"Although they are looking at the words, they are not actually reading": Apprentices' liminal literacy and literacy tutors' dilemmas

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Abstract

This study set out to explore the situation faced by tutors who were providing remedial literacy support to New Zealand Modern Apprentices (MAs). As part of a wider, triangulated study of employers, tutors, MAs, and industry training coordinators, we undertook a qualitative analysis of ten in-depth interviews with literacy tutors. Three major issues strongly affected the nature of what tutors could achieve for their students. First, tutors experienced substantial role ambiguity; second, apprentices were working in oral and experiential modes more than in print-literate modes; and third, tutors found they had to employ an instrumental approach to their teaching in response to the situation they encountered. For example, this often meant serving as a scribe for their student rather than being able to focus on building the apprentice's print literacy. This instrumental approach ran strongly counter to the tutors' traditional ethical stance associated with building empowered and competent citizens who were able to participate fully in their civic, social and economic settings. The study uses the term liminal (or threshold) literacy to evoke a passage into more enhanced kinds of literacy and to avoid any deficit branding of a person's undeveloped print literacy. The constraints on what the tutors could actually achieve meant that most students, while on track to successfully complete their apprenticeship, still remained of low print literacy. In many cases via literacy support apprentices certainly built their confidence far beyond the point at which they had come into the programme. Yet they had probably become further reinforced in their little-changed culture of orality in which their workplace experience also sustained them.

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Introduction

The New Zealand Modern Apprenticeship (MA) Scheme, launched in 2000, is designed to assist young adults to undertake and complete their apprenticeships, usually of three to four years' duration. Each Modern Apprentice is supported by a Modern Apprentice Coordinator (MAC), generally a member of the relevant Industry Training Organisation (ITO). Each industry has its own apprenticeship training structure and designs its own apprenticeship workbooks and resources. In addition to general mentoring support, MACs are expected to visit each MA allocated to them and the MA's employer at least four times a year. MACs can also, if they realise one of their MAs has low print literacy, refer MAs to print-literacy support, which is undertaken by a national consortium of regional adult literacy training providers. MACs liaise

between the MA's employer and the consortium's literacy tutors in order to coordinate support for each apprentice.

The MA Literacy Programme began in April 2008 with a maximum of 30 hours literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) tutoring provided for each MA. The most frequent teaching approach is one-to-one tuition, alongside and mainly employing the industry's apprenticeship study materials. By the end of 2008, 191 MAs had undertaken a programme with one of the consortium's training providers. Each MA identified as in need of literacy support was assessed by a consortium adult literacy specialist, with individual tuition arranged within an individual programme designed to be relevant to the MA's learning needs.

Our research group was contracted in 2008 by the New Zealand Department of Labour to carry out a formative evaluation of MAs' literacy tuition. We set out to explore the perceptions of apprentices, tutors, employers and MACs as to how well the literacy support was performing, identify how apprentices were progressing with their study, and recommend any possible enhancements to the literacy support programme.

In 14 case studies we interviewed an MA, his employer (all MAs were male), MAC, and adult literacy tutor. From 46 interviews (some MACS and employers being involved with more than one apprentice in the study), we derived triangulated insights into how well each MA was progressing both with literacy and trade learning. (For a comprehensive online report on our findings from this formative evaluation see Sligo et al., 2010.) From the interview transcripts we learned of a collection of (often interconnected) difficulties being faced by apprentices, especially around print literacy. Also included were personal learning style, insufficient time to complete learning and assignments, fatigue and health, problematic family contexts, or poor access to transport. All of these difficulties appear in other adult literacy research (e.g., Sligo et al., 2007) and are predictable challenges for young working adults with low print literacy.

However, one perspective that appeared to be new to the literature came from the literacy tutors. This had to do with ambiguity as to their roles as teachers and support people, and incompatible expectations as to what their focus should be. In essence the tutors seemed to be suspended between two worlds and different assumptions around what they were supposed to be achieving. It seemed desirable to explore the nature of this problem in more detail and to see if we could identify ways to reduce the dilemmas that tutors seemed to be experiencing.

