect

Another problem is that the language we use can be offensive. If we use the term 'low-skilled' to mean 'low literacy' we are equating a lack of literacy skills with a lack of other skills, with a lack of any skills. This is not just imprecise, but also offensive to adults struggling with literacy, because it is communicating that they have no other skills. So, another problem with the language we use is that it can be offensive and disrespectful.

1.1.3 About whom are we actually talking?

Another challenge is the way we talk about 'people with low literacy skills' without distinguishing who these people are and how they may relate to our advocacy or policy point.   We may be talking about adult literacy learners, or we may be talking about the wider population of adults with a variety of literacy skills. We may be referring to adults who have joined provision (either voluntarily or otherwise) or to adults who may be judged as having adult literacy needs by the expectations of others. One group have made a decision (or had it made for them) to set about improving their literacy skills; the other group includes those who have made a conscious decision not to join a class because they feel that they are already able to meet the demands placed on their literacy; those who might want to join a class but for one reason or another have not yet done so, and those who have never considered, or had the opportunity to consider, formally improving their literacy. These people are clearly in different positions vis à vis their literacy and have different attitudes towards literacy use and learning.

1.1.4 Different traditions, different expertise

A further challenge is posed by the fact that adult literacy experts come from such a range of disciplinary or professional backgrounds. Some are psychologists, others applied linguists; some identify with research, others with teaching; some have focused their teaching or research primarily on children and moved towards a focus on adults, others began with a focus on adults, but have perhaps moved from adult language teaching or the broader field of adult education. This provides a real richness and is a great strength of our area, but it also means that we come from different practical and theoretical backgrounds, with different points of emphasis, different 'theoretical habits' and different assumptions. Together, this makes us stronger, but it does present the challenge that we cannot assume that we share common understandings. We need to be more explicit about what we mean. To take a specific example, one of the seven principles reiterates a phrase well-known to those who worked in adult literacy teaching in England in the 1980s, 'a beginner reader is not a beginner thinker.' Those from this tradition may feel the phrase does not need repeating, that we have 'moved on' or that it is just too obvious. Yet to others from different traditions, this phrase has a new and

important contribution to make in shaping the way we think about, and work with, adult literacy learners.

1.1.5   Working across many languages

Within ELINET we have the additional challenge of our inter-language working. We are working across many languages, with most people translating to and from other languages into our common working language of English. This makes terminology use in our context even more complicated. It is complicated because the words we each use in our various languages have come into use in contrast or in complement to other words (our lexicons about literacy and language and skills) and so are 'right' in our languages for these reasons. When we translate these into English, we find the best fit, but the best fit will not always take into account the nuances – and when others hear this word, they will not know exactly the meanings or contrasts behind the choice of this term. We need to discuss our concepts and our terms together to get more of a sense of what we mean by the words we choose. As a pan-European group of literacy expects, we need to work both with terminology in English and with terminology in the other languages of our professional lives, ensuring that our communication is clear in both. There is ample opportunity for slippages in what we think we mean and, if we are to collaborate effectively to argue for the importance of adult literacy in public policy, we should ensure that our linguistic differences do not mask conceptual differences.

2.   THE TENSION BETWEEN THE COMPLEXITY OF LITERACY AND THE DESIRE FOR PRECISION

The fact that literacy is complex is at the heart of our terminology problem. Here we will try to examine the different ways in which literacy or adult literacy is complex.

2.1   What is literacy?

The term literacy is used in different ways. The dominant contemporary UK English-language understanding of 'literacy' (in both every day and educational usage) is reading and writing (EU High Level group of Experts on Literacy, 2012) although some argue that the term 'literacy' should include spoken communication (see, for example, the English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, DfES, 2001a) Literacy has another common everyday usage, to mean competences, as in 'cultural literacy' or 'emotional literacy.' This is not normally our usage, but it is worth remembering that it exists and contributes to the sense that 'literacy' can be taken as a proxy for all sorts of intellectual and other capabilities, and the need for high 'standards' for these, within individuals or societies. This contributes to the discourses of doom or panic around falling literacy standards.

ELINET works with literacy as reading and writing (including, of course, reading and writing digitally). Literacy, in this sense, is one aspect of language and oracy is another. However intertwined these two aspects of language are, we can also recognise that

literacy (as reading and writing) is a distinct aspect of language use, different from speaking and listening, not least because it is so much more recent in human history, and not 'genetically encoded' in the same way as speaking and listening (Nation, 2006). This means that people usually need to be taught to read and write, while it is generally accepted that given 'normal' cognitive function and social environment, children develop oral language without the need for teaching. This is not, of course, to underestimate the highly linked nature of literacy and oracy, both in terms of how written and spoken language are used together in daily practices and in terms of the importance of oral language use for literacy development.

