Global and Local Literacies: Standards and Situated Practice

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Abstract

IN THE LIGHT OF RENEWED EDUCATION DEPARTMENT PLANS FOR AN ADULT LITERACY CAMPAIGN THIS ARTICLE ADDRESSES BOTH THE RISE TO DOMINANCE AS WELL AS THE LIMITS OF A HUMAN CAPITAL OR 'BASIC SKILLS' PERSPECTIVE ON LITERACY THAT IS IMPLICIT IN SUCH PLANS. THROUGH AN ENGAGEMENT WITH BOTH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON LITERACY IN WORKPLACES, THE ARTICLE DEVELOPS AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON LITERACY AS CONTEXTUALISED SOCIAL PRACTICE, AND ARGUES THAT SUCH AN APPROACH HAS MORE CHANCE OF ADDRESSING THE DEMANDS FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT THAT ARE BEING MADE IN POLICY DOCUMENTS BOTH LOCALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY.

> Cecil Rhodes wanted to build a railroad from Cape Town to Cairo in order to subjugate the continent. Now we want to build an information super-highway from Cape to Cairo which will liberate the continent.
>
> Jay Naidoo, Minister of Communications, South African Government, 1998.

The understanding of literacy as a core basic skill that stands at

the door to rational thinking, 'higher order skills' and 'trainability' is one that still dominates policy-making and system building in educational provision across countries. It is accompanied in contemporary times by a repetitive concern in developed countries with low or falling 'literacy standards' (Graff, 1979; Freebody, 1997, 1999). In South Africa, the concern is expressed less in terms of 'standards' but in a more elementary form, as that which is either present or absent. The new Minister of Education, Kader Asmal has just recently vowed to 'break the back of illiteracy within five years', as if the metaphor was self-explanatory. In comparison, the Secretary of State for Education in the UK has said he will resign if the targets he has set for literacy levels have not been realised by 2002. In the UK the targets will be met by way of 'The New Literacy' Strategy (NLS), which sets out to raise the standards of literacy attainment in national tests in primary schools over 5 years, through detailed delineation of what teachers will have to do in terms of 'literacy teaching' (Bourne, 1999). In South Africa, recognising that he doesn't have the budgetary or personnel resources for a state-driven adult literacy campaign that has any chance of meeting his target, the Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, is talking anachronistically of a 'volunteer-driven' campaign, with a large involvement by high-school students. How many of these same high-school students in South Africa would fail the NLS tests for 'appropriate literacy levels' were they to sit them is a moot point. Nonetheless, they are expected to 'weed out illiteracy' in those spots which industry-driven Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) for workers cannot reach — where the poor, unemployed, rural and marginal people are located.

Last year the Deputy Minister of Education discussed his plans to 'fast-track ABET provision' with adult education academics at the University of Cape Town. We argued at that meeting and in an invited briefing paper (Department of Adult Education and

Extra-Mural Studies, 1998) (ref?), that the assumption that literacy is a basic skill, relatively easily transmitted by volunteers or quickly trained teachers is a wasteful mistake. A modern government should draw on available knowledge and experience that shows otherwise. A 'vaccination' approach to adult literacy provision, where a once-off intervention is intended to take care of the problem, does not work, we argued, apparently with little effect, judging by recent Ministerial statements on 'adult illiterates'.

At school level the Minister now commits himself to all children achieving 'competency in reading, writing and numeracy skills by age 9, or the end of Grade 3.' His ambitions are no less, in effect, than his UK counterpart. In South Africa, the majority of children are learning to read and write in another language (English) to their home language, as well as learning that language, as well as learning to read and write their first language. The Minister has himself pointed to the rampant inequality that characterises schooling in South Africa — rural schools without water, sanitation, electricity, telephone, library, workshop or laboratory; low teacher morale across the system; the vulnerability of learners and teachers in many schools to gang violence, drugs, vandalism, looting, rape, sexual abuse, murder; indiscipline on the part of principals, teachers, learners; irregular school hours and irregular attendance at school; the lack of effective management skills within the education system, characterised by absences of planning agendas and task performances and the presence of inefficiency and corruption. While working to change these conditions the Minister will have to work with unambitious criteria as to what constitutes 'competency' in reading and writing, if he is to meet any targets at all.