Literature review

Both 'functional literacy' and 'literacy' are highly contested terms (Gee, 2000) with no sign of any convergence among scholars writing from differing standpoints. Functional literacy is regarded in much of the workplace literature as referring to an individual's ability to achieve a certain standard on a

literacy test such as ALL (Adult Learning and Lifeskills Survey) (Reder & Bynner, 2009). From a critical studies perspective, social practice theorists prefer multi-literacies, and hold that 'functional literacy' is whatever enables a person to function well, that is to succeed at work or in their community, regardless of their capability in reading and writing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). To try to clarify the position of this paper, we use the term print literacy, which is intended to indicate that the literacy programme explored here set out to assist apprentices specifically in the dimensions of reading and writing.

The discourse of deficit

It is argued that there has been and still is a covert (or even overt) blaming attitude towards people of low print literacy (Gee, 1986). Jackson (2004) has described the "inflated claims that blame workers' alleged 'skill deficits' for such broad and complex social problems as poverty, unemployment, workplace accidents and disease; even lagging productivity" (p. 7). In this contested area, adequate terminology is often difficult to find agreement on. Goody (1977) refers to "restricted literacy" (as opposed to highly competent print literacy) but he was criticised by Gee (1986), who thought that he was inappropriately privileging print literacy. Goody's restricted literacy is along the same lines as what the present authors prefer to call liminal or threshold literacy. *Liminal* (from Latin *limin*, a threshold) seems more accurate than *restricted* in that *restricted* suggests human deficits, drawing attention to what apprentices lack, rather than to what they may possess. In contrast, *liminal* instead suggests an entry point and thus the possibility of further passage into other literacies, especially (but not only) a print-literate framework.

Various policy texts have been analysed in recent years to explore the nature of what is being implied about the standing of people with low print literacy. For example, Brine (2006) has argued that in European policy documentation, people with low literacy are regarded as not only having the problem but being the problem. In Australia, Castleton (1999, as cited in Jackson, 2004) found that "institutional texts portray workers as having inadequate literacy skills, and that key stakeholders such as government, labor and workplace literacy practitioners, as well as business managers, support these views as 'common sense'" (p. 7).

Very strong scholarly objections to decision makers' implicitly blaming attitudes towards people with low print literacy seem to be connected to those same scholars' dismissive comments about whether print literacy is actually important in the modern workplace. For example, print literacy is referred to as "mere literacy" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000); or Black (2004) comments approvingly on how there may be "a group reading of a letter" or "assistance with literacy-related tasks can be exchanged for other services" or how, "within informal communities of practice, workers engage collaboratively with literacy practices" (p. 9).

Problematically, though, for people with difficulties in reading and writing, print literacy is of rising importance in the current era of globalised enterprise, which is mandating standardised ways of performing work across international sites (Belfiore, 2004). For example, Farrell (2006) comments that the impact of documentation of work policies and processes is such that now "global workspaces are textual phenomena" (p. 27). However, globalising trends, as well as upping the demand for competent

print literacy, also run counter to localised, situated ways of knowing and doing work on particular sites. Inevitably they tend to privilege print-literate frames of reference over oral, locally grounded ways of expression.

In combination with this is the oral nature of how people prefer to learn and generally function in the workplace. It has long been demonstrated that people generally learn on the job far more via co-workers, by informal means, rather than as an outcome of courses, seminars, textbooks, or software packages (Hopkins & Maglen, 2000; Mintzberg, 1973, 2009; Stewart, 1967). Less well understood though is the situation of people with low literacy who have been told they have to learn via digital or printed texts, but who have much less chance than others of accessing knowledge via such means. In essence, the workplace relies on these individuals learning by informal, oral mechanisms, since the formally-mandated channels for learning are blocked so far as they are concerned.

Although there has been increasing interest in apprentices' learning in recent times (e.g., Fuller & Unwin, 1999; Geiser, 2008; Unwin, 2007), it is still an under-researched area, and the situation of apprentices with low print literacy is less well-understood again. Ong (1982) argued that historically, "trades were learned by apprenticeship (as they still largely are even in high-technology cultures), which means from observation and practice with only minimal verbalized explanation" (p. 43).

