

## Abstract

The field of adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) has undergone dramatic changes in recent years with the advent of labour market programs, accreditation, competency-based assessment and competitive tendering for program funds. Teachers' working conditions have deteriorated and their professional autonomy has been eroded. ALBE has been increasingly instrumentalised to fulfil the requirements of a marketised economy and conform to its norms. The beliefs and value systems which traditionally underpinned the work of ALBE teachers have been reframed according to the principle of 'performativity' and the demands of the 'performative State' (Lyotard, 1984: 46, Yeatman 1994: 110).

The destabilisation of teachers' working lives can be understood as a manifestation of the 'postmodern condition' (Lyotard 1984; Harvey 1989): the collapse of the certainties and purposes of the past; the proliferation of technologies; the impermanence and intensification of work; the commodification of knowledge and curricula; and the dissolving of boundaries between disciplines and fields of knowledge. The critiques of the modernist grand narratives which underpin progressivist and critical approaches to adult literacy pedagogy have further undermined the traditional points of reference of ALBE teachers.

In this thesis I examine how teachers are teaching, surviving, resisting, and 'living the contradictions' (Seddon 1994) in the context of struggles to comply with and resist the requirements of performativity. Following Foucault and a number of feminist poststructuralist authors, I have applied the notions of 'discursive engagement' and 'the politics of discourse' (Yeatman 1990a) as a way of theorising the interplay between imposed change and teachers' practice. I explore the discursive practices which take place at the interface between the 'new' policy discourses and older, naturalised discourses; how teachers are *engaged by* and are *engaging with* discourses of performativity; how teachers are discursively constructing adult literacy pedagogy; what new, hybrid discourses of 'good practice' are emerging; and the micropractices of resistance which teachers are enacting in their speech and in their practice.

My purpose was to develop knowledge which would support the reflexivity of teachers; to enrich the theoretical languages that teachers could draw upon in trying to make sense of their situation; and to use those languages in speaking about the dilemmas of practice. I used participatory action research as a means of producing knowledge about teachers' practices, structured around their agency, and reflecting their standpoint (Harding 1993).

I describe two separate action research projects in which teachers of ALBE participated. I reflect on both projects in the light of poststructuralist theory and consider them as instances of what Lather calls 'within/against research' (Lather 1989: 27). I analyse written and spoken texts produced in both projects which reflect teachers' responses to competency-based assessment and other features of the changing context.

I use a method of discourse mapping to describe the discursive field and the teachers' discursive practices. Three main configurations of discourse are delineated: 'progressivism', 'professional teacher' and 'performativity'. The teachers mainly position themselves within a hybridising 'progressivist /professional teacher' discourse, as a discourse of resistance to 'performative' discourse. In adapting their pedagogies, the teachers are in some degree taking the language and world view of performativity into their own vocabularies and practices. The discursive picture I have mapped is complex and contradictory. On one hand, the 'progressivist /professional teacher' discourse appears to endure and to take strength from the articulation into it of elements of performative discourse, creating new possibilities for discursive transformation. On the other hand, there are signs that performative discourse is colonising and subsuming progressivist /professional teacher discourse. At times, both of these tendencies are apparent in the one text.

Six micropractices of resistance are identified within the texts: 'rational critique', 'objectification', 'subversion', 'refusal', 'humour' and 'the affirmation of desire'. These reflect the teachers' agency in making discursive choices on the micro level of their every day practices. Through those micropractices, the teachers are engaging with and resisting the micropractices and meanings of performativity.

I apply the same multi-layered method of analysis to an examination of discursive engagement in pedagogy by analysing a transcript of the teachers' discussion of critical incidents in their classrooms. Their classroom pedagogies are revealed as complex, situated and eclectic. They are combining and integrating their 'embodied' and their 'institutional' powers, both 'seducing' (McWilliam 1995) and 'regulating' (Gore 1993) as they teach. A strong ethical project is apparent in the teachers' sense of social responsibility, in their determination to adhere to valued traditions of previous times, and in their critical self-awareness of the ways in which they use their institutional and embodied powers in the classroom.

Finally, I look back on the findings, and reflect on the possibilities of discursive engagement and the politics of discourse as a framework for more strategic practice in the current context. This research provides grounds for hope that, by becoming more self-conscious about how we engage discursively, we might become more strategic in our everyday professional practice. Notwithstanding the constraints (evident in this study) which limit the strategic potential of the politics of discourse, there is space for teachers to become more reflexive in their professional, pedagogical and political praxis. Development of more deliberate, self-reflexive praxis might lead to a 'postmodern democratic politics' (Yeatman 1994: 112) which would challenge the performative state and the system of globalised capital which it serves.