

Literacy and structural adjustment: sustaining local communities in global economies.

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A paper presented to the 2008 AARE conference
QUT Brisbane, November 30-December 4, 2008

Sustaining local communities in global economies.

In 2008, for the first time in history, there are more people living in urban areas than in rural areas. The move to the cities is partly the culmination of a move that has been going on for centuries, but it is partly also a response to the increasing un-viability of farming in many parts of the world. Food production – farming and food processing and the industries that support it – has traditionally been the major income producing activity of many rural and remote areas. There are many reasons for the move to the cities, some of them more or less entirely determined by local circumstances, but two stand out as generalisable globally.

First, global markets have changed the way that food is traded in many parts of the world, and in doing so they have changed the ways in which it is produced. For instance, Sachs reports that in order to sustain themselves and their families, people living in "remote villages in Africa increasingly deliver flowers, vegetables, or sewn fabrics to markets in Europe, and the United States, linked by cell phones, bar-code monitoring, GPS tags, (to monitor physical location) and other instantaneous tracking devices (Sachs 2008:397). This involves changes to what is produced and how it is produced, it changes what is available to the local community (diminishing access to local goods, increasing access to foreign currency and all that it can buy). It also recalibrates communication practices, foregrounding certain forms of English literacy, especially literate practices generated by remote, technologically enabled engagement. What happens in those African villages is likely to affect vegetable and flower producers in Australia who are increasingly trading in the same global markets. It not only changes what and how they produce, it changes how they trade and how they communicate with their clients.

Second, environmental degradation and climate change have made farming an economically marginal activity in many parts of the world. Many farms can no longer offer a current livelihood, let alone sustainable employment for future generations. New forms of farming must be developed and adopted but this alone will not provide work and income for local communities. Fewer people will farm and they will farm differently. It is becoming harder and harder to sustain local regional communities in global economies, although the local communities which are being sustained tend to be the ones that can engage with global economies on something of their own terms.

If rural and regional communities are to be sustained then existing industries must be expanded, new forms of production and trading evaluated, new industries must be developed and ways of engaging with global economies that sustain rather than threaten local communities need to be developed. This is environmentally, economically and socially challenging for individuals, communities and policy makers at local and national levels. It is these challenges that workforce education must address. In this paper I want to focus on the role of literate practice in structural adjustment.

I am focussing on literate practice here because the idea of a globally networked economy assumes routine, ubiquitous, global literate engagement of a kind that, while readily acknowledged, is not generally understood. If regional and rural communities are to survive, or even thrive, as part of global production networks then the fundamentally textual character of the global economy has to be taken into account and new literate capacities developed at the local level that take into account the dynamic interaction of local communities with global economies. Global economic activity is conducted through literate practice, mostly but not exclusively electronic in character, and it relies on certain kinds of literate actors to animate and transform these texts to trade in global markets. If local communities are to thrive in global economies, however, they must do more than simply develop in people the kinds of identities that can animate remotely produced texts. Communities and individuals need to develop new ways of engaging with the literate practices of globalisation if they, collectively or individually, are to have any degree of autonomy in global economic activity. In this paper I take up these concerns generally and illustrate them in a brief account of one local community situated in an area that has attracted world attention as a global 'water danger' area.

This paper begins an analysis of what kinds of work-related literacy demands structural adjustment place on local and regional communities and begins a consideration of what might constitute strategic approaches to addressing those demands. In this context I am going to treat structural adjustment as a pragmatic policy response to economic and environmental pressures on local communities and economies and the existing industries and work and organization practices associated with them. Specifically I am referring to 'changes in the size and make-up of an economy in terms of the distribution of activity and resources among firms, industries and regions (McCull and Young 2005).' Structural adjustment occurs when existing industries, or work practices, are no longer sustainable because of economic, social or environmental changes. Structural adjustment has economic, environmental and social consequences, as well as causes, and these must be taken into account if local communities are to sustain themselves in current and prospective economic and environmental circumstances.