Marchand (2008) has pointed to how "Masonry and carpentry . . . are communicated, understood and negotiated between practitioners largely without words, and learning is achieved primarily through observation, mimesis and repeated exercise" (p. 247). He noted how ideation occurred in a physical dimension so that "ideas took shape in the coordinated activities of eyes, ears, hands and tools" (p. 248).

Trying to explicate the interplay between orality and print literacy, McLuhan (1972) thought of orality and literacy as interchangeably forming figure and ground in any society or context which possesses print literacy. In a situation when literacy has not yet made extensive inroads, orality will form the predominant ground of interactions, while literacy will comprise a relatively limited figure within that landscape, imposed upon the ground. But as print literacy advances in that setting, the relationship may be reversed so that the assumptions and practices of literacy become more predominant in social and economic relationships, and orality will reduce to a lesser significance. This metaphor may help to shed light on the situation of people with difficulties in print literacy. As the influence of printed or digital texts strengthens in the workplace, those with lesser literacy (who necessarily are accustomed to oral-experiential ways of operating) are likely to become increasingly isolated from print-oriented forms of work organisation.

A discussion paper on New Zealand Modern Apprentices' (MAs') and industry trainees' completion rates (Jeffcoat & Jeffcoat, 2006) revealed that over two-thirds of MAs' and trainees' problems stemmed from their required written work. Apprentices described difficulties they experienced both in understanding their curricular materials and in finding the time to complete their required book-work assignments. It should be noted that these difficulties applied to all MAs surveyed, including those who possessed good

print literacy. Therefore, it is easy to infer that apprentices with poor command of print literacy would have been further disadvantaged.

Methodology

Prior to the research team becoming involved, the literacy providers had undertaken needs assessments, designating each MA as either low, moderate, or high needs in their ability to cope with the print-literacy demands of their apprenticeship. Low need meant requiring up to ten hours of literacy tuition to achieve learning goals. Here a given learner was thought to have a particular print literacy requirement that could fairly readily be remedied in a short time-frame. Moderate need meant an MA who possessed relatively minor gaps in their learning, or a specific but more difficult learning need. Such individuals were assigned between 11 and 30 hours of tuition. High need learners had more complex print literacy needs which might require more than 30 hours, though government funding ceased at that point. In all instances, though, the apprentices had been assessed as having print literacy of a level considered insufficient for their trade learning. During 2009 we liaised directly with the national office of the literacy consortium as well as its regional affiliates which had trained apprentices. Ethics applications were completed to the satisfaction of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

We set out to discover how the various players in apprentices' learning regarded print literacy support, undertaking 46 one-to-one interviews with apprentices, employers, literacy tutors and MACs. In this way we arrived at 14 detailed, triangulated cases each focusing on a given apprentice's learning. This paper focuses on what we learned from the 10 literacy tutors interviewed, here designated as A to J, whom we interviewed both in the South Island (Otago and Marlborough provinces) and North Island (Waikato, Auckland and Northland provinces). Interviews were recorded and transcripts typed out, with interviewees then contacted and given the opportunity to correct the transcripts or to withdraw their permission for use of their interviews.

The data analysis used a classic (emic and interpretivist) grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1998) by which we sought to overview and explain the issues facing the literacy tutors in what was for them a novel context of working with apprentices with low print literacy.

Results

In the interviews the tutors noted the differences between their work with these apprentices and how this work contrasted with what they were much more accustomed to in their other teaching of adult literacy students. More typically the tutors were used to serving the needs of willing learners, often in middle age, who arrived at adult literacy training out of their own volition. Such learners nearly always

described a sense of frustration that their low print literacy was impeding their everyday life activities in various ways. The apprentices, though, had different motivation. Although diagnosed with insufficient print literacy, they had often not recognised the need to advance such capability further, or else resisted confronting this issue. They generally thought that their practical on-site skills were quite sufficient for everyday life purposes and to get their work done. Unlike older literacy learners, they had not elected to attend these lessons ("I don't need this, I've just been sent here") (**Tutor A**).

