

Jane Mace – a tribute

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In memory and celebration of the adult literacy work of Jane Mace

This is hard to write, and not only because I would much prefer to be writing Jane an email arranging to meet for a cup of tea. It is hard because Jane Mace did so much, wrote so much, knew so much and worked with so many different people, that any account will inevitably be incomplete. Perhaps we can see this as a start, to which others will add.

Jane Mace was a volunteer, co-ordinator and then Director of the Cambridge House Adult Literacy Scheme; Director of the Lee Community Education Centre; Chair of the National Federation of Worker Writers & Community Publishers; Senior Lecturer in Community Education at Goldsmiths University; Senior Lecturer and Director of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at South Bank University; and Visiting Lecturer in Adult Literacy Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. She also acted as researcher and advisor for both NALA, the (Irish) National Adult Literacy Agency, and the NRDC, the (UK) National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. Jane supported, mentored and guided numerous adult literacy related projects, including Voices on the Page and Reading Aloud in Britain Today. She was involved in so much that no doubt every reader will think of other examples to add.

Throughout this career of extraordinary action and activism, Jane Mace also wrote; she wrote beautifully and she wrote a lot. *Read as much of Jane's writing as you can.* I have tried to compile a list (at the end of this paper), but this too will be incomplete, such is the range and volume of her work. It's also worth saying that while there are many published texts which are published but rarely read, Jane's work was always read – and discussed – and so her influence is immense. Yet, it's probably also true that those of us currently working in the field may not always be aware of the degree to which her careful and elegant arguments lie beneath the accepted notions of good practice we are trying to defend today.

Jane wrote alone and with others; she wrote about literacy, adult education, feminism, politics and where these intersect. There is a powerful range to Jane's writing (and she was publishing from at least the mid-70s until 2020), and across this range there are recurring themes or tensions which we could see as forming the backbone of her contribution. She wrestled with **representation** - how those who are not adult literacy students can or should talk about literacy learning and learners; with the complexity of **measurement** and **destinations** in adult literacy learning; with the value of **inquiry and careful attention**, how this is as crucial to teaching as it is to research and policy making; with **authorship, democracy and sisterhood**– writing as **action, respect and listening to others**; and (as noted on the back cover of her 2020 book *Passion and Partings: the dying sayings of early Quakers*) with 'a **persistent curiosity in the to and fro of speech and writing**'.

Here I will focus on three books (one from the late 70s, one from the early 90s and one from the late 90s) to highlight how much we have all learnt from Jane Mace, and how important it is to hold tight to this learning as we struggle through the next few years in this brutal educational and social context.

1979, *Working with Words: Literacy beyond school*

The lie common to a large amount of press coverage is that literacy students are a special race of people about whom the 'literate' have expert opinions.
(p.20)

Mace examines the question of representation that she returns to throughout her career. How can those who are not adult literacy students themselves talk and write about those who are? And how do literacy students talk and write about literacy and literacy education? How might we all be mis-representing, misunderstanding, mis-recognizing and missing opportunities?

She reminds us of Sue Shrapnel Gardner's question of whether adult literacy teaching is 'social work' or 'politics' – the former about helping those with a *need* (a deficit), while the latter foregrounds educational *rights*, providing opportunities to right the wrongs produced by social inequalities. This reminder also serves to remind us, in turn, that while Jane Mace was a pioneer, she was also very much part of a wider community of thinkers, including Sue Shrapnel Gardner amongst others.¹ And the value of collaboration echoes throughout her writings. For example, in this book Mace explores how an adult literacy tutor (whether volunteer or paid) is always learning alongside the student(s), arguing that constant mutual feedback and openness about this learning process is essential.

She also lays out the thorny issue of 'measuring the journey' – of how we can, and whether we should, measure forms of success or progress in adult literacy work. Mace argues that this doesn't have an easy answer and it's important that we don't get seduced into thinking one is possible or even desirable, suggesting that for students, for teachers, and for those interested in measuring, the important thing is developing '*the confidence to go slow*' (p. 67). Mace ends this volume with a message about 'writing as action:' the impact of print and the significance of writing for others, the move 'from private to public' fundamental to adult literacy learning.

Literacy students are people who have the courage to ask for help in learning. What they have in common is an interest in making words work, in working at words until they make sense, until they carry meaning from the head to the paper, from the paper to another head and beyond. (p. 118)

¹ Please see 'A Mood of Hope, A Legacy of Writing: Sue Gardner and the Community Literacy and Publishing Movement,' written by Mary Hamilton (with contributions from Richard Andrews, Ursula Howard, Keith Jackson, Jane Mace, Juliet McCaffery, Rebecca O'Rourke, Judd Stone and Alan Tuckett), published in the RaPAL Journal, Winter 2018, Volume No. 96 pp. 45-51.

