Sam Duncan
Autumn 2022
(accepted version but may still be some small changes before publication)

Dedicated to Irene Schwab, the woman we all learnt everything from, and someone we miss very much.

Reflections and conversations on the expertise of adult literacy practitioners

What is it that we need to know or be able to do, as adult literacy practitioners? What is the nature of this expertise and how is it developed? These are complex questions to answer, not least because what it means to be a teacher or practitioner of adult literacy (or adult literacies) and the various labels attached to provision vary from context to context. It is also certainly the case that, even if we consider only one context or form of provision, this is an area which is far more complex than it may seem and far from self-evident. What exactly do we need to know, understand or be able to do in order to support an adult with her reading or writing? To help someone who feels she is at the very beginning of her journey learning to read or write? And to help someone further on? These are not questions that will ever have simple answers, but I feel strongly that we need to keep exploring this area (and if we don't – then who will?).

What does the literature tell us?
This isn't a topic that is often tackled head on in the literature (though I will never be confident that I have a full grasp of 'the adult literacy literature', which seems to be part of the particularly diffuse and 'resistant to consensus' nature of this field). There are, however, some articles that offer important insights. Crowther et al (2010) highlight the vital importance of the creation of a 'positive learning environment' in order to encourage 'persistence in learning', and Tett & Maclachlan (2008) argue for the importance of avoiding discourses of deficit and maintaining authentic forms of critical pedagogy. Similarly, Ade-Ojo & Duckworth (2017) stress the forms of 'cultural dissonance' required by adult literacy practitioners, often around the retaining of person-centred traditions of adult education pedagogy, as practitioners are faced with tensions between ideals of adult literacy practice and less-then-ideal situations shaped by specific institutions or wider policy.

Parris & Block (2007) explore the expertise of those who teach literacy to adolescents within compulsory schooling, arguably a dramatically different context from that of most adult literacy practitioners, but nevertheless provide a useful reminder of the importance of varied forms of literacy pedagogy and the ability to address diverse needs. Konopasky & Reybold (2015) make the case for the importance of better understanding the varied roles adult literacy educators, and the expertise involved. They argue that adult literacy educators do not receive the same forms of support as school-teachers for both understanding their roles and accessing the knowledge required, and as a result are often left with 'fragile' identities. Pinsent- Johnson (2011) aims to examine 'the experiences and expertise of adult literacy educators' (in Canada), providing a fascinating analysis of how adult literacy work is shaped, reformed, and *de*formed by regimes of assessment and accountability (something that will be familiar to many of us). This article does not, however, provide much of an

account of the nature of adult literacy expertise, beyond the crucial reminder that adult literacy educators often need to deal with being pulled in opposing directions.

Unpublished academic work may get us closer. Omar's excellent MA dissertation (2013) identifies seven factors core to the professional identities of a sample of adult literacy practitioners in London, including: a commitment to social justice, the enactment of adult pedagogy, being 'an activist professional,' and 'the importance of autonomy.' Similarly, Schwab (another experienced adult literacy teacher and teacher educator), in her 2017 doctoral thesis on the teaching of reading to adults, highlights the importance of adult literacy educators understanding social context alongside specific adult literacies pedagogy and suggests that being able to balance their own values or beliefs around adult literacy education with those of their employing institutions is itself a key element of practitioner expertise. A year earlier, Irene Schwab and I worked on terminology guidance for the [European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET)](#), also published as an article in RaPAL (Duncan & Schwab, 2016) on the importance of careful uses of precise, and respectful, terminology (and the dangers of the opposite). This work included the argument that adult literacy practitioners need to lead the way in developing good practice in this area: that this is part of our expertise and should not be left to politicians.