Some similarities existed, however, in that apprentices did eventually receive a very positive experience from these lessons. In particular, they were relieved that lessons bore little resemblance to what had been their unhappy experience at school.

Close and multiple readings of tutors' interview transcripts suggested three major themes: (1) tutors' **role ambiguity**; (2) apprentices working in **oral and experiential modes** rather than in a print-literate mode; and (3) tutors reverting to an **instrumental approach** to their teaching in response to this.

1. Role ambiguity. Given that providing literacy services to apprentices in a systematic way was a new national initiative, it is unsurprising that some confusion was evident as to what service exactly was to be provided: "Are we their minder as far as the apprenticeship is concerned, or are we teaching them or are we helping them with their assignments?" (**Tutor H**). **Tutor D** commented that "I was told at the beginning you are really helping him with his literacy, you're not really helping him with his unit standards, you're helping him with his literacy so he can complete his unit standards". In other words, the apprentice's literacy development was originally supposed to be a precursor to the apprentice doing his own bookwork rather than for the tutor to take a direct role in completing the necessary bookwork. **Tutor D** also described how "the thing he was working on was the evaluator sheet so he was trying to answer questions that an evaluator would actually ask of him orally. It just didn't make any sense".

Tutor H reported: "So you know his . . . co-ordinator gave [apprentice] a report which he brought to me, and he said, 'you've got to be doing this, this and this, and you haven't been doing it' and I didn't even know we had to do it . . . it's applying what you've learnt to the practice so you've got to fill in when you use cross-cuts saw, what you used it for . . . he got told off for not using the book, so now we're spending a bit of time on that book".

In the absence of clarity about what was supposed to be in the lessons, some tutors for a period of time went back to what they knew best, teaching the mechanics of literacy: "I've been working on just the normal things like spelling, talking to him about what sorts of words he needs to do his unit standards that he's going to need in his work . . . proper use of words, letter sounds and we're just starting from scratch with the alphabet and sounds and initial consonants" (**Tutor D**).

Time pressures were very evident, and seldom was time available to engage in revision or to reinforce capability in literacy. Instead, tutors eventually learned that they had to engage in a conveyor-belt approach to helping students to complete their bookwork, and some seemed to quite like this, possibly because at least this removed their earlier uncertainty about priorities. Some tutors did become

motivated by the nature of their task, as with **Tutor J**: "What I love about it is that in the general field of adult literacy sometimes the goals that you are trying to achieve are somewhere in the distance you can't see them. But with this it's very tangible you know okay we've got these books to do, let's get into them . . . the objective is very simple . . . just get to the end of book four".

2. Oral and experiential modes. Apprentices' strengths in orality and in learning by observation and doing rather than via printed texts were evident to the tutors. **Tutor D** said that, "He knows the jargon and explains things to me … all I can do when I'm trying to help him is write what he says because I don't know enough about it to even make suggestions about it, but he seems to know what he's talking about so and he seems quite confident when he's talking about it, it's just getting down on paper".

Tutors noted the MAs' avoidance of print literacy-based activities if they had a choice of doing so.   **Tutor B**: "They obviously have never done well at school and therefore if you're not very good at it you're not going to like it. I mean they don't like theory, they don't like writing." **Tutor J**: "But in their enthusiasm to be a very good builder . . . they neglect the assignment side, the written side of it . . . they build this up to be quite a problem for them . . . 'here I am I've only got six months to go and I'm only half way through book two'." **Tutor E**: "Apprentices are not really interested in actually learning to read and write . . . all they want to do is get through the heap of manuals . . . although they are looking at the words they are not actually reading".

Apprentices' lack of experience and confidence in coping with knowledge in print form were obvious to the tutors. **Tutor J**: "When they see these four great books in front of them and they look at them and they realise I've got to work right through the four of them you know they're just sort of stunned." **Tutor B:** "Most of them have never passed any exams or anything like that."