Structural adjustment and economic, environmental and social sustainability

In Australia at present structural adjustment is especially acute in rural and regional communities which rely on irrigation for food production and processing for domestic and regional markets. The Murray Darling Basin has been identified as one of the ten water danger areas of the world, along with The Horn of Africa, Israel-Palestine, the Middle East, Pakistan and Central Asia, and the US Southwest. All of these water danger zones reduce food security and so increase the likelihood of poverty and of conflict. (Sachs 2008). Sachs argues that if environmentally sustainable methods of farming are not developed and implemented then the ensuing degradation of the land will have an impact not only on the local regional and rural communities of the basin itself, or even on the large urban communities that rely on the Murray Darling Basin for food, but also on communities remote from the Murray Darling Basin but impacted by the environmental flow on effect.

Immediate pressures on communities in the Murray Darling Basin include:

- ❖ dramatic restriction of water for irrigation, and attendant demands to rely less on farming generally for direct employment and as a driver for associated economic activity, to produce different crops for different markets (for instance, to shift from dairy to blood products) and to farm established crops in different ways, especially ways that do not rely on irrigation
- ❖ the development of global agri-businesses and the consequent need to engage with global standards and practices and to be active partners in global production networks
- ❖ the perceived shortage of appropriately skilled labour to support existing and emerging industrial innovation and the apparent inability of the local communities and businesses to develop these skills in existing workforces or local populations.

Structural adjustment of the kind that is or will soon be occurring in these communities is often understood

to adversely affect those already most disadvantaged in a community (indigenous people, migrants, refugees, older workers with little formal education, young people who have little formal education and little or no work experience) often because of their assessed low literacy levels and their perceived inability, at the individual level, to meet the escalating literacy demands of contemporary global economic activity.

The City of Greater Shepparton – a local community in a global economy

The specificity of the local is easily lost in the enormity of the global, but these issues must be dealt with at local sites by the people who live and work there, taking account of local conditions and resources. I want to focus briefly on the City of Greater Shepparton to illustrate the kinds of challenges and resources that define local communities.

The challenges facing the City of Greater Shepparton are typical of those facing local communities in Australia and around the world. Shepparton, with a population of 61,420 people (2006 census) is situated within the principal food growing area of Australia. Food processing accounts for half the region's turnover. Increasingly, agricultural businesses are and will need to be integrated into global economic activity. If they are to be globally competitive they will rely progressively more on Information and Communications Technologies and on the overall technologisation of many work practices in line with the demands of global agri-businesses. This transition will require a differently skilled labour force. A serious problem identified by the community is that, while the overall population of the region is increasing it is also aging as young people move to the cities for education and employment. Thus, while the population is increasing, the available local labour force is decreasing. Paradoxically, there are still unacceptably high numbers of long-term unemployed, especially amongst youth, those over fifty years of age, Aboriginal adults, those from non English speaking backgrounds, ex-offenders and the disabled. Indigenous unemployment is high (80% in the Goulburn Valley Region as a whole).

Regional government and firms have made considerable efforts to attract skilled migrants and guest workers (on infamous 457 visas) to meet perceived skill shortages, skill gaps, and to provide a potential workforce for the unskilled and seasonal work common in the food processing industry. In addition to targeted and short term migration, refugees were initially encouraged to move to Shepparton from the major cities to support the 'unskilled' work in the food processing industry but also because 'these groups possess a wide range of professions, skills and training that, once recognised and approved, may be a major source of workers that could easily fill the regions many vacant positions' (North East Victoria Area Consultative Committee Regional Profile 2005). In other words, the global movement of people is sustaining and 'producing' this rural Australian community.

The Shepparton Irrigation Region (of which the City of Greater Shepparton is the major part) is the largest irrigation region in Victoria in terms of irrigated land and the volume of water used. Dairy farming and stone fruit production are especially heavy users of irrigation as are major industries in the area. The area is currently operating on reduced irrigation entitlement and farmers are reducing their stock loads and radically pruning trees in order to continue to operate.