Twenty years after Harvey Graff (1979) showed up the 'literacy myth', then, policy makers and administrators in central

governments are still working with uni-dimensional notions of literacy as a (mono-lingual) free-floating basic skill, supposedly easily transmitted and inherently powerful. Beyond the imaginary walls of policy, however, the semiotic landscape is far more rugged, uneven and changing. Multiple languages and changing multi-cultures within nation states are accompanied by increasing diversity in the modes and media of communication. While the impact of the 'first wave' communicative media of cinema and television is apparent even in the poorest households, the 'second wave' media of computers and the Internet are shifting the literacy practices of others around the world, changing the mix of linguistic, visual and gestural signs that characterise social languages.

Why should such a narrow concern with literacy 'levels' and 'standards' be prevalent at policy level under these conditions? One explanation is that of the rise of 'human resources' concerns in educational planning, and the consequent lodging in policy analysts' minds of a correlation between literacy and productivity, under the impact of the 'human capital' metaphor.

Globalisation and Human Capital Development

Despite their dramatic social, economic and cultural differences, a number of countries around the world, South Africa and Australia among them, are setting up or already have in place a system of outcomes-based, assessment-driven education and provision, and the logic of these new systems is such as to marginalise conceptions of education and literacy that do not meet the system's requirements. This logic is guaranteed by the wider macro-economic discourses around 'globalisation' and the so-called new world order. Key features of 'globalisation' are commonly seen to be the increased flow of capital and goods

across national borders, intense international competition to produce high quality goods for saturated markets, massive technological changes at the levels of production and information processing, and increasingly diversifying consumer markets. Under these conditions of intense and unboundaried competition, ongoing customization and modification of products is said to help producers to maintain or acquire market share, so the 'flexible knowledge' that can plan and produce innovatively designed and marketed products or services is highly valued. The imperatives of global market capitalism are thus seen to dictate that the skilling of human resources is a critical concern of industry, government and education.

In South Africa policy-makers have the ideal of moving the pool of human resources in the country from a 'low-skill equilibrium' to a 'high-skill equilibrium' (Lewis, 1989) Post-Fordist logic reached South Africa in the later 1980s with the energetic sanction of the organised trade union movement (COSATU). Its researchers and leaders saw possibilities for the social advance of the (black) working class in the stated commitments to skill development, participatory management and workplace democratisation. Labour researchers were influenced in particular, by the Australian analyses of John Mathews and colleagues who argued for a co-operative relationship on the part of organised labour with government and capital, under the changed conditions of global competition, and the opportunities it offered. (Mathews, Hall and Smith, 1988)

Flexible Skilling

There is no doubt that the organising logic of post-Fordism has had a profound impact on performance and productivity in a limited number of 'high-performance' industries and enterprises. But beyond these it is also apparent that these discourses of 'fast

capitalism' have been profoundly imperialist, changing the social practices, identities and rhetoric within institutional life far beyond the workplace, in schooling, government, churches, universities and in adult education provision (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1997). Whether they have been helpful is another issue altogether.

This is now a familiar story: Flexibility and creativity are valued in the new flattened hierarchies of post-Fordist production units, where teamwork, collaboration, participation, devolution and empowerment are prioritised. A new emphasis is given to learning, abstract thinking, and skill acquisition. Education and training are seen to be critical for shaping productive workers, because people are assets which can be value-added. Curriculum is directed towards process skills, a stress is placed on the transferability of knowledge, the encouragement of problem-solving and the recognition of soft-skills such as interpersonal communication. These are seen to be required for the new ways of making goods for the more differentiated markets of contemporary economies.

These directions are accompanied in the discourse of outcomes-based education with a commitment to identifiable outcomes and efficiency, linked to close scrutiny by way of assessment procedures. The procedures can be best monitored in terms of quantifiable learning outcomes: grade-level test scores, certificate attainment, within a comprehensive articulated system of education and training ('a seamless robe'), including compulsory sectors of provision plus post-compulsory sectors. Terms such as *learning to learn* and *lifelong learning* capture the ambitions of the system. But there is a dearth of research that has tried to find out how successful outcomes-based assessment models are and little attempt to find out what the experiences are of people who participate in such programs.

What's Wrong with 'Human Capital' Approaches to Literacy and Education?

This paper concentrates on the assumptions about learning and skilling that are implicit here, and how they encounter literacy and language in action. It will make the case for a more situated understanding of literacy, learning and skills.