Defining literacy as reading and writing does not imply, however, a narrow, or 'utilitarian' vision of literacy (that literacy is, for example, just about being able to fill in forms or read bills), providing we acknowledge that reading and writing are both themselves immensely broad, and include a range of purposes, pleasures and meanings, closely bound up with issues of personal identity, community belonging, culture, power and desire (Duncan, 2012; Hughes and Schwab, 2010; Pahl, 2014).

2.2   The Literate-Illiterate Binary

The word 'literate' always carries with it the word 'illiterate'; these terms are bound together in a binary relationship, with the implication that one is either literate or illiterate. Many of our present day views of literacy development reflect this, including the idea that we develop literacy at school and thus 'become literate' with no further need for development. In many contexts, we have moved away from this and the term 'illiterate' with its associations of 'ignorance' or 'stupidity', is rightly shunned for being offensive. But it is also inaccurate; anyone living in a literate society uses literacy to a certain degree and so is not 'illiterate'.

'Illiteracy', like 'literacy', is always relative, based on often ill-defined expectations. As Freire (1985) pointed out , the term 'illiterate' is usually used when we expect that someone should be doing something with written language and yet we feel they are not . Hanemann (2015) has explained that when door to door surveys of literacy in 'developing' countries are conducted, people often self-report or report their families as illiterate or literate, but this presents a challenge as each person or each family is working with literacy expectations which may be different from the person in the next town, or even the person next door. For example, someone may classify herself as literate because she can sign her name, while someone else may consider herself illiterate because she stumbles with nerves when she reads aloud to a large audience.

For all these reasons, we should reject the idea of literacy as a binary concept, focussing instead on a spectrum of literacy uses, where individuals engage with literacy to different degrees, with different levels of confidence, for different purposes and with different meanings.

2.3   The spectrum and its invisible dividing lines

Replacing a view of literacy as a binary concept with a view of literacy as a spectrum may make more sense in many ways, but it still presents challenges, particularly in the world of education. If we are all on a spectrum of literacy, and our literacy is always developing, how can we talk about particular literacy needs along that spectrum? Indeed, by definition a spectrum is not limited to a specific set of values but can vary infinitely. It is not possible precisely to define the spectrum of literacy practices in which adults engage. However, education provision usually requires the establishment of large and small distinctions – levels, items, teaching points, grades - and a spectrum, by nature makes this hard.

We could try to divide up the spectrum, to chunk it, and identify those chunks with terms. For example, the EU High Level Group chooses to distinguish between baseline, functional and multiple literacy (EU High Level group of Experts on Literacy, 2012). Here we are left with 'invisible dividing lines' between what is functional and what is not, what is basic and what is not.   These dividing lines, the drive for precision, can end up reinforcing what has been called a 'deficit model' – that is, a focus on what people do not have or cannot do, highlighting ways in which individuals do not meet societal norms or expectations. The 'deficit model' is examined further later in this paper.

We could also try to talk in Levels. PIAAC and the English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum each use levels but in different ways. In the English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum levels are used to describe and organise adult literacy provision and assessment, whereas in PIAAC levels are used to classify a population. Once again, like the 'chunking,' of the EU High Level Group, both provide valuable precision; they allow us to organise and standardise our educational offer and to draw attention to levels of need within the population. But they also present challenges. For example, we need to be cautious of imagining that these levels are about 'normal progress in a year' (that an adult will or should 'move up' a level every year), or that these levels describe a person, rather than what someone can do at a particular time. We also need to remember that when we label someone as being at a certain literacy level, this is based on a specific assessment process, which may nor may not relate to the kinds of literacy practices which an individual is required to, or desires to, perform in her life. Indeed, the 'literacy' levels defined within PIAAC are in fact reading levels as PIAAC does not include any assessment of writing.

Children's reading levels have also been used to try to provide some precision along the spectrum. This is often objected to on the grounds of respect, but perhaps equally worrying is the potential to mislead. Reports that large numbers of people have a 'children's reading age of 11' cause shock and consternation and yet the majority of 11-year-olds who have attended school can and do read confidently. Many are voracious and fluent readers. The difference between a fluent 11-year-old reader and a fluent 33-year-old reader lies in vocabulary, life experience and the contexts in which they use their

reading and writing – in other words, about various individual and social development factors which make comparing the reading development of an adult with the reading development of a child highly problematic.