Nonetheless, twice in 2007 the government warned that it was six weeks away from cutting off water for irrigation completely in order to try and preserve the Murray Darling River system. Groundwater levels in October 2008 were the lowest on record. Some trees have already died. Salinity will affect stone fruit trees soon. Previously locally owned companies like SPC Ardmona have been bought by global companies (in this case Coca Cola Amatil) and they are in the process of reducing their operation in Shepparton. Already they have begun sourcing their fruit from overseas and are developing processing plants in low wage areas in Europe.

In 2003 32% of the population were employed in agriculture and associated services and half the annual turnover of the region is from food processing. Service industries which rely indirectly on the agriculture sector make up a large part of the rest of the economic activity, and employment opportunities, of Shepparton. Agriculture directly and indirectly supports a lot of people and if the agriculture sector fails there will be major unemployment in Shepparton and heavy demands on all welfare services, many of which are only minimally equipped to deal with the newly complex cultural mix of the community.

Shepparton has a TAFE college and three university campuses, a number of private provider organisations and several medium or large companies (including Coca Cola-Amatil) which provide in-house workplace training and/or outsource training to other organisations. The potential reach of these organisations is considerable. Taken together they provide a powerful infrastructure for shaping the direction of the local community.

Generally speaking, however, publicly provided workforce education in the local area is driven by perceived skill shortages as measured by the National Employers Skills Survey 2005 (2006). The methodology adopted by this survey is based largely on a telephone survey of local employers, asking them to identify hard to fill vacancies. This methodology has been comprehensively critiqued by Shah and Burke (2006). In other words, workforce education in the area is 'responsive' to perceptions of skill shortages described by a very imperfect instrument in a context where a large percentage of regional economic activity is in a highly volatile state and all that is clear is that economic activity will have to change radically and quickly, and that will require proactive workforce education of a complex and integrated kind. Such a model does, however, make fundamental challenges to the ways in which workforce education is conceptualised and operationalised.

Literate practice and globalisation

The centrality of (English) literate practice to global economic activity is widely recognised in the development of funded programs for literacy education in Africa, Asia and parts of the Middle East through organisations like the World Bank, and in international survey instruments like ALLNS. In general in these contexts literacy skills are conceptualised as an unproblematic form of human capital. Literacy is seen as a transferrable skill, or set of skills, that contributes to the value of a flexible worker who can use literacy to develop new skills that can be traded in the labour market. Populations with relatively advanced literacy skills are also attractive to global companies seeking to locate part of their operations offshore, or seeking to outsource to remote companies in global supply chains. A literate workforce is understood to be a workforce that can follow written instructions and keep written records – critical activities in global economic activity. Research in Literacy Studies as a field, however, has focussed much more on the effects of globalisation on local literacy practices than on the potentially homogenising and standardising effects of global literacies. It has, in effect, been more interested in the global movement of people than the global movement of capital.

The effects of globalisation, or 'transnationalism' (Warriner 2007) on literate practice at local sites is an emerging preoccupation for Literacy Studies. The most robust and influential work on literate practice over the past 20 years has built on concepts of locality, of situated-ness, and especially on Street's theorizing of local literacy practice as ideological and deeply embedded in the social, political and cultural contexts of the local site (Street 1995). The profound impact of globalisation has, however, forced a reconsideration of what constitutes 'the local' in a context in which the global flows of people, ideas and capital are reshaping local communities and local social and work practices. The central question has been how local literacy practices are connected to larger socio-political movements (Baynham 2004). This question has most frequently been taken up in regard to the global movement of people, and particularly an examination of the distinctive literate practices that communities shaped by permanent or temporary migration develop in order to establish and maintain social relationships. The focus is often on a detailed analysis of the socio-political dimension of the literate practice of segments of a particular geographical community, like Gregory's (2000) study of Bangladeshi-British women and children or Martin-Jones et al's study of Welsh bilingual farmers. Studies like these challenge the assumptions underpinning literacy as a standardised, globally applicable, form of human capital by looking at how literacy functions at the local level to get work done and to maintain social relationships, and what this means for previously unexamined assumptions about literacy and work. Blommaert et al 2005, for instance, pose a critical question - what does 'competence' mean in diasporic contexts? To what extent do we need to reframe 'skill' to take account of globalisation? This critique is generally (although not always, see Barton and Hamilton) implicit rather than explicit.