Tutor D described how the apprentice "wants to get all the written stuff over and done with so he doesn't have to do it anymore . . . he just wants to get it done so he can finish his apprenticeship basically . . . he's actually said once I've done this I don't need to do any more writing again. He's had a struggle all his life". **Tutor E**: "Mostly you have to remember that apprentices are not interested in learning reading/ writing or spelling. The motivation is just to complete their apprenticeship. They do not see the relationship of literacy and practical work working together to make a complete unit." However, tutors pointed to apprentices' capabilities in practical knowledge other than in writing: "Where there is diagrams he's pretty good on doing that, he actually likes doing that" (**Tutor F**).

The theme of being practical often came up as with **Tutor G**'s comment: "A lot of these people are very practically oriented, they like doing things physically" or "He'd like to get all this written and all the reading stuff out of the way so he can just get on and do the practical work", or "He's quite passionate about what he's doing, it's just getting the paperwork done" (**Tutor D**). Similarly with **Tutor E**: "That is why they learn better if we talk the answers through, I write it down then they copy, it is a better option than trying to teach them just to read and write. It is a far more practical solution and these people are practical. Also many of them lack the ability to concentrate on reading and writing for any length of time . . . this way at least they come back as they see the progress of achieving another few pages done in

their books." **Tutor H** made it quite explicit: "We have a system where he doesn't read everything, we don't look at the notes, we sit and discuss the notes, talk about what it's all about then we look at the questions and I'll say what the question is about."

3. Instrumental approach. It became evident from the interviews that tutors were well aware of the great pressures and difficulties these apprentices with low literacy had faced already, such as unaddressed failure at (or by) their schools. This often resulted in the tutor making allowances for their student, such as by serving as their scribe during their lessons. As noted above, developing the apprentice's print literacy was supposed, at least in theory, to serve as a precursor to the apprentice doing his own bookwork rather than to have the tutor serve as a scribe. However, the very constrained situation both apprentice and tutor found themselves in, in terms of so few hours available, often meant that a more instrumental approach had to be taken.

Tutors would have liked apprentices to build their actual print literacy capabilities, as from prior teaching with their more typical, older students they knew that this could be a gateway into much-improved confidence and capability. They also thought that those who designed the programme had the same aspirations. For example, **Tutor C** said: "Yes they do want them to get their books done but at the same time they want them to be able to have that confidence to move on themselves, to know that it's going to be a huge benefit to their work." Sometimes it appeared that apprentices with better print literacy capabilities did make a reasonably secure transition into improved print literacy. However, while in some cases there was an original orientation to literacy as a goal in its own right, generally this did not survive long once tutoring was underway. Thus the tutoring more typically moved into an instrumental approach to getting the bookwork done.

Past or present stresses on the apprentices often motivated tutors to undertake many of their apprentices' print literacy activities during lessons. **Tutor J**: "They have been defeated . . . a number of times and they don't like to write because they make spelling mistakes and their handwriting isn't very good. So my answer to that is, 'Okay I'm here to help you, you do the thinking, you figure out the answers, we'll figure out the answers to the questions together and because I'm a faster writer than you then we can get more done by me actually doing the writing'."

Tutor D: "He was struggling so much to get these unit standards done . . . his time, his contract is running out … so we've really got the pressure on … and then I met with him last night at six pm and acted as his writer and he dictated stuff to me just to make a bit of progress into his units." **Tutor F**: "As we come across a word if it's difficult and he's having trouble with it we will break it down bit by bit and then yeah I will as we go I will note them in his notebook." **Tutor B**: "My first pupil he was a young volunteer fireman and he wanted to get through the professional pre-training. So we got him through the course." **Tutor D** commented: "Once I found out that this timeframe was so short I said well this is what you've got to do especially in this economic climate, if he leaves that work without having finished his apprenticeship I don't know what would happen to him."

This was enlarged upon by **Tutor J**: "I try to find out where are you through your course of your practical and how much do we have to do to get you to where we are to finish this? And then it becomes a race against time in that the guy has got six or eight months to go, and you've got one and a half books to do." Or "If they have struggled all through school there is no way you are going to fix all their problems in 30 hours" (**Tutor E**).