2.4 Literacy as contextual

One of the arguments for not using binary terms such as 'literate' and 'illiterate' is that everyone living in a literate society uses literacy in some ways and in some contexts. Here, then, we recognise that literacy is complex because it is culturally and socially bound; it is contextual. This has been theorised in different ways:

2.4.1 Autonomous vs ideological models of literacy

The work of Brian Street was central to the development of New Literacy Studies, with its emphasis on literacy as socially situated, and its ethnographic approach to studying literacy as lived experience (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Street's most celebrated contribution is his distinction between the 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy (Street, 1984; Street, 2003). Street stresses the distinction as between a model of literacy 'in its technical aspects, independent of social context' (the autonomous model) and the ideological model which sees literacy practices as 'inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in a given society' (Street, 1995 p.161).

2.4.2 Skills vs social practices

The New Literacy Studies' ethnographic, contextual approach presents literacy as social practice, that is, as something that people do in particular ways, in particular contexts and for particular reasons (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Baynham, 1995). A social practice approach (closely related to the above 'ideological model of literacy') is often placed in opposition to a skills-based or psychological model of literacy, where literacy is seen as a set of skills located within one individual, a matter of individual cognition and coordination. In teaching terms this is often seen as the distinction between seeing literacy as comprising a finite set of skills which each individual should master versus seeing literacy as embedded within different life domains, determined by power relations, and culturally and historically situated. In research terms, this opposition is between literacy as the concern of cognitive psychologists working on models of the cognitive processes of reading and writing, versus literacy as the concern of sociolinguists or linguistic ethnographers striving to better understand the literacy uses and meanings of particular domains or communities. A social practice approach is often indicated by the use of the term 'literacies' rather than 'literacy,' to stress the varied nature of literacy practices

2.4.5 Dominant vs invisible literacies

Inherent in the 'literacy as lived in everyday life' emphasis of social practice theory are questions about the relationship between literacy and formal education. Is literacy, then,

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something that 'belongs' to the domain of formal education or something that 'belongs' to our varied social interactions? Turning to compulsory schooling for a moment, is it the role of schools to train children in the 'type' of literacy that they 'should' be using in their lives? Or is it the role of schools to reflect the literacy practices, uses, and preferences of our lives?

Shirley Brice Heath's work (1983) examined the relationship between the home and school literacies of communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the USA, arguing that some children were disadvantaged at school because their home literacy practices were different from the dominant school literacies. This work raised important questions about 'whose literacy is 'school literacy'? and the extent to which differences between children's home practices (both literacy and oral language) and those 'normalised' by formal education account for a lack of success in school. Besides raising questions of standardisation, language variety and change, this raises questions of what literacy education is for. Should literacy education be aiming to teach people to read and write in certain, standard, dominant ways? Or should it reflect the existing literacy practices of various communities?

The question of the relationship between 'school' and 'home' literacies is important precisely because some 'literacy practices are in some ways submerged or invisible in relation to dominant literacy practices' (Baynham, 1995). Baynham's important contention is that existing social and cultural power relations make some practices 'invisible' while others are dominant. This has implications for how literacy is assessed and taught.

2.4.6   Literacy as multiple

The New London Group (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) called for a 'pedagogy of multiliteracies' to take into account the multilingual, multipurpose, multimodal realities of contemporary literacies. We have multiple practices (reading a newspaper is different from reading a love letter; writing a eulogy is different from writing a report as a research group) across multiple life domains, including the domains of work, school, college, faith and family (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Duncan, 2015). These practices involve different 'modes' of communication, including, for example, colour, sound, image, moving image, conventions of layout, voice (see, for example, (Burnett et al., 2014; Kress, 2003). Crucially, literacy is also multilingual, both in terms of use of different languages and the creation of bilingual texts (Mallows, 2012) and the use of different varieties, or dialects, of 'standard' languages (Hughes and Schwab, 2010; Schwab, 1994).

These practices run across the life course: they are 'lifelong', as is our literacy development (Duncan, 2014). Literacy is also life-wide, enacted differently for the various domains of our lives. We carry out multiple literacy practices, in multiple life domains and for multiple purposes. Our literacy use is multimodal, including digital modes and, often, multilingual (remembering also language variety). This means literacy is complex and evolving, and literacy development is therefore continuous and varied

(Gregory and Williams, 2000).