Firstly, at the level of skilling for purposes of enhancing competitiveness and production: Clearly, an economic model of education and training cannot alone explain people's success or failure in the workplace (Hull and others, 1996; Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1997). It is well known that the post-Fordist story of happy, flexibly-skilled workers participating in decision-making in flattened hierarchies is just that. Even in the hotbed of the electronics industry in Silicon Valley, California, Hull and her colleagues found both conventionally organised, hierarchical workplaces and those workplaces consciously re-organised to encourage greater collaboration, communication and devolution of responsibilities. In both types of workplace organisation, management subscribed to post-Fordist principles at a rhetorical level.

In a commissioned study of the skill-training potentials in the construction industry in the Western Cape (Prinsloo and Watters, 1996) we found that the employers' association and the national training body were enthusiastically promoting their model for skill development in the industry. This model was lifted directly from the United Kingdom. It was a competency-based, 'lifelong learning' model, which would enable workers to enter the industry with 'nothing but their health' and through a system of work and certificated training, rise to the level of qualified artisan,

or even engineer, in theory. We studied the feasibility for making this model of training operative, and found that the organisational dynamics of the construction industry in the Western Cape would guarantee its failure. The industry is a 'hire and fire' industry, with jobs of a short-term contractual nature predominating, thus undermining individual employers' commitment to sustained training of workers. There was substantial deregulation, outsourcing and sub-contracting taking place in the industry, whereby larger companies gained access to cheaper labour and shifted the risks of production to smaller contractors, who were often ex-employees of the larger firms. The sub-contractors were able to operate more profitably by employing unqualified people at below minimum-wage levels of remuneration to do skilled work. There was a clearly segmented labour market, with a smaller number of qualified workers enjoying job security and benefits with the larger companies and a considerably larger number of workers without benefits or job security, employed by the sub-contractors. 'Unemployment' was given as the most important reason for bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers and painters becoming sub-contractors, workers often being offered a sub-contract as an alternative to retrenchment. The model of training and skilling appealed to the big employers because of its status as state-of-the-art practice originating in the metropolis. But it bore no relation to the embedded practices of the industry, at least locally. The organisational dynamics of the industry were at odds with the decontextualised ideals of the policy model.

A related process can be seen to be happening at a national level. In South Africa the New Labour Training Bill sets up a system of levy deductions from industry to fund training, and 'learnership' schemes to set a context of incentives for training. But such efforts are wasted where the context of training or ABET learning is at such a remove from the social and communicative practices and authority structures of the workplaces. Following Lave and

Wegner's (1991) analysis, learning works at the level of how roles are occupied. It is a way of engaging, not a structure in which engagement takes place. The small core of highly skilled workers, secure and well paid, who are typical of 'high performance' industries generally do not need ABET — they are usually well schooled or well versed in the literacy practices of their jobs. Their work is usually carried out in 'literacy-rich' environments where they are constantly using and extending, where needed, their literacy skills. They are usually supported by short-term contract staff who do not enjoy the same security and are less likely to benefit from training. The unskilled, casualised labour that lies beyond these is not likely to have the rights and opportunities to engage in any but the most basic functions of literacy. Very many of them are likely to resist efforts to shepherd them into classrooms.

The assumption that if individuals acquire marketable skills they will be able to get back into the market, or move out of one labour market into a more rewarding and secure one, is clearly a simplistic and misleading one. So too is the assumption that the really value-added parts of production are open to relocation rather than still being retained in the metropolitan centres, irrespective of the skill-levels of respective sites.

Levels of unemployment in South Africa are frequently quoted in the national media as being between 25 and 30 per cent, with large numbers of youths reaching adulthood without expectations of work (ref?). They are statistically likely to remain jobless and poverty-stricken. If any form of educational provision can help them it should be about how they can cope with and understand the risky post-Fordist future that awaits them. 'Generic skilling' that does not try to understand the forms of learning that they undergo in their own lives is likely to be an irrelevancy for them.