However, we did not seem to find any evidence that tutors were taking responsibility to do the apprentice's thinking for them. Instead, tutors tended to take over the mechanics of print literacy, such as reading and annotating the workbooks, while the reasoning and logic needed to arrive at a correct answer seemed mainly up to the apprentice. Apprentices were enabled to reason their way through to a correct answer to their bookwork problems by the strong support provided by tutors, and possibly for the first time in their educational experience received close one to one teaching in a warm and supportive atmosphere. It was evident that this resulted in an increase in personal confidence and feelings of self-efficacy: "We had been working I think two or three sessions . . . and one comment was how noticeable was the difference in his attitude in the workplace . . . he was much happier, he was more motivated in what he was doing . . . he has an awakening awareness of his own worth I think" (**Tutor C**). **Tutor I** commented: "In his first session he was kind of like he didn't like it, pretty reticent quite quiet, and now he's like, 'Oh this is cool, this is neat' . . . so his attitude has very much changed towards it."

In some cases, however, tutors came to dislike the instrumentality of their work with the apprentices: "The major problem though is that we're not actually teaching literacy or numeracy, we're getting through the book. Their sole aim is to finish that particular assignment, it's not to learn how to read or write or do maths . . . you could try and encourage them to read more or encourage them to write more, you can't, but they're not that interested" (**Tutor H**).

Discussion

The interviews revealed significant dilemmas for the tutors, both in terms of what they experienced as role ambiguity and in terms of what was for them a novel experience of working with low-literacy apprentices who mainly saw print literacy in highly instrumental ways. Acutely, the limited hours available to them for helping apprentices put severe constraints on what tutors could do to build conventional print literacy. These factors converged to drive tutors into a very instrumental approach to their work with the apprentices.

The tutors' situation was made more complex by various other factors. First, most of the low print-literate apprentices felt as though they had failed at school and consequently experienced great self-doubt and low self-esteem in the print-literate sphere. However, they had much more confidence in themselves as hands-on artisans. Apprentices typically possessed many literacies of their body, tools and materials, and had well-developed capabilities in learning from and interacting with others on the job.

Second, even if the apprentices had had aspirations to become highly print-literate, they would have been undermined by little practical support or reinforcement for this level of print literacy learning in their workplaces. It seemed evident that the trade environments themselves featured an oral-experiential mode of work more than a strong orientation to printed or digital texts as means of learning or knowing (Geiser, 2008; Marchand, 2008).

Third, the apprentices in the present study had encountered teasing and possibly bullying from their peers, along with annoyed and frustrated reactions from their supervisors when it was evident that the apprentices had not reached a sufficient level of competence in reading and handwriting. For example, they generally had difficulties in interpreting basic workplace texts and workmates found it problematic to interpret their hand-written notes. In practice this meant that such apprentices knew that they had to upgrade their basic print literacy to at least a minimal level where they would no longer be teased or bullied. Certainly a working familiarity with the fundamentals of print literacy was essential, but in a work context where orality appeared, in McLuhan's terms, as more like ground than figure, there were strict limits to how developed their print literacy needed to be.

As already noted, McLuhan thought that orality and print literacy could be seen as interchangeable figure and ground, depending on how far print literacy had advanced in a given setting. For apprentices in the present study, orality may be thought of as their primary ground. While they certainly possessed some liminal capabilities in formal print literacy, the more developed modes of operating in literacy such as the capability for sustained deep reading of printed texts were less familiar to them.

Tutors had to learn about this rather convoluted learning landscape on the job, as it were, through interaction with the apprentices; so it was no surprise that it probably took most of them some time to understand how best to serve their students. Tutors however did recognise that although their students had low print literacy, and were uncomfortable with isolated, print-based means of learning, nevertheless they were very competent in experiential, applied means of doing their work.

Then fourth, the funding pressures on tutors, since they were expected to achieve major literacy outcomes in only 30 hours, along with having to cope with inherent uncertainties, seemed to create for the tutors ongoing role ambiguity. Their instrumental approach to getting apprentices through their bookwork ran counter to how tutors had usually viewed themselves. This is around helping students to realise their own potential and become fully participating citizens through advancing their print literacy.

