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Original Citation

Tett, Lyn (2017) Resisting 'human capital' ideology? *Concept*, 8 (2). ISSN 2042-6968

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Resisting ‘human capital’ ideology?

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Introduction

Human capital was defined by Gary Becker (1975) as ‘any stock of knowledge or characteristics the worker has (either innate or acquired) that contributes to his or her productivity’. This knowledge was regarded as a form of capital because it was seen as enabling workers to invest in a set of marketable skills through gaining credentials that would enable them to increase their earnings. This commodification of human beings as a form of capital goods has been much criticised (e.g. Rubenson, 2015) but nevertheless has gained largely uncritical currency. It has been taken up by many international organisations, especially the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) as a key driver of adult learning because ‘for individuals, investment in human capital provides an economic return, increasing both employment rates and earnings’ (OECD, 2001:3).

When applied to literacy learning, this model of knowledge claims a universal relationship with economic development, individual prosperity and vocational achievement and this in turn leads to an assumption that skills-focused education is the most important. This perspective, which regards countries and their citizens as competitors in a global market place, then gets translated into measurable indicators such as those used in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (OECD, 2016). These powerful standards become taken for granted in our everyday practices, meaning that the focus of education is on the national productivity agendas that are in the interests of industry rather than ordinary people (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). In addition the narrow domains of skills-focused knowledge perpetuated by these interests become accepted as normal and so are difficult to challenge (Gorur, 2014).

Scottish policy and human capital ideology

The reports from the OECD are ordering our knowledge of literacy, particularly through the underpinning assumption that ‘learning activities help to develop workers’ characteristics, which in turn drive productivity and wage prosperity’ (Rubenson, 2015: 189). This global discourse is reflected in Scottish policy documents, where the guidance on adult literacies gives priority to the *economic* – ‘by 2020 Scotland’s society and economy will be stronger because more of its adults are able to read, write and use numbers effectively’ (Scottish Government, 2011: 2) above most other aspects of provision. Moreover, the target group is people that are unemployed or unskilled so using literacies ‘at work, [and for] gaining qualifications to progress towards a job, or a better job’ (ibid: 7) is emphasised.

This individual focus contradicts the finding from the Scottish Government’s own research that ‘increasing skills and qualification levels without a corresponding increase in demand for skills by employers may simply result in people working in jobs they are over-qualified for’ (Scottish Government Social Research, 2015: 7). It also shows that structural issues, such as the availability of employment, are neglected. The increased emphasis on employment related provision is also reflected in the distribution of funding and the systems of accountability. These systems, as Hamilton argues, have a major effect on ‘teachers’ lives including the content and structuring of their everyday activities with learners’ (2012: 174). If funding is reduced, then projects may end up competing with each other and be forced to accept lower costs and much more targeted provision that fits funders’ goals (Shaw and Crowther, 2014). As the funding for Local Authorities has been reduced, adult literacies provision is one of the areas to have the most severe cuts as overall budgets are squeezed (see Hamilton and Tett, 2012).

Yet, as Ball notes, ‘policies are always incomplete in so far as they relate to or map onto the “wild profusion of local practice”’ (1994: 10). So, whilst the funding base is shrinking and the expected outcomes of programmes are narrowing in response to the dominant human capital discourse, there is always the possibility of resistance on the

part of practitioners. These possibilities are enhanced by the ambiguity in the documents related to literacies provision. For example, the Adult Literacies guidance document (Scottish Government, 2011) emphasises the social justice argument that ‘every citizen in Scotland [should] have the literacies capabilities necessary to bridge the poverty gap, to understand and shape the world they live in, and to enjoy the rich knowledge and benefits that being able to read, write and use numbers can bring’ (p 1). On the other hand, the outcomes policy says that: ‘if an individual has a weakness in [literacies] skills, they are less likely to make an effective contribution to Scotland’s economy... This is potentially a drag on Scotland’s economic capacity’ (Scottish Government, 2012: 1).

So in this paper I investigate if human capital ideology has had an impact on practice in adult literacies programmes in Scotland through the perceptions of experienced practitioners. Earlier research (Swinney, 2012) found that practitioners saw themselves as working within a ‘funds of knowledge’ (González et al, 2005), rather than a deficit, approach in their practice. I sought to find out if the current employability focus was impacting on these ways of working. In order to explore this I interviewed, mostly by telephone, twenty people from community-based projects in Scotland’s four major cities and six other Local Authority areas in the central belt. In each of these areas I interviewed a literacy practitioner and the person that had overall responsibility for literacies. I interviewed experienced people because I wanted them to be able to reflect on changes over time. Their experience ranged from 20 years of service to nearly 6 years with the median being 12 years. The interviews lasted around an hour and discussed how the opportunities and constraints of employability-focused programmes had influenced their approaches to learners. The conversations were recorded and then analysed using a grounded theory approach. The names used in the quotes are pseudonyms.