While the labour movement sought to impose a worker orientated meaning and intent on to elements such as 'life-long learning', 'flexibility', 'multi-skilling' and 'horizontal and vertical mobility', in practice these elements are being linked to strategies that are undermining and limiting workers' access to education and training. (Cooper, 1998, 17) Cooper describes how the National Union of Mineworkers in South Africa participated with a mining company to conduct a basic skills audit (language and maths skills against national communication and maths standards). The outcome was 'disappointment and frustration' for the unions and 'a deep sense of bitterness amongst workers'. Workers felt they were unable to show 'what they really know' because the tests advantaged formal school-based literacy and numeracy skills and a form of oral performance that prejudiced workers who 'could perform better than they could talk'. (Cooper, 11)

This last complaint resonates with the distinction that Diehl and Mikulecky (1980) draw between workplace and school literacies. They see 'reading to know' to be what children are supposed to be doing in schools, while 'reading to do' is what characterises literacy in the workplace. (quoted in Hull et al, 1996, 200) Hull and her colleagues go on to show the limits of this distinction, in that it gives no sense of the political nature of literate activities in the workplace. To say that 'reading to do' is what people do with literacy at work, they argue, is to overlook the many different functions that reading serves when people are reading in order to accomplish a task. From a taxonomy of nearly a hundred observed functions of literacy in 'workplace events' they developed a series of meta-categories of literacy functions: Performing Basic Literate Functions; Using Literacy to Explain; Taking part in Discourses Around and About Text; Participating in Flow of Information; Problem Solving; Exercising Critical Judgement; Using Literacy to Exercise, Acknowledge or Resist Authority. They observe that in their list of literacy functions only

a small portion of these functions fall into the category of 'basic', by which they mean relatively simple self-contained tasks: copying, labeling, keyboarding, tallying. Their continuum of literacy functions expands to include categories in which the purposes that literacy serves are first more complex — using literacy to explain, taking part in discourse around texts, participating in the flow of information, problem solving — and then to categories in which literacy is more obviously connected with issues of power — using literacy in the exercise of critical judgement, using literacy to acknowledge, exercise or resist authority.

Situated Literacies

Hull and her colleagues' study illustrates how deeply implicated literacy practices are in the wider dynamics of work and social relations in the workplace. That is, learning is necessarily structured and defined by actual social relations and social practices taking place on shop floors, training sites, and other specific contexts. They conclude that 'taking part in literate activities is not so much a question of ability, than it is a question of rights and opportunities'. In other words, patterns of literacy use are generally linked to structures of authority. What this means, practically, is that skills change when authority changes. They note that it is 'still customary to talk about literacy in terms of basic skills and to urge schools, vocational programs, and adult literacy classes to teach these fundamentals.' (Hull et al, 1996, 203) But their research shows that 'this way of talking about skills misrepresents the nature of working knowledge, and leaves us with pat, inaccurate skill lists and related curricula':

> Contrary to popular opinion workers don't just need the
> basics... our argument is that a literate identity means
> being able to dip appropriately and as needed into a wide

> and deep repertoire of situated ways of using written
> language and other forms of representation in order to
> carry out a work-related activity. (Hull et al, 1996, 204).

Such studies suggest that learning is necessarily structured and defined by actual social relations and social practices on shop floors, training sites, and other particular settings. South African research has similarly begun to argue for the importance of understanding the social contexts that give rise to particular literacy practices, and the social purposes for which such skills are deployed (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996). The various case studies developed in the SoUL *(The Social Uses of Literacy)* project provide multiple examples of the ways people develop the capacities, skills or repertoire to accomplish necessary literacy-linked activities in their lives. A crucial feature of these practices is their embeddedness in particular contexts, so that what is learnt is not a disembedded cognitive or technical skill. The learner assimilates a particular social identity through the performance of contextualised social practices. This extract from Gibson's study of literacy practices of unschooled farm-workers is illustrative of just how embedded this literacy can be. She is interviewing an older, unschooled but experienced farm-worker, who is describing to her his procedures for designing and building customised wagons:

> DG: And the material you used...How did you
>   know how much you needed?
>
> MH: I may not be able to read or write, but I use
>   something I have learned in one case and
>   adapt it (pas *dit aan*) a bit to fit in another
>   case (laughs). When I looked at that first
>   wagon, I measured it and calculated how
>   much I would need to make it. Then I adapted
>   (pas *aan*) those measurements to the second

> and third and fourth wagons I made. By the second wagon I almost always ordered the correct amount of material. (Gibson 1996, 53)