What do teacher education courses or resources tell us?
The expertise of adult literacy practitioners is (at least partially) articulated in the design of adult literacy practitioner education programmes, modules and materials, where these exist. For example, the (2011 onwards) [Scottish Professional Development Award 'Tutoring Adult Literacies'](#) is made up of three units (tutoring adult literacy, contexts of adult literacies in Scotland, and tutoring numeracy in adult literacies) and is built on eight aims:
1 Develop specific knowledge of planning for adult literacies teaching and learning
2 Develop specific teaching strategies in literacy and numeracy
3 Develop awareness of relevant context and policy in Scotland
4 Improve professional effectiveness in assessment and educational guidance
5 Use technology within learning and teaching contexts
6 Develop group work skills and confidence
7 Develop the skills required of a reflective practitioner
8 Promote the use of the social practice approach to adult literacies learning

To take another example, the English [City and Guilds L4 Certificate for Adult Literacy Subject Specialists (9485) (England)](#) (2004) contained these seven units:
1. Theoretical frameworks and language
2. Factors that influence or shape language or literacy use
3. Language and literacy learning and development
4. Speaking and listening
5. Reading
6. Writing
7. Teaching practice

A resource pack rather than a specific training programme, NALA's ['Getting started in adult literacy and numeracy: A tutor training resource pack'](#) (2008), is made up of sixteen sections:

A. Introduction to Literacy
B. What do we mean by Literacy?
C. Causes and Effects of Literacy Difficulties
D. Adult Learning
E. Introduction to reading
F. Writing
G. Spelling
H. Assessment and Planning
I. Introduction to Mapping the Learner Journey
J. Evaluation: what I have learned?
K. Material development
L. Involving Learners
M. Training Methods
N. Interculturalism
O. Special needs
P. Numeracy

We could also look at the four sections of Hughes & Schwab's 2010 textbook *Teaching Adult Literacy: Principles and Practice*: 1) literacy in its social context, 2) language awareness for literacy teachers, 3) teaching and learning literacy and 4) inclusive learning. To take a final, and more recent, example, at the 2022 [European Basic Skills Network (EBSN)](#) conference in Vienna, Irmgard Stieglmayer and Giselheid Wagner presented the work of the [WBA (Weiterbildungsakademie Österreich/ Austrian Academy of Continuing Education)](#), developing qualifications for basic skills teachers in Austria (Stieglmayer & Wagner, 2022). Their framework, developed from the 'bottom up' with practitioners, includes 'didactics' (both 'general' and 'subject'), alongside educational theory (including sociology), 'professional competence' (including 'language skills'), and 'personal and social competence.'

These examples are from different geographical and political contexts, and there is plenty that is not visible from these snapshots, including about how they were/are used, proportions of time spent on these various elements and what is and is not included under the different categories. However, they do seem to share some key communalities, with content (though differently labelled) in three main intersecting areas: 1) input on an adult-focussed pedagogy, 2) input on language/literacy awareness, use and development, and 3) input on the wider social context.

Talking to practitioners
Remembering just how much knowledge sits within experienced practitioners, and believing in the power of conversations, in 2021 I decided to ask these questions (what is the nature of adult literacy practitioners' expertise? and how is it developed) to six experienced adult literacies practitioners (teachers and teacher educators): one based in Wales, one in Scotland, two in London, two elsewhere in England (the North and Midlands). I am

arranging their ideas about the nature of the expertise of adult literacy practitioners into eight categories:

One: being committed to, and able to work within, an adult, learner-centred, pedagogic orientation
> 'Adult literacy work is […] student centred rather than, you know, results centred or curriculum centred'

> 'I think it's about each adult […] that each adult has their own trajectory and it's about them, understanding that and being able to meet the needs of where they are at'

> 'having an understanding of who our students are, and the particular issues that arise, not just with literacy, but for them as people in their world, in their community'

This an idea that can sometimes be called a 'democratic' pedagogy (see for example Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2017), is associated with Freire and 'critical pedagogy' (see for example Giroux, 2010) and is at the heart of both a social practices approach to learning (as articulated by, for example, Education Scotland, 2016), and the 'political pedagogies and dialogic approaches' core to traditions of 'humanist' adult education (Lima, 2018), though often in danger of being misunderstood or misrepresented. As articulated by these adult literacy practitioners, the idea is clear: the adult literacy learner is the centre of the endeavour, and drives what and how we teach.

