

**Book review**

**Literacy in the lives of working-class adults in  
Australia, dominant versus local voices**

Stephen Black  
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Reviewed by Trace Ollis  
Associate Professor, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

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Stephen Black's important book titled 'Literacy in the lives of working-class adults in Australia, dominant versus local voices', draws our attention to the important role of literacy in the lives of working-class people. The book provides first-hand accounts or the voices of people who have usually been labelled, or pathologized by others as lacking appropriate literacy skills or lacking the level of literacy to participate fully in society in their everyday lives. Black's account of literacy in working-class adults' lives draws on empirical research over 30 years of research and teaching. It focuses on the voices of those who are at times labelled 'low literate' or 'deficient in literacy skills' and the discourses and discursive practices that account for such labelling people as 'other'. The book asks critical questions such as: What role does literacy play in their lives? How does literacy affect their participation in work? Does

literacy affect their participation in society?

The empirical data draws on the experiences of adults from diverse backgrounds such as, prisoners, students engaged in Vocational Education and Training (VET), local council workers, manufacturing workers, and people who are managing a chronic health condition. What is especially important about this book is its focus on the voices of ‘people from below’ drawing on what he refers to as ‘critical ethnographies’ and noting Australia has an absence of first-hand accounts of ‘literacy practices’ that impact the lives of working-class people. As Black (2022, P. 190) notes, we need to understand; ‘how groups of working-class adults manage their everyday lives while subject to a dominant discourse on literacy that oppresses them and subjects them to symbolic violence’. Black argues one of the aims of this book is to draw attention to issues related to dominant views and perceptions of adult learners who are viewed as low literate, to examine the role of literacy and working-class people from their own perspectives, indeed, as Black (2022, p. 179) notes, ‘in their own voices’. The methodology for this research and the data analysis draws on the significant strengths of ethnography in conjunction with a social practice approach to literacy, which encourages dialogical engagement with the participants, generating thick descriptions of data. Black (2022, P. 179) carefully illuminates how working-class adults navigate literacy by drawing on the narratives of usually silenced and marginalised students. Black provides an onto-epistemological positioning of himself as a teacher-researcher and academic, locating himself as a frustrated history teacher, a teacher and a program leader of adult literacy education courses in a TAFE (further education) and an academic researcher in a university.

The Whitlam Labor government introduced literacy practices in TAFE intuitions in the 1970’s. Principles of adult literacy education were based on Freirean-inspired problem-posing conversation, rejecting ‘front end’ loading models of pedagogy by focusing on what is now widely known as ‘student-centred’ pedagogy. Where both teachers and students are engaged in the process of constructing knowledge, teacher to students and students to teacher. Central to this pedagogy were practices that empowered students through conscientisation and by developing their self-confidence (Freire, 1972).

Black conceptually locates his critical social practice positionality

regarding literacy education in the historicity of the post-Fordist period of economic activity, which saw a rapid expansion and acceleration of the global capitalist economic system. The advent of the project of neoliberalism saw governments' increasing reliance on notions of human capital theory to 'future proof' the workforce as economies adjusted to the forces of global capitalism. A decline in manufacturing industries is used to justify governments' fixation with policy manifestations, developed with human capital theory imperatives, justified by discourses relating to increased 'skills shortages'. In addition, the advent of managerialism and discourses of economic and work efficiencies is what Gee (1998) notes as 'the contemporary condition of work', where workers are expected to work smarter, faster and in ways that generate greater efficiency and profit. This political-economic context of neoliberalism's impact on work is important because it provides a critical, passionate, and rich context for understanding literacy learning policy in Australia. It includes increased monitoring of those who found themselves unemployed and the introduction of mandatory training regimes that link literacy to adult employment prospects. He claims:

*In the context of adult literacy programmes in the TAFE system of VET that have dominated much of my working life and research, my perspective is that in this neoliberal era, the almost exclusive curriculum focuses on literacy as foundation skills for employability serves primarily to control and regulate working-class students in the interests of capital (Black, 2022, P.).*

Notable in the book is Black's considered critique of high stakes testing and big data largely promoted and supported by the OECD and primarily driven by the imperatives of neo-liberal capitalism. He claims, 'key international organisations have demonstrated the power to name and define literacy and, in so doing, provide an explanation for continuing poverty and inequality in societies' (2022, p. 184). He argues the OECD is the main international organisation that defines and names literacy to such an end that it influences and dominates literacy policy in many advanced Western countries, including the UK, Canada, and the United States, permeating policy discourses in Australia. Policy migration ensues that what counts as literacy in Australia is largely determined by data from high stakes testing from quantitative data sets. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses OECD surveys (the ALL

survey), which have largely driven Australian literacy policy imperatives. In this ‘vocational turn’ the shift has been made from more traditional views of literacy to an economistic view identified in Australia as ‘foundation skills’. Black (2022, p.185), notes OECD surveys with a focus on labour market “competencies” are infused with human capital theory.