The same farmworker produced a complicated labeled diagram and showed how he used it to lay, monitor and repair an irrigation system on the farm. The reading that was part of this task was embedded, and did not call on a school-acquired skill called literacy. It was thus not identified as reading. This farmworker is able to display evidence of being 'flexibly skilled'. While he has not been initiated into the so-called 'vertical discourses' (Bernstein, 1996) of school learning he has mastered a particular set of learnings. His mastery is displayed by his capacity to apply what he has learnt under varying conditions. Mastery involves the timing of actions relative to changing circumstances: the ability to improvise. It is by no means only learnt under the conditions of schooling. (Lave and Wegner, 1991)

Situated Learning of Literacy

Conceptions of literacy in technological terms that characterise frameworks of provision see it as a basic skill which serves essentially as a conduit for the accessing of meaning, which in turn is carried in the form of coded language. Language and literacy, in this view are essentially codes for *talking about* the world. The more dynamic conception of language and literacy that is being developed here and elsewhere is that they are means of *acting in* the world. (Street, 1983, 1997; Gee, 1990; Barton 1997; Baynham, 1995) Language and literacy are social and cultural practices, not second-order representations of practice. In this latter view, which is premised on the situated character of human understanding and communication, language and literacy use entail multiple participatory skills and modes of access to interaction in social life. (Wertsch, 1993) They are acquired and

used through what Lave and Wegner call 'situated learning'. Learning is situated in certain forms of co-participation, where meaning, understanding and learning are all defined relative to actional contexts. Rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place. (Lave and Wegner, 1991,14) Gee has made a similar point in relation to the 'design' features of language and literacy (their 'grammar'), pointing out that these are tied in complex ways to their functions. He identifies these core functions: 'to scaffold the performance of social activities (whether play or work or both)', as well as 'to scaffold human affiliation in cultures and social groups and institutions'. However, the metaphorical description of language and literacy as 'scaffolds' for social action perhaps draws too much of a distance between language/literacy and the action — they are part of the action itself, the way scaffolds could never be. (Gee, 1999, 7)

Learning is distributed among co-participants in this view, and is not a one-person act. What the effective learner actually learns is how to *do* practices in relational contexts. Learning is about participation in communities of practice. The learner does not acquire a system of rules and representations, but rather the ability to play various roles in various fields of participation. Freebody and Luke's typology for a favoured model of literacy provision is particularly appropriate in this context: They see literacy learning as being the acquisition of multiple competencies in the context of their social roles. (Luke, 1993) These competencies   are:

- **Coding competence: learning your role as a code-breaker/maker,** including knowledge of the alphabet, grapheme/phoneme relationships. These are necessary but not sufficient conditions for effective literacy use in a particular

social context;

- **Semantic competence: learning your role as a text participant,** which requires an awareness of how meaning is made, variably, in different social settings; an awareness of the varying, socially shaped genres of meaning-making that are operative, as well as being able to access a range of inter-textual resources that have to be brought to play to give meaning to specific texts;

- **Pragmatic Competence: learning your role as a text user,** that is, coming to know what are the culturally appropriate uses of reading and writing in a range of school, work, leisure and civil contexts;

- **Critical Competence: learning your role as a text analyst**, including a concern with how texts construct and represent the world, and how they position and construct human subjects.

Freebody and Luke make the important claim that these 'competencies' are not to be graded in terms of 'lower order' and 'higher order' skills, or taught sequentially. In schooling contexts where exclusive early attention is given to either the code-breaking aspects of literate behaviour ('phonics-centred' approaches) or the meaning-making aspects ('whole language' approaches) those children who have not learnt the other aspects of literate activity do not have a context to make sense of their learning. If they have not learnt these outside the school (usually by assimilation from their family contexts) they are often punished by the school assessment procedures for failing to display the behaviours that the school expects of them but neglected to teach them.

How does a learner transport the skills acquired in one participatory learning context to another social context? The

answer has to be that the portability of learnt skills must rely on the commensurability of particular forms of participation (Lave and Wegner, 1991). If the adult literacy class is focusing simply on code-breaking exercises, or attempting to mimic the ideal of school literacy practices of 'learning to know' rather than situating literacy use in relation to appropriate action contexts, then the learning will not be of value outside of the learning setting. Learning under these conditions can be about how to manage the learning situation, rather than developing the ability to do something in a non-learning context. At best, the individual can become expert as a learner but never actually learn the intended social competencies.