Scottish practitioners’ views

All the respondents reported that there were changes in practice that were driven by two main issues: changes in the welfare programme that caused differences in learners’ participation, and funding reductions in Local Authority budgets that led to

involvement in externally funded projects. Emerging out of these changes was another challenge: the impact on the values that underpinned their practice.

Impact of the welfare changes

Most people highlighted the greater demands now made on literacy learners due to the changes in the welfare system that ‘have put huge pressure on Jobseekers having to use digital skills to actively seek employment’ (Emma). As a result large numbers of people that hadn’t accessed literacy services before were now being referred from Job Centres. This had particularly impacted on people with mental health issues who had been on long-term benefits because they now had ‘to apply for jobs and this is adding to their stress and their ill health’ (Denise). Another interviewee commented: ‘I feel that learners, particularly the longer-term unemployed ... are pushed from pillar to post, from agency to agency, where boxes are ticked and statistics are generated to justify funding’ (Jim).

Working with learners that were further from the labour market was also difficult because ‘there is also quite a lot of buck passing by the other sectors [such as Further Education and private providers] especially when individuals have mental health issues’ (Margaret). There was a particular impact from private providers because they ‘tend to cherry pick those learners that are nearest to achieving the specified outcomes so we can end up supporting the learners that are further away from being employment ready’ (Sheila). There were also issues arising from other professionals who had a lack of belief in the possibility of improvement. ‘This leads to inward thinking along the lines of developing a CV, job search, digital skills etc. All these are important but the emphasis needs to be more on building up people’s confidence in themselves’ (Pete).

A number of literacies services had set up systems so that this new group of learners could be more appropriately accommodated. For example: ‘we have been providing training to our front-line staff ... on how anti-social behaviour issues can be effectively defused ... and also awareness-raising sessions so that they can be more sympathetic to people in very distressed states’ (Karen). Others were working more

closely with colleagues including ‘the financial services staff who do sessions in libraries to help with benefits’ (Ann). Finally a number had ‘established pathways that enable staff to understand who to refer learners to as well as signposting the implications of the rules for claimants’ (Brian).

External funding

The participants all considered that their practice was more constrained because ‘funding cuts mean that more of our resources are being targeted at employability skills’ (Pete). External funders required different types of outcomes so ‘depending on the funding-stream, courses can be very prescriptive in content and expect learners to achieve accreditation so there are fewer opportunities for learners to develop more personal interests’ (David). Capturing employability outcomes was difficult especially where the criteria for success were the numbers moving on to other courses, or gaining a qualification or employment. This was because many participants ‘were far away from the job market and although many gained ‘soft skills’ such as increased confidence they could not be accredited and were not easy to record’ (Sue). Other funders were a bit more flexible and so: ‘any improvement in literacies or ESOL communication skills or digital skills to being able to demonstrate that people can write a CV ... or that they have moved on to accredited courses’ (Pete) could be included.

A number of interviewees had found more creative ways of delivering outcomes including making ‘use of impact statements from learners that include gains in self-confidence that are powerful ways of explaining the whole life impact that they experience’ (Ann). Staff also had to be careful about how they described their provision as one of the managers said: ‘I was anxious we might lose our family learning provision, so I pitched this as parental engagement for employability ... Crucially, this still allows us to deliver some of the initial work that is so valuable’ (Karen). For some, external funding had made it possible to develop more ‘critical literacy’ programmes that ‘developed communication and numeracy skills at the same time as involving the participants fully’ (Sue). However, such temporary funding

could generate a huge administrative burden that ‘took skilled staff away from the “front line” and meant that their ability to innovate was lost’ (Sue).

The focus on employability had also brought opportunities because: ‘we are able to offer a greater range of courses in response to the learners, many of whom see employability as their key goal’ (Callum). Many practitioners reported that they were now ‘attracting greater numbers of learners’ (Sian) but one worried that ‘we aren’t as focused on the people that are more difficult to reach because of the demand from those that are more aware of the opportunities we offer’ (Judith).