Here we have a view of literacy as contextual, multiple, visible or invisible, dominant or otherwise. This raises questions about how the ways we test for literacy skills relate to what people can or cannot do, or do or do not do, with literacy in their lives. It also highlights the difficulty of establishing 'functionality' - how can we possibly know what someone needs to function in their life unless we have walked in their shoes?

All of these problems and challenges (and the glorious complexity of literacy) makes terminology use very difficult. It is clear that perfect terminology is impossible. It means that we cannot aim for a list of 'good' and 'bad' terms to use. What we can do, instead, is agree on a list of principles to guide our decisions around terminology use, to make us more aware of the consequences, or advantages and disadvantages of different choices, so that we can come a little closer to communicating what we want to communicate, and so that we can stake our claim as literacy experts and work against uses of language which are disrespectful and discriminatory (because if we don't, who will?).

3.   THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for terminology that:

1. provides precision appropriate to communicative purpose

2. communicates transparently and simply, as appropriate to audience, purpose and context

3. is respectful

4. is positive (where possible avoids contributing to a deficit model)

5. recognises that people are not at levels, skills are

6. recognises that 'a beginner reader [or writer] is not a beginner thinker'

7. is appropriate to linguistic and cultural context, as well as to audience and purpose

3.1   Provides precision appropriate to communicative purpose

As noted above, the language we use to describe aspects of literacy use or literacy learning is often imprecise. The UK Government's Skills for Life Strategy started with the claim that 'Seven million people have poor literacy and numeracy skills, including around half a million more who struggle with English because it is not their first language' (DfES, 2001b p.6). This apparently straightforward sentence is imprecise in so many ways.   Apart from the difficulty of knowing how the statistics have been

determined, 'poor' literacy could imply that these seven million people have severe difficulties with all written texts, or maybe only with some written texts. Or they may only need help with particular aspects of literacy such as writing in formal genres or reading certain types of longer or more complex texts. If a person's 'poor' literacy is self-determined, further issues arise; comparability (poor in relation to what - or whom?) and confidence (I feel I'm not very good at reading and writing or I've been told I'm not very good at reading and writing).

If 'poor' literacy includes all these possibilities, how do we know when someone has moved from having 'poor' literacy to having 'good' or even 'adequate' literacy? Adequate literacy is often called 'functional' literacy, but what would adequate or functional literacy look like? What we may consider 'functioning' in terms of society, home, school and work is a moveable feast depending on your home, your school, your work and your wider life interests and endeavours. You might function very well at home without needing 'much literacy', especially if you have good support systems. The literacy needed for work or society will depend on the work you do and the society you inhabit. It could necessitate familiarity with a variety of textual genres and having the facility to manipulate them; it might equally involve literacy of a limited and specific type or only a minimum of reading and writing. Historically and geographically, people have replaced literacy skills with a host of other resources and skills (including forms of what we could call 'visual literacy,' Apkon, 2013). What might be the norm in urban areas of Western Europe is not necessarily the norm everywhere.

Numeracy, while often seen as an element of literacy (UNESCO, 2004) has also, since 1959 been seen as the 'mirror image of literacy' to mean a relatively sophisticated level of what might nowadays be called scientific literacy (Coben, 2003 p.12). Coben argues for precision in the use of the term:

> To be numerate means to be competent, confident, and comfortable with one's judgements on **whether** to use mathematics in a particular situation and if so, **what** mathematics to use, **how** to do it, what **degree of accuracy** is appropriate, and what the answer means in relation to the context.) (Coben, 2000 p.35) (emphasis in the original).

Coben is noting that the meaning of the term numerate is contingent upon context; who is using it, how it is used and for what purpose. We could say exactly the same for literacy. 'Good literacy' or 'poor literacy' are simply not precise enough terms without seeing them within a context.

To describe the complex nature of what literacy is and how it can be applied to people, we need to have the terminology to match. Each time we have to use a term, we need to think about the purpose for which it is needed and the degree of precision that is needed to fulfil that purpose. For some purposes we need less precision, but for others, a lack of precision could be misleading or dangerous, leading to statements, even policy, being made on assumptions and media hyperbole rather than evidence. The use of

precise terminology is a key element in our repertoire of tools for being able to communicate exactly what we mean to say.