In Literacy Studies, as in many other disciplinary areas, global flows have forced a further reconsideration of what constitutes the local, and, more particularly, what constitutes a 'community' and how the textual practices that instantiate many communities, including those that are spatially and temporally distributed, might be understood (Farrell 2006, *in press a*; Pennycook 2007). From the point of view of literate practice, the most compelling challenges to established concepts of geographically defined communities are made through analyses of the impact of ICT in various domains like computer games, blogs, wikis and social networking sites like Facebook, and special interest internet communities.

Global Production Networks constitute a particular challenge to established conceptions of workplace communities and to our understanding of the role that literate practice occupies in work practice. Most workers are now, implicitly or explicitly, part of ICT-enabled, work-oriented transnational communities which I have called elsewhere globally distributed workspaces (Farrell 2006) realised to a significant extent through literate practice. They are, simultaneously, part of local, geographically bounded, economically and environmentally situated, communities with specific constraints, possibilities and resources. The viability of these local, geographically bounded communities rests, to a significant extent, on the ways in which these communities engage, economically, socially and environmentally, with technologically-enabled global production networks. In terms of literacy, communities need to develop new literate practices that enable local communities to flourish as they engage citizens (those who have lived in the area a long time as well as new migrants and refugees) with the immediate environmental, social and economic challenges of the local area while simultaneously opening up to global production networks (and the standardised literate practices they require) with an orientation of enlightened collective and individual self interest.

Global Production Networks and Economic, Environmental and Social Sustainability

A significant shift in the field of Economic Geography has been the shift from the concept of the globally distributed supply chain – which emphasises interconnectivity between firms but is essentially linear in concept – and Global Production Networks which also emphasise interconnectivity but in ways that foreground non linear networks and which emphasise both firm and non firm actors. The limitation of the global supply chain was the focus on a single link in the chain, which meant that the broader processes in which the chain is embedded were ignored. GPNs exist in a 'transnational space' and are marked by dynamic action and 'profound power asymmetries'. Coe, Dicken and Hess' (2008) focus is on the usefulness of global production networks as interpretive frameworks for understanding the complex interaction of global networks with local territories. Like Sachs, they stress the interrelatedness of the economic, social, political and cultural as well as the multi-scalar (drawing on Peck) quality of contemporary activity. They, too point out that material economic processes are not easily distinguished from 'nature' and the 'lifeworld'. In other words from an economic perspective it is no longer sensible, or even possible, to distinguish the social and the environmental from the 'economic man'. Production is unequivocally grounded in the environment (Coe et al 2008: 278). Bridge (2008) argues that we need to think about production as 'a process of materials transformation in which environmental change and the organization/disorganization of matter and energy are integral rather than incidental to economic activity' (:77). GPN foregrounds the complex circulations of capital, knowledge and people that underlie the production of any goods. In some ways the concept of Global Production Networks complicates our understanding of how things are produced and traded and what individual people and places have to do with it. There is certainly more to take account of than there used to be. From the perspective of workforce education, however, the concept of global production networks demonstrates the limits of conceptualising education and training (and, in particular, from my perspective in this paper, literacy education) in exclusively economic terms as a form of human capital or in exclusively social terms as local social practice.

The literate practice of global production networks

As I have argued elsewhere (Farrell *in press* 2008), routine global economic activity of the kind that we are all engaged in requires and produces a repertoire of literate practices that connect local, geographically specific, workplaces and workers in routine and almost invisible ways.