Another issue that managers had to be clear about was what could be achieved. Brian explained that: ‘for the work with young people we get an initial starting payment but if they don’t complete a training course or move on to a positive destination then we get nothing so we have to plan accordingly’. This meant that external funding had to be thought through carefully so that it did not compromise ‘the values about what good practice should look like’ (Lorna).

Underpinning values

So being clear about values was crucial and for nearly all of the interviewees’ good practice meant: ‘ensuring that the learners’ goals are at the centre of our provision’ (Kathy). A key value was ‘being focused on the assets that learners’ bring rather than their deficits’ (Jo) and many practitioners showed how they operationalized these values. For example, Gary said: ‘rather than writing CVs we build the curriculum around what the young people are interested in. That way they do end up developing their literacies skills but in ways that arise from their own interests’. Many operated from ‘a funds of knowledge’ approach so Alan, working in a project for homeless people, started off by ‘asking them about their housing issues or how they have dealt with social work so that we can use their experience. We get to deliver our outputs about being ‘employment ready’ but we start from their knowledge rather than telling them what to do and it’s so much more effective.

Similarly Sian, who was based in a family learning project, said: ‘we always work from the strengths of our learners so we start from what the parents know and ask them to share their knowledge with each other so it’s about changing attitudes ... learning how to see themselves positively again’.

So, rather than seeing knowledge as an economic commodity, most of the interviewees were focused on knowledge as a way of expressing critical opinions about the world. For example:

We discuss why they think they didn’t get qualifications when they were at school and what they think could be done about it in ways ... that put the emphasis back on the system failures. They then write about how they might change education and this helps to build up their skills as well as improving their self-esteem. This means we can hit our output targets but in a way that enables us to still stick to our social practices approach (Louise).

Good practice also involved taking time to remove barriers to help people towards becoming more employable. This meant that: ‘although our overall aim is to move young people on to positive destinations, behind that is helping them to take small steps...so they gain the confidence in what they know’ (Jim).

Working in these ways was not easy because of the time and commitment it took. In particular, staff were under pressure from the Job Centres to report on learners’ attendance but ‘we have made it clear that any referrals they make to our provision is on the basis that we will not monitor or report on learners’ attendance because it would violate our principles’ (Ann). Staff were helped to stick to their value base because of the ‘passion for the job that gives you the courage to work in this way because all your experience tells you that this is the right kind of approach that is going to help people to learn’ (Emma). They were also supported by colleagues who shared their values and trusted them ‘to make good judgements’ (Sian). However, there was still ‘a big discrepancy between the rhetoric about the value of our work and the lack of funding for it at the local authority level’ (Brian).

Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated how the policy context is dominated by the human capital discourse, especially at the international level through the statistics and reports of the OECD. Underpinning this discourse is the assumption that work of any kind is the solution to poverty, despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary. It is also assumed that people should invest in their own marketable skills and failure to do so is consequently their fault. These assumptions are reflected at the state level both through changes in welfare provision and through the focus on narrow skills for employability, leading to a deficit view of learners. At the heart of the discourse is a failure to acknowledge the structural inequalities that caused these problems.

Literacies workers have been able to disrupt this dominant discourse of deficit at the local level to some extent. A shared understanding by workers of what is good practice, and clear views of the underpinning value system has driven this alternative discourse. Staff have asserted their agency to support literacies that are based in rich and meaningful practices, and have found ways to avoid reducing the curriculum to narrow employability-related competencies. The curriculum they have offered has helped learners to develop the effective strategies and skills they already use, rather than seeing them as having individual deficits that need to be corrected. The spaces they have found in which to continue to work in the ways that they value have helped them to develop ‘a politics of solidarity based on empathy and committed engagement’ with learners (Shaw, 2017). They have been helped in taking this stand by the strengths they derive from being part of a long tradition of literacies work that places the learner at its centre (Hamilton & Tett, 2012).

Yet working in these created and creative spaces comes at a cost in terms of the effort that has to be made in simultaneously respecting the learners’ own knowledges, and satisfying the requirements of funders in delivering the outcomes they expect. Such costs are placed unfairly on the shoulders of these practitioners, who face an on-going struggle to work in the ways they value. Currently, there is a great deal of rhetoric about the value of literacies work, but little support for it. So we all – practitioners,

researchers, policy makers and funders – need to demonstrate that we are able to work in solidarity with them.

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