Two: being able to build confidence and show learners what they can do (rather than what they cannot do).
> 'the confidence side of it, I think, just comes with encouragement and support […] the brave step to come in, in the first place […] things that they might think 'that's not for me' it's showing them that it is for them, and sort of developing their confidence in that way and developing their interest in their skills and their abilities and supporting them to do things…'

The practitioners I spoke to emphasized this as a distinct aspect of their practice, part of a recognition that 'confidence' is not some wooly thing that is generally desirable, but rather something core to adult literacy development (and how could any of us read or write anything without trust in the judgements we are making as we decode, encode, interpret or plan our written communications?).

Three: being able to provide a warm welcome, acceptance, a safe place, a positive regard
Again, this was emphasised as something worth distinguishing from a person-centred approach more generally, recognising that many adult literacy learners:

> 'have had terrible experiences of education in the past […] and for them to just come and […] be faced with a warm friendly face and a nice vibe, a nice environment […] accommodating and non-judgmental […] A big part

of being an adult literacy teacher is, actually it sounds simplistic but […] Carl Rogers used to call that positive regard […] what I think of as warm acceptance […] and that's about knowing who your students are, knowing where they come from, and what crap they might have faced in the past.'

This is a 'humanistic commitment […] to equality and inclusion and making people's lives better.'

Four: Being able to find, adapt and create appropriate learning materials/resources
This is another element of what may often come under the umbrella of 'adult pedagogy' but warrants specific emphasis: the importance of being able to find, adapt and create appropriate learning materials to fit the needs and interests of learners (as these are unlikely to fall into our laps). This is a core part of a 'creative and flexible' approach, which requires adult literacy practitioners to be 'hands-on' and 'resourceful'.

Five: Having knowledge of, and experience with, literacy learning and teaching (how reading and writing have been, and can be, taught)
In the examples of adult literacy teacher education programmes and materials above, there is always some sort of mention of specific knowledge around literacy, but what this actually means varies. Usefully, the specialists I spoke to identified two forms of what we could call 'literacy-specific-expertise', the first of which is this: having knowledge of how reading and writing can be, and have been, taught and learnt, as well as having their own toolkit of methods to develop reading and writing in different ways. This includes 'theories of reading development' (or writing development), but also 'recognising how someone may have been taught before […] and they haven't got it'. Developing expertise in a range of approaches for (to take an example) developing spelling, is particularly important given that approaches that 'might work with' different learners 'aren't necessarily the same'.

Six: knowledge of language (including specific attention to written language)
The second aspect of literacy-specific knowledge raised in these conversations was understandings of language more broadly, and written language specifically, including the nature of the English writing or spelling system, etymology and spelling patterns, punctuation and grammar conventions, relationships between spoken and written discourse, and understandings of language variety and language change. It is this knowledge, they argued, that allows adult literacy practitioners to react to learners' goals.

Seven: An awareness and understanding of the wider social, cultural and political context
Understandings of language variety and language change require understandings of a wider social/cultural/political context of injustice and power relations, as does the commitment to a person-focussed pedagogy. This requires understanding of the 'social context, socially situated-ness' of 'the social and the political' as understood by 'theorists like Freire'.

> 'Working in adult literacy is […] complex. Isn't it almost entirely a social project? It wouldn't exist if society was equal. […] Isn't it entirely about trying to empower people? It's not a curriculum subject.'