3.2 Communicates transparently and simply, as appropriate to audience, purpose and context

Everyone involved in the world of literacy has an interest in communication. One of the aims of literacy practitioners is to make text accessible to everyone. Problems accessing texts are only partly to do with the reader; it is also incumbent on the writer to make their words readable. Bureaucratic organisations are often accused of producing 'inconsiderate texts': those that have characteristics that adversely affect comprehension. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland and The Plain English Campaign in the UK support 'peoples' rights to understand text and the spoken word' (NALA). They believe that everyone should have access to clear and concise information and they work with Governmental and commercial organisations to make information clear and precise. One of the advantages of writing in plain English, according to the Plain English Campaign is that 'you get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way.' (Plain English Campaign, 2009 p.2). As a way of respecting our readers, whether they are Government policy makers, practitioners, researchers or learners, it is important that our message is clear and unambiguous.

This does not necessarily mean that we should not use specialist terminology. Sometimes a specialist term is important in conveying a precise concept and other similar terms will not do. For example, the term literacies as opposed to literacy conveys the multifaceted nature of literacy practices. We can choose to use an imprecise term that everyone knows but which might not convey exactly what we want it to or we can decide to use a precise term and ensure that we explain it so that readers are aware of its meaning and its use becomes increasingly more common and more accepted by a wide range of people. In this way we can influence terminology use for the benefit of our adult literacy work.

We need to model what we see as best practice in putting our ideas across to specialists, 'apprentices' training to become specialists (i.e. trainee teachers), policy makers (not necessarily specialists in our field but experts in a different field), the wider media-reading public and, perhaps most importantly, the people we are talking about, who are working to improve their own literacy (and those not yet working on it but who might do so in the future). We must use terminology that everyone can understand.

3.3 Is respectful

It is a truism that everyone wants and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Equality starts with mutual respect. Literacy practitioners are often working with people who have been told that they are failures - unintelligent or incapable of learning with nothing to offer society. Some adults hide the fact that they find reading and writing

difficult to avoid negative comments and many have talked about how difficult it is to take the first steps back into education where they feel they were stigmatised and humiliated earlier in their lives. Literacy practitioners know that avoiding a deficit model and building self-respect is an important pre-requisite for building cultural capital and enabling learning to take place.

The Eur-alpha Manifesto, produced by writing and reading adult learners from Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Scotland and Spain, argues strongly that learners should be treated with respect and be included in decision-making about their education. 'We need to have a voice' they say, and to achieve this 'we need European policies to include our views and address our needs' (Eur-alpha, 2012). As with any group of people they want to maintain some control over the things that affect their lives and part of this is to control how they are addressed in public life and the media.

A recent blog posting about the use of terminology around autism seems equally applicable here:

> We should always seek to establish how people wish to be described – by asking them directly, if possible – and not impose external views or guidelines upon them (Pellicano, 2015).

This is of course easier said than done, but worth striving for.

Some current uses of terminology stand out because their lack of precision makes them deeply disrespectful. It is not respectful, for example, to refer to 'the low-skilled population' when what we mean is people who might have many other life skills, but who have literacy skills below an arbitrary level. The people we are referring to might speak several languages; drive a range of vehicles; be experts in agriculture, astronomy or athletics; they may hold down jobs, raise families, manage budgets, take part in civic life, including voting, trade unions, housing and faith communities. If someone cannot drive, they would feel it was offensive to call them 'low-skilled', so it is equally offensive to call someone low-skilled because they are limited in aspects of literacy. Just as we would no longer talk about 'remedial English' or 'backward learners' because these are degrading terms and focus only on deficits, we must always consider the effects of our words on those who are listening to them or reading them. We will discuss the idea of the 'deficit model' further below.

3.4   Is positive, where possible avoiding contributing to a deficit model

A deficit model of literacy sees people with limited literacy only in terms of the skills they lack or what they cannot do. It offers a view that implies they need something that only others can give them. It also implies that literacy is a matter of a matter of individual cognition and that individuals with limited literacy have something wrong with their brains or lack intelligence.

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An alternative view, such as that espoused by New Literacy Studies, argues that literacy is a social practice, something that people do in particular ways, in particular contexts and for particular reasons. From this viewpoint, what is important is what people do with literacies, not what they cannot do. Adult literacy teaching approaches based on a social practice theory would work from what someone can do, and from this, extend and develop individuals' skills and practices.

3.5   Recognises that people are not at levels, skills are

A system of levels can be seen as both positive and negative; it can situate people within a 'low' level according to their literacy skills (which ignores all their other skills) or it can promote the idea of movement along a continuum, of continual progress towards the highest levels. This, however, only relates to adults in the domain of formal learning and does not relate to those in the wider population who choose not to enter education. It is these people who are often referred to in surveys as 'low literate' or 'low skilled' (OECD, November 2013). This is presented as a relative state in terms of a norm; an expectation of what adults should be able to do in the twenty-first century i.e.   'adults' proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments – the key information-processing skills that are invaluable in 21st-century economies – and in various 'generic' skills, such as co-operation, communication, and organising one's time.' (OECD, November 2013 p.3). But we might ask who has decided that these are the skills that are needed in the twenty-first century? And against what norms and expectations?