The book commences and concludes by returning to a vignette about a heightened awareness of Australians’ lack of literacy skills, primarily due to a TV series called ‘Lost for Words’, which tracks the experiences of eight students as they progress through an intensive literacy program. The program largely affirms deficit views of literacy learners as struggling, feeling shame and embarrassment, entrenching a deficit ideology of literacy learners and blaming the victim narratives about those with low literacy. A promotional tool used in the program claims that 7 million adults, or more than 43 per cent of the population in Australia, do not have the required literacy skills to navigate everyday life. In addition, the Australian government called for public submissions to a Senate inquiry on Adult Literacy and its importance. The book carefully uncovers confected moral panics about the state of literacy in Australia, dominant views about working-class people and literacy, blaming the victim discourses about low literate learners, their lives and experiences. As Black (2022, p. 16), rightly claims:

*In this era of neoliberal capitalism, it is in the interests of governments and dominant groups to focus on victim-blaming individuals with literacy problems because it effectively shifts responsibility away from the need to address the broader structural issues of social class inequalities in society.*

The book’s data largely dispels many of the myths around literacy learning, working-class learners’ lives and adult learners’ agency. It reveals how working-class people navigate any issue they may have with literacy by using relational supports such as peers, family, and relationships to navigate literacy in their everyday lives. One example from the data explores literacy in the lives of prisoners, whilst the scholarly literature frequently refers to prisoners being overrepresented in the data as having lower levels of literacy than the general population, and the Prisoners’ narratives outlined in the book reveal themselves as ‘low literate’. Black claims the prisoners he worked with displayed agency and were more than able to draw on a range of strategies and

supports to manage and mediate literacy in their lives both within the prison and on the outside.

In the chapter on production workers and literacy, the advent of workplace language literacy and numeracy programs is largely driven by industry discourses regarding concerns about the impact of literacy and numeracy in manufacturing industries. Black claims the dominant view of both government and industry is that workers did not have the required literacy and numeracy skills to rise to the challenge of technological advancements in the manufacturing industries. Notwithstanding this, many manufacturing industry workers were migrants whose first language was not English. Contradictions and tensions were revealed quickly as the literacy teachers realised the workers revealed no evidence of literacy or numeracy deficiencies that would impact the work they were performing. The work was routine and performed along traditional 'Fordist' production lines; it required few literacy and numeracy practices. Workers showed little interest in workplace literacy training other than to seek advice from the teacher about their children's literacy and how they could prevent them from doing routine, monotonous and poorly paid jobs like their parents!

These are only two examples of the chapters that reveal the narratives of working-class adults and their experiences of literacy and literacy learning. Other chapters on unemployed workers attending mandatory literacy programs as a requirement of their unemployment programs are uncovered, Vet English languages and literacy are explored and health literacy for people with diabetes are equally myth-dispelling and illuminating regarding the resources, and strategies used to navigate literacy issues. Misrecognition of issues relating to literacy compounds deficit views of working-class adults; such an approach reinforces symbolic violence and doesn't acknowledge issues of the social and cultural capital of working-class adults that may impede access to literacy support structures and resources (Bourdieu, 1990). Not surprisingly Black (2022, pp. 187-188) concludes the chapter by reflecting on the violence of discursive practices regarding literacy:

*In each of the chapters in this book, I have demonstrated how conceptualisations of literacy promoted by dominant groups have presented working-class adults as deficient and unworthy, representing a violence against working-class people. The*

*standardised autonomous forms of literacy promoted by the OECD, is an ideological tool that represent dominant society's values and norms and is used against working class people; it oppresses them.*

In conclusion, this important book provides a critical account of literacy learning in the lives of working-class adults in Australia. Drawing on empirical data from various research projects on working-class adults and literacy. It outlines the prevailing practices of adult learning educators who use Freirean-inspired pedagogies in TAFE (VET) colleges in Australia, focussing on students' learning needs. The book provides a critical and powerful account of Australian Literacy policy influenced by the imperatives of government and industries in its unfettered embracement of neo-liberalism ideologies and the advent of a massive acceleration of global capitalism from the 1980s. This book is for anyone who wants to understand the history of literacy policy and practices in Australia. Its strength lies in the narrative accounts of the working-class adults' perceptions of locating, understanding and illuminating some of the tensions and contradictions regarding their literacy, and limited by deficit views of literacy and adult learning. Fortunately, we continue to see working-class adults empowered through learner-centred practices in Adult Community Education (ACE) settings such as Neighbourhood Houses, Men's and Women's sheds, Learn Locals, Mechanics institutes, libraries and other adult learning spaces. This book will be of interest to both policymakers and governments and to adult learning and literacy scholars, teachers and students who want to understand the literacy field and the experiences of working-class adults and literacy.

## References

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