In this way tutors' role ambiguity seemed connected to a kind of emotional dissonance which challenged their traditional identity. On the one hand, because tutors were so committed to their students, they were happy that their students were not abandoning their apprenticeships because of insufficient print literacy, and generally appeared set to complete their time as apprentices. However, tutors were uneasy about their own inability to advance their traditional mission of creating literate and empowered citizens via strengthened literacy.

In this way tutors typically took personal responsibility to manage the interplay between orality and literacy. Given the constraints of the situation, tutors seemed to accept that they needed to leave the MA in his occupational orality, where he appeared at least in a practical sense to be coping, and for the tutor to take on himself or herself the responsibility of putting into writing the answers that the two of them had arrived at via spoken means. In a pragmatic way these tutors tacitly accepted that they had to work within the apprentice's orality, a different kind of culture to the one they were accustomed to, as the learning space. In this way tutors became a kind of bridge between the apprentices' world of occupational orality and the print literacy which the students were supposed (in theory) to be entering.

Tutors were well aware of the sensitivities of their situation and did not always find it easy to talk to us openly about it. The literacy training consortium is, in the author's estimation, doing as well as it possibly can in a very challenging environment in which it is funded to do only a restricted job.

In parallel with this, though, it should be recognised that the close one-to-one support provided by the literacy tutors often did create stronger self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy among the apprentices. In some cases they started to realise that they could demonstrate success in the basic print literacy tasks needed at work, such as handwriting in a way that others could read. We had also learned from interviewing apprentices that the one-to-one support which the literacy tutors was providing was vastly better than what apprentices had experienced in the classroom at school. This encouraged the apprentices to start to re-imagine themselves as different and more successful individuals.

The literature review noted the paradox for those with low print literacy who were required to learn via printed texts, but who themselves knew from personal experience that the real learning in the workplace is done by oral and experiential means. Thus there seems a contradiction between what the enterprise hopes for (literate apprentices) and what it is prepared to actually support (i.e., its usual low preparedness to invest in building apprentices' literacy). This incongruity helps to illustrate why the tutors for the most part quietly acquiesced in helping the MAs to 'do their books' usually to the minimum standard necessary to permit these books to be signed off.

How print literacy at work should be regarded is both complex and contested. The concept of liminal literacy avoids a deficit branding of a person's undeveloped print literacy and opens the door to discussion about what kinds of literacies are most important to grow in which applied settings. Ong (1982) described "shifts from orality to various stages of literacy" (p. 29) and this is probably relevant to most of the apprentices whom we interviewed. We find the term liminal literacy useful, in line with its etymological origin as a threshold, as appropriately invoking passage into more developed kinds of print literacy.

There are of course diverse literacies in apprentices' workplaces, and as already noted, it was evident to us that many apprentices are sophisticated in their literacies of the body, tools, and materials in everyday work practice. Apprentices themselves were generally well aware of their work capability such as in their comments to tutors, noted above, that they thought their practical on-site skills were more than adequate for everyday purposes.

One interesting question for further research raised in the present study is given that the tutor and apprentice were largely engaged in a world of orality (because the opportunity did not really exist to advance the apprentice's literacy), whether that occupational orality is itself sufficient to permit the individual to work at a high level of cognitive complexity. Ong (1982) argued that in a wholly oral society the answer to this would be no: "Oral folk . . . cannot organise elaborate concatenations of causes in the analytic kind of linear sequences which can only be set up with the help of texts" (p. 57). The apprentices in this study do not of course live in a wholly oral society, and are inevitably influenced in many ways by the textual world that surrounds them. Yet this world seems to have less direct impact on them than it does on people whose reading is fluent and frequent, and these apprentices' ability to manage analytic sequences via the use of printed or digital texts must also be quite low. Some tutors made reference to this: "Many of them lack the ability to concentrate on reading and writing for any length of time" (**Tutor E**).

Ultimately the programme's lack of focus on actually building literacy meant that most apprentices, while successfully completing their bookwork and receiving their apprentice's certificate, still remained of low print literacy. In many cases via literacy support they certainly built their confidence far beyond the point at which they had come into the programme. Yet they had probably become further reinforced in their little-changed culture of orality in which their everyday workplace experience continued to sustain them.

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