Eight: The ability to balance/negotiate varied and sometimes competing demands
Both related to and distinct from the above wider social context, their final point recognizes that adult literacy practitioner expertise includes the ability (and commitment) to negotiate varied and sometimes competing demands, within and across specific and often shifting institutional and policy contexts. This may include, in some contexts, balancing accreditation requirements with student goals, when these do not always align: 'I do have to stick to some of the curriculum. Obviously, I want them to pass the exam, if that's what they want […] so I have to jump through some hoops and that's ok.' This may also involve having to work in different ways in different contexts, and work to ensure that any policy requirements are met in ways that 'don't dominate' and allow for the maintaining of a person-centred approach.

I also asked *how* this expertise is developed, and have organised their responses into four categories:

One: we develop our expertise working with a range of learners
These six practitioners were clear that the main way they had developed their expertise, and were still developing it (as most emphasised that this a never-ending learning process) is 'on the job', working with 'a range of learners', 'you learn something from every learner, every group.'

Two: learning from colleagues (and networks)
> 'in my experience, it [expertise] kind of develops, you know, in the team
> […] you have people very often who taught a level for a long time, and
> become specialists. […] you know I've managed those teams, that's a really
> valuable thing to have, one colleague who's taught Entry one for years and
> years and has really got the hang of it, to support others.'

We learn from our colleagues, benefiting from their experience, whether these are colleagues we see regularly or only occasionally. It was also recognised that some adult literacy practitioners are working in more isolated situations, and so plugging into networks of other adult literacy specialists becomes even more important, whether local, national or international, to connect with those 'who have made adult literacy their life's work' and to keep 'networking and finding out what other organisations do.'

Three: forms of teacher education
These conversations also recognised the importance of formal teacher education, including longer programmes (such as initial teacher education), shorter courses, and days of continuing professional development. The strong message, though, was that these are only part of the picture of how expertise is developed, and only meaningful in combination with learning on the job and learning from colleagues/networks. These conversations reminded me of Belzer (2006) which highlights the importance of the right form of adult literacies practitioner training at the right stage of a career: the possibility that 'less is more' and 'just in time' may be the right time.

Four: other forms of education, learning and life experience

Interestingly and importantly, those I spoke with recognised that their expertise has developed over a longer life story, including diverse forms of past work, past study and varied past life experience. Examining the expertise they felt was important to do their jobs as adult literacy practitioners, it was often hard to identify when or how something was learnt. One spoke of how it was easier to look at colleagues and see that their expertise was the product of 'their life experience, their wisdom.' And another noted 'that expertise thing: it's more about who you are than the qualifications that you've got.'

What next

This is intended to be a 'thought piece' – to bring together some thoughts of my own, some ideas from what has been published, and some thoughts from other adult literacy practitioners. It is mainly, though, a call out to others, to you and your colleagues. It is intended to lead to a larger discussion among those already connected with RaPAL, as well as those who might like to join and shape RaPAL for the future. In this spirit, I'd like to end with three points for further thought, each suggested by the work of this piece.

Point 1: for those developing teacher education programmes, professional development or policy in this area, it is not enough to look at what the role involves, what the expertise is, what seems most important, and design a programme with only this in mind. We also need to consider where any form of teacher education (shorter or longer) fits into a wider, longer experience of learning, which includes vital experiences 'on the job' and working with colleagues. As suggested by Belzer (2006) and the above conversations, we need to consider which forms of knowledge development may be most useful at different points and in different forms. We also need to remember that not all forms of expertise can be developed in the same ways. Attention to theories of writing development or language change on teacher education programmes does not mean that this is a more important form of adult literacy practitioner expertise than others which receive less attention on such programmes, but may suggest that these are aspects more suited to formalised learning.

Point 2: The conversations I had for this piece reminded me how important it is to keep considering how closely these forms of expertise interrelate. To be able to take a person-centred, democratic, dialogic, critical, social practices pedagogic approach (the first of the forms of expertise emerging from the conversations), requires not less but more expertise around language, literacy and literacy pedagogies (the fifth and sixth areas of expertise). In my experience, the assumption is often the opposite, and that forms of teacher education which emphasise a social practice approach can sometimes underplay importance of linguistic knowledge (and see Ackland's 2014 warning about the 'social practice' label potentially hiding an 'erasure' of critical pedagogy). To build a programme of study which is truly reacting to learners' strengths, goals and interests requires a great deal of practitioner expertise on language, literacy and literacy pedagogy (amongst other things). How various aspects of adult literacy practitioner expertise interrelate seems a crucial area for further thought.