The SoUL research studied night schools at informal 'squatter' settlements and adult literacy classes in the townships and found little connection between the literacy taught there and the existing literacy practices that were already part of people's lives. It became clear that what the adult participants in the night school were doing in school was highly encapsulated, and defined by the practices of 'school' literacy. This 'Night School literacy' was insulated from the literacy practices within the other domains of people's lives and the project questioned the value of a pedagogy which focused on the transmission of disembedded literacy skills. Kell's study of teaching letter-writing in ABET classes is similarly illustrative. In class adults are being taught 'proper' letter writing practices. They themselves are part of a substantial letter-writing culture that has operated for decades amongst households linked to the migrant labour market. The conventions and practices of this letter-writing culture differ substantially from those of the 'school'. The differ in forms of address, expressions of intimacy and relationship, and even in their transmission (by hand, carried by the combi-taxis that stream back and forth, rather than by post which is thought less reliable and costly). Such practices are invisible in the night school instruction on letter

writing, which is taught as if there is nothing else besides itself, except error. (Kell, 1996; Kell, 1999)

In the UK context Bourne is concerned that the new commitment to teaching and testing 'literacy skills' might become a new medium for naturalising inequalities, by setting in place, under conditions of economic recession, and in 'post-Fordist and global market conditions, a more explicit framework which justifies differential wealth and opportunities by appealing to scales of attainment which rank and order school leavers.' (Bourne, 1999) This concern must be even stronger for the South African context: The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) emphasises certification and learning outcomes (competencies) in an interlocking grid of supposedly commensurate qualifications that are to span schooling, vocational training and the adult education system (incorporating adult literacy provision). The framework includes a national system of accreditation which is intended to allow portability of qualifications vertically across three hierarchically structured bands (general education, further education and higher education) and horizontally across fields which comprise the education and training system in South Africa. A proliferating list of 'unit standards' is being generated by standards-setting bodies who are under the control of their Sectoral Education and Training Authority. The unit standards are intended to be content-free and context-free descriptions of knowledge-skills which can be tested. The most immediately visible outcome is a massive uncertainty at the level of provision, evidence of 'teaching to the test', a 'dumbing down' of learning content, and curriculum overspecification. A similar pattern is described in Australia by Freebody:

> Educators are being required to 'teach and test' ever more diligently the more obvious, quantifiable, generalisable and thus minimal features of individualist management of written script. (Freebody, 1999,5).

Outcomes for a Situated Curriculum

It is not the concern of this paper to detail an alternative system of assessment for adult literacy learning. Suffice it to say that what would be required would be to develop assessment instrumentation appropriate to the intellectual and developmental nature of the tasks, and assessment that contributed to pedagogical decisions, rather than committing the system to simple mass testing of decontextualised subskills. Rather than decontextualised testing what would be more appropriate would be 'rich tasks' that had face validity. However, the practice of multiple levels of testing in Adult Basic Education could also give way to forms of 'access' tests, which would be concerned with assessing and assisting individuals' preparedness for further studies at a formal, certificated level, if that is what they wish to do.

The New Literacies

Jay Naidoo's enthusiasm, quoted at the beginning of this paper, for the Information Superhighway stretching through Africa (interactively learnt from Al Gore) carries the same technological determinism which has been shown to be at the heart of 'autonomous' constructions of literacy as core, basic skill. His enthusiasm is shared by the World Bank, amongst others:

> This new technology greatly facilitates the acquisition and absorption of knowledge, offering developing countries unprecedented opportunities to enhance educational systems, improve policy formation and execution, and

> widen the range of opportunities for business and the
> poor' (World Bank 1988,1).

At this time, however, the 'Worldwide Web' is seen to provide the information-thirsty poor with a flood of 'noise': 'digitised Westernised irrelevance'. The social practices that shape what counts as information transmitted on the web are from a world apart. It is also hardly surprising that the Internet reaches few people: there are apparently more account holders in London than in the whole of Africa, and most of those in Africa are in urban South African.

In the 19th century European missionaries taught literacy to converts in South Africa in the context of church practices which combined a reverence for the doctrinal 'word' together with a Puritanical bodily disgust. Their converts 'rewrote' these church practices, inserting the cultural resources that related to re-assertion of the physical and physicality. They also developed a more flexible commitment to 'scriptural authority'. New technologies do not simply wipe out older systems of communication, but rather generate new and hybrid forms. 'New literacies' likewise, outside of the testing institutions will inevitably be a hybrid of linguistic, visual and performance that will struggle for recognition in the face of the discourses of 'basic competence' and 'standards' of the gate-keeping institutions.

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