For a teacher in a class, levels are a useful shorthand for roughly what a learner can do and what they might want to work on. It is a way of grouping learners who might want to be develop similar skills. For those researching wider populations, levels can be useful to try to understand and communicate what members of that wider population can and cannot do in terms of reading and writing. However, we need to remember that they are only a descriptor of someone's literacy skill and that levels do not and cannot describe a whole person, or their literacy practices beyond what is assessed on a particular test. Even as a label to attach to a literacy skill, a level can only characterise a sub-skill or element of learning. For example, someone might be able to read at one level but find writing more difficult and place themselves in a different level for that; or even more specifically they might be able to read some texts more easily than others, for example, computer games more than newspapers. A level can only be determined by assessment via a particular text, at a particular time, in a particular context and says little about other times, other texts in other contexts.

Literacy use is lifelong and life-wide, and literacy development is lifelong and life-wide. Just as individual literacy skills and practices change over time and across contexts, cultural literacy expectations and conventions change too.

3.6   Recognises that 'a beginner reader is not a beginner thinker'

This quote from a literacy learner (Goode, 1985), originally used in a resource pack called

'Opening Time' and now used as the strapline for Gatehouse Books1, a Manchester-based publishing company, takes up the banner for adults who might not have facility with reading and writing, but who live full and successful lives which incorporate many other skills, ideas and achievements. People learn from a variety of sources besides the written word: friends, family and colleagues; TV, radio and online media; experience of doing and watching others do things are all tried and tested methods. Literacy skills are not congruent with cognitive skills or with the potential for developing all sorts of other skills. Without literacy, one can still be outstanding as a musician, visual artist, oral poet, craftsperson, sportsperson, a community or faith leader. One does not need literacy to take part in meetings, discussions and debates; to have opinions and to take actions in support of these. We could rephrase 'A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker' as 'someone with a limited command of literacy is not necessarily someone with limited thinking or other skills'. This is a point which underpins the other principles, and should be repeated again and again.

3.7 Appropriate to linguistic context

Every language has its own lexicon which is used by practitioners, researchers and policy makers to refer to literacy. These terms may or may not have direct translations into English. Some languages will offer more precision than English for particular concepts.

What 'literate' means in one language is different from what it might mean in another. The term 'literacies' to indicate plurality is preferred by some to the singular 'literacy'. Those who use the term need to make a decision on when and where to use it depending on the context in which it is to be used. In some cases this might mean using it without definition; in others it would need to be explained and, on occasion, the writer might feel it was inappropriate to use at all. If we are conscious of our purpose and audience, we will be more likely to use language that is appropriate. Being aware of our linguistic and social context will also help us to adhere to some of the other guiding principles; it will help us to be precise in what we are saying (principle 1) and to communicate clearly (principle 2).

We cannot here determine how terms are used or defined in other languages; that is for teams within language communities/countries to work on. However, we hope these guidelines will help with their discussions as well as helping the English-speaking communities to clarify and agree terms for our own usage. This is not an instruction to use particular forms of language but an attempt to open up the discussion and invite contributions from different contexts.

4. WHAT NEXT? HOW CAN WE USE THESE PRINCIPLES?

We have argued above that we need some guiding principles for use when we talk about

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[1] http://www.gatehousebooks.co.uk

adult literacy and we are suggesting seven particular principles to use. These should not be seen as 'rules' but rather as an attempt to lead the discussion about how we define what we are doing and why we believe that certain ways of doing this are clearer and more positive than others. Starting with our key criteria of precision and respect, they could be seen as a checklist to apply to any talking/writing about literacy.

As experts in the field, we should be leading the way rather than just following others. We also need to challenge terms used by politicians and the media which we feel do not meet our guidelines. The guidelines can support us in encouraging others to use more appropriate and less offensive terms.

Everyone will need to determine their own uses as appropriate to their own languages and contexts. In our various roles as policy makers, researchers, teachers, advocates we all have to discuss literacy with a variety of others within a large range of contexts. Our audiences might be large or small; expert or non-expert; and we might be talking to those who think like ourselves or we may have to vigorously argue our case. The words we choose to use, as always, should be selected according to our particular communicative contexts and purposes.

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