Point 3: The strongest message from the conversations, though, is that adult literacy practitioner expertise is developed across a career, working with different learners and colleagues. This means that when individuals can maintain longer careers as adult literacy

practitioners, more expertise is developed and, crucially, shared. When longer careers are not possible (redundancies, unsustainable working conditions and salaries, precarious contracts) opportunities for the development and sharing of expertise are lost. If we want good adult literacy provision, we need to ensure that people can build careers in this area. The tools which are produced by policy initiatives (materials, assessments, frameworks etc) will never be perfect, and we don't need them to be. Part of our adult literacy practitioner expertise is that we can adapt what we have and make the best of it. But none of this will work without experienced, collaborative practitioners. To maintain and develop expertise, to develop 'high quality' provision, we need stable jobs with decent conditions and opportunities to support each other.

'Would you consider yourself to be an adult literacy teacher?'

'Absolutely… against all the odds'

References:

Ackland, A. (2014). Lost in translation: Tracing the erasure of the critical dimension of a radical educational discourse. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *46*(2), 192-210.

Ade-Ojo, G., & Duckworth, V. (2017). Of cultural dissonance: the UK's adult literacy policies and the creation of democratic learning spaces. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *36*(4), 388-405.

Belzer, A. (2006). Less may be more: Rethinking adult literacy volunteer tutor training. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *38*(2), 111-140.

Crowther, J., Maclachlan, K., & Tett, L. (2010). Adult literacy, learning identities and pedagogic practice. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *29*(6), 651-664.

Duncan, S., & Schwab, I. (2016). Why Terminology is Important. *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL), 88 (Spring 2016)*, 20-25.

Education Scotland (2016). Scotland's Adult Literacies Curriculum Framework Guidelines: learning, teaching and assessment. Crown Copyright. https://education.gov.scot/Documents/adult-literacies-curriculum-framework.pdf

Giroux, H. A. (2010). Rethinking education as the practice of freedom: Paulo Freire and the promise of critical pedagogy. *Policy Futures in Education*, *8*(6), 715-721.

Hughes, N. & Schwab, I. (eds) (2010). *Teaching Adult Literacy: Principles and Practice*. Open University Press.

Konopasky, A. W., & Reybold, L. E. (2015). Accessing the world: Adult literacy educators' metaphors for learners and learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *13*(3), 239-258.

Lima, L. C. (2018). Adult and permanent education in times of crisis: A critical perspective based on Freire and Gelpi. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *50*(2), 219-238.

Omar, D. (2013). *Adult literacy teachers: an exploration of professional identity*. [unpublished MA Report]. Institute of Education, London.

Parris, S. R., & Block, C. C. (2007). The expertise of adolescent literacy teachers. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *50*(7), 582-596.

Pinsent-Johnson, C. (2011). Essentializing the experiences and expertise of adult literacy educators. In *Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference*.

Schwab, I. (2017). *The role of initial teacher education in the formation of adult literacy teachers' beliefs and practices in the teaching of reading.* [unpublished doctoral thesis]. UCL Institute of Education, London.

Stieglmayer, I. & Wagner, G. (2022, 10 June) Professionalization for Adult Educators: Qualification Profile for Basic Skills Trainers. [Conference presentation]. European Basic Skills Network Annual Conference, Vienna, Austria. https://conference.basicskills.eu/ebsn-annual-conference-2022-info/

Tett, L., & Maclachlan, K. (2008). Learners, tutors and power in adult literacies research in Scotland. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *27*(6), 659-672.