These literate practices exploit local knowledge-building potential at the same time as they standardize literate practice (and all that it entails, including the pervasive use of English) across space and time. The

sort of literate practices that I am referring to here include interactive production manuals, routine standards audits like ISO, and telephone, email and sms communication, intranets, wikis and blogs that individuals and organizations use to connect people to each other. These common literate practices create the ligatures that join up the global production networks, but they cannot, and do not, completely replace the local literate practices that sustain local work practices.

In local workplaces all over the world global literacies and local literacies are in constant conversation, producing new textual forms that foreground certain types of knowledge and marginalize other types, that foreground certain kinds of working identities and marginalize others (: 1 *in press* 2008).

Specifically, people in Shepparton (and other local/regional/remote communities) currently need to use literacy to:

1. *Comply with global standardisation processes:* ISO, QOS etc, as well as the quality assurance documentation demands of global corporations like Ford, GE etc. Even very small firms who supply these large companies need to do this. Some of this involves documentation and general accountability but some of it involves changing local work practices from practice-based to document-based. These are changing all the time.
2. *Confront skill shortages:* skill shortages are chronic across the developed world and likely to remain so, even if unemployment increases. This is because no form of training can keep up with the pace of change caused by hyper-competition in global markets. Literacy skills that allow existing and potential employees to access and appropriate new text-based work-related knowledge quickly are the fastest and cheapest way to deal with skill shortages. Young people will need to do this over and over again in their working lives. They will need skills to figure out what is critical and what is marginal, how it fits or challenges what they already know etc The texts they use are less and less likely to be print-based because print based material is expensive to up date – much more likely to be interactive online materials etc.
3. *Navigate multi-modal, globally distributed, workplaces.* **All** work places are multimodal – they rely on some or all of print, fax, pager, landline, mobile phone (for text and voice and internet), video conferences and video walls, intranet, internet, email, messaging systems, business to business exchanges in virtual workspaces, wikis, blogs, facebook, YouTube, multiplayer online games used for training etc. Companies need networks and they need information and they need both quickly. While they need employees who are familiar with these technologies they need them to understand how they are or can be used in the workplace, which is not always the same as the ways they are used in social life. The point is not that people need to be familiar with any particular technology – it is likely to be out of date by the time they get into the relevant workforce. They need to be able to understand communications technologies as textual phenomena and understand the qualities of the texts they produce: what they can do, how they can fail, what their potentials are and what their risks are.
4. *Identify and develop new literate practices* that exploit the complex knowledge of communities shaped by local histories and the global movement of people.

Conclusions

The implications of the global interactions of economic, social and environmental dimensions at local sites present educators with profound challenges that cannot simply be addressed by arguing that we need to organise around a benign and intuitively recognisable local ‘community’. Communities are neither intuitively recognisable nor reliably benign. Geographic communities are networks of overlapping social relationship networks that often have competing interests and competing values.

Nor can they be addressed by mass literacy education programs designed to produce populations literate in the standardised and standardising practices of global corporations and global standards frameworks.

Global production does not occur in some kind of fifth dimension remote from virtual or material communities or local or global environmental ecosystems.

Education and training about literacy, especially in work-related settings, needs to equip people with the kinds of skills that allow them to recognise and generate the literate practices that animate global production networks in ways that sustain local communities – socially and environmentally as well as economically. This requires sophisticated understanding and critical evaluation of historically embedded, situation-specific local literacy practices (and understandings about what literacy is and what it signifies). It requires sophisticated understanding and critical evaluation of historically and socially embedded standardising global literate practices. It requires the capacity to generate the literate practice – locally and globally – that can bring those domains into conversation and keep them there. This cannot be a long term, or even a medium term, goal. It needs to be achieved now. So local communities need help to identify the resources in their local communities, to identify and source other resources, and to teach people on the job (or off the job, if that's where they are). This kind of huge re-orientation has been done before – its not impossible. The first step is to recognise that it needs to be done.

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