1992, *Talking about Literacy: Principles & Practice of Adult Literacy Education*

These messages are developed in her later writing, and nowhere (to my mind) so powerfully as in the 1992 book *Talking about Literacy: Principles & Practice of Adult Literacy Education*. Part 1 returns to the 'problems of representation,' including how adult literacy students represent their relationships with literacy, how literacy practitioners represent literacy education, how campaigners and policy makers represent 'the problem of illiteracy' and how everyone deals with the great challenge of representing (and understanding) the experiences of others.

Part 2 of this book develops what Mace presents as the five key principles of adult literacy education: **context, inquiry, authorship, equality and community** - as good a starting point as any for those wishing to teach, research or think about adult literacy. Once again, I implore readers find this book and read Jane's words carefully, as each of these sections includes both what we might imagine would be included under its title, and what we might not.

For example, **context** is not only about the wider social and political context, but also the context of the individual student's experiences, motivations and hopes, and so the importance of a teacher or organiser having a careful conversation with each student. Context also means the context of the class itself, and how it is vital for a literacy student to have the chance to understand what joining provision might involve. What are the usual ways of working? Who will be there? Who does what, when and where? Who makes the decisions?

Inquiry, for Mace, is at the heart of not only teaching and practitioner networks, but also student-teacher relationships.

The relationship between the uses made of literacy in everyday life and the moments of concentrated thinking and talk in a classroom on the same subject is an important one. (p. 81)

In this way, all teachers and students are researchers and their work together forms the collaborative inquiry which develops teaching, learning and literacy.

Teachers are not the only cooks; literacy is about making, as well as consuming. We need help with the mixing and flavouring of the dishes. The principle of inquiry means that the teacher will continually be checking with the group as to their existing knowledge of these situations, and inviting them to contribute to and create the ingredients from which they may then create the course work. It also means that new items, not already known to be common, are given the space to emerge. (p. 71)

Examining **community**, Mace suggests seeing communities as 'overlapping,' highlighting 'convergence' and the inherently shifting nature of community, created and recreated with literacy at the core. And **equality** emphatically includes Mace's career-long argument for literacy education to take account of both reading and writing, as she stresses '*the principle of equality between reader and writer*' (p. 103):

Adult literacy education, I argue, has to do with a principle that says: literacy development is only possible if students, when they are reading, acquire a greater sense of equality with other writers; and when they are writing, with other readers. (p 103)

Crucially, **authorship** is at the center of all five principles (a point of overlap), just as it is one answer to the ‘problem of representation’ (and, perhaps, to ‘measuring the journey’).

1998, *Playing with Time: mothers and the meaning of literacy*

Playing with Time both develops these principles and provides quite a different perspective.

This book is a study of literacy and its meanings in the lives of mothers. (p. 1)

My contention in this book is that, more than at any other time, mothers today are assumed to be essential to other people’s literacy, and yet are the objects of contradictory messages about their own. (p. 2)

Mace builds on a Mass Observation directive (*Directive 46, No 2 – Mothers and Literacy*), along with in-depth interviews to examine the themes of democracy, representation, authorship, equality and sisterhood, so embedded in all her work, looking closely at the lives of a group of women, their mothers and grandmothers.

This book also contains a section titled ‘Literacy’ (pp. 12-15, within the chapter ‘Literacy, Mothers and Time’) providing a succinct and engaging four-page overview of literacy theory. It ends with:

In considering the idea of a “literacy life”, which any one of us may have (along with a social life, a spiritual life, a sporting life, and so on), I am happy to see literacy as plural and various, and certainly something far more than skills that may be achieved and assessed within a system of education. I also want to persist with the notion that literacy engages our imaginations, intellects, emotions and memories: and as such, is a matter of enormous mystery, beyond simple measurements. In this book I hope to show that any researcher who accepts this and who seeks to find out what literacy may mean to an individual or a group, has to go beyond mere observation of what could be called “literacy behaviour”; for while such observation can tell us some things, there is much that it cannot. If, for example, I watch someone else reading a newspaper on a train, I can notice which page they turn to, or how long they take to read an article; but I cannot tell what mental images or lines of thought their reading sets up. If I see someone writing a postcard in a café, I may notice that they are left-handed, using a felt-tip pen, and pausing over every other word; I may even – when they go up to the counter to buy another cup of tea – catch sight of a word or two of what has been written, and get a sense of what they have been writing

about. But I have no idea of the unwritten words that they have decided not to write. (p. 15)

This idea of literacy permeates the later discussions on time and family (*'family is more than mum and literacy is more than school'* p. 119), relationships between oracy and literacy, the said and the unsaid, dominant discourses and complex truths, and between living and remembering lives.

The copy of *Playing with Time* I have in front of me right now, bought second-hand some years ago, has a message written in tiny handwriting and blue pen at the top of the opening page: *'Maureen, I hope you find this book interesting- love Sylvia'*. This is an academic book, reporting on a rigorous research project, much used and loved on university modules, a book which provides an overview of literacy theory unmatched in its clarity. And yet it is also a book of far wider appeal, loved for its careful accounts of the lives of women. Continuing earlier themes of democracy, authorship, representation and inquiry in the 'traces of lives' and amplification of voices, Mace's explorations of women, 'illiteracy' and literacy are striking and quietly spectacular.

I have been exploring what mothers themselves might want literacy for. I have been seeking to tease out with you how we may put two words "mothers" and "literacy" next to each other without it being assumed that we are only talking about children. (p.164)

Jane Mace kept shattering assumptions, and through her writing she remains a voice warning us to be vigilant: to keep listening and questioning.

I am currently rereading more of Jane's work, and reading much for the first time. It is very likely that if I were to write this in three months' time, I would choose to focus on different texts or different ideas within these texts. The wisdom and originality of Jane Mace's work cannot be overstated. Jane's two most recent single-authored books (to my knowledge) are about Quakerism - *God and decision making: a Quaker approach* (2012) and *Passion and partings: the dying sayings of early Quakers* (2020). This could be seen as a departure from her work on literacy, a testament to how broad, and deep, Jane's interests and expertise reached. Yet these books are also very much a continuation of her earlier work – examinations of authorship, the spoken and the written, of mutual understanding, respect and the serious mission of caring about the lives of others. They reveal an interest in, and love of, other voices (often marginalised voices), and a belief in just how much we can gain from listening.

I am very grateful for Mary Hamilton's help with this piece, and I'd like to end with a few of Mary's own reflections:

"I can still hear Jane's chuckle. She was light spirited, engaging, warm, full of creative energy. She was interested in people and always respectful of others. She was thoughtful - reflective and constantly questioning. She was an instant supporter of RaPAL when it was formed and continued to organise events and to advocate for the journal. She understood the power of writing but especially public writing - the importance of reaching an audience, a listener who would acknowledge the writer's experience and story. She saw

literacy as action, especially applying these ideas to women's experience. She had a passion for writing and for championing others who had been marginalised by the education system.

She wrote really well, and her approach to literacy was absolutely groundbreaking for the time, early 1970s, when "adult illiterates" were still treated as psychological 'remedial' problems, written about (naturally) by literate outsiders. Jane's approach foregrounded learners' firsthand experiences, treating these as the most essential, valid kinds of information on which teaching can draw. Her lively and accessible accounts of students' lives, her commitment to collaborative practice and the idea of the scribe as a writing arm inspired and continues to inspire generations of teachers.

She did write quite a few things with others but despite her commitment to collaboration I do see her as a lone writer and thinker, with an imagination and wisdom that went beyond most of us. Whenever I had what I thought was a new good idea about literacy (e.g. working with images, representations in the media, signatures), I would look back and find that Jane had already written about it! In that way, she was part of a set of symbiotic relationships that infused adult literacy in the 1970s/1980s and which felt like far reaching shift of culture" (Mary Hamilton, May 2023)

I would love to hear others' thoughts about Jane's work and its impact. Perhaps we could start up a Jane Mace online reading circle to read and discuss her writing. Please get in touch with me if interested: sam.duncan@ucl.ac.uk

List of publications (please do add to this; I'm sure they are more!)

Single authored:

- 1975, 'Blaming the Victim', Times Educational Supplement May 1975
- 1979, *Working with Words: Literacy beyond school*, Chameleon Books.
- 1979, 'Sensationalism or sound sense? – adult literacy in context'. *Assistant Librarian*, May issue.
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- 1983, 'Women talking: Feminism and Adult Literacy Work,' *Frontiers: Journal of Women's Studies*, vol 7, no 1, pp. 38-43.
- 1985, *A Time and a Place: a Study of Education and Manual Work*, Lee Centre/Goldsmiths College.
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- 1995, (Ed) *Literacy, Language and Community Publishing: Essays in Adult Education*, Multilingual Matters.
- 1995, 'Reminiscence as Literacy: Intersections and Creative Moments' in J. Mace (ed) *Literacy, Language and Community Publishing: Essays in Adult Education*, Multilingual Matters, pp. 97-117.
- 1996, 'The Art of the Possible: Inspirations, Issues and Strategies for Research and Practice.' *RaPAL*, 30, pp.6-12.
- 1997, 'Reminiscence as literacy: Intersections and creative moments; in R Perks & A Thomson Eds. *The Oral History Reader*. Routledge.
- 1997, *Through the Joy of Learning: Diary of 1,000 Adult Learners*.
- 1998, 'Snatched Time: Mothers and Literacy.' *RaPAL*, 35, pp.30-33.
- 1998, *Playing with time: mothers and the meaning of literacy*. UCL Press.
1998. *Older Learners and Higher Education: The Experience at South Bank University*. South Bank University, Centre for Continuing Education and Development.
- 2000, 'The Significance of Student Writing'. *RaPAL*.
- 2001, 'Listening to learners'. *Development Education Journal*, 7(3), pp.21-22.
- 2002, *The give and take of writing: scribes, literacy and everyday life*. National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education.
- 2002, 'Writing and power: Influence and engagement in adult literacies'. In D Boud & N Miller Eds *Working with Experience* (pp. 183-195). Routledge.
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With others:

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