

UEA Literacy Inequalities Conference 2009

Title: (Un)veiling Desire: re-defining relationships between gendered adult education subjects and adult education programmes.

Conference theme: Literacy, change and contestation

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My underlying argument, in this paper, is that conceptualisations of power as a commodity, through which the 'disempowered-as-illiterate' subject moves towards becoming an 'empowered-as-literate' subject, forces constructs of identities into a powerful/powerless dichotomy which does not always do justice to diverse experiences. The claimed 'empowering' intentions of adult education programme and policy practice may, in reality, contribute to the dominance of restrictive disciplining and regulatory discursive practices. Moving away from emancipatory trajectories of adult education programmes that allege only liberation from domination, through 'literacy', can promise freedom points to another position of hope. Drawing on Foucauldian analysis, I explore sites of resistance as possibilities of transforming 'structures of understanding' at different levels. Officially validated and recognised transformations, in adult education programme as well as policy understandings, of the 'illiterate' subject may also hope to include choices in postures of autonomy (see Spivak 1996) made by programme participants in other 'fields' of socio-cultural practice linked to their material realities. Subsequently, 'empowerment' of the 'illiterate Indian village woman' cannot solely be imagined as a product of laws, policies and institutional discursive practices (see, for example, Gouws 2005; Rai 2003 on gender mainstreaming and Mosse 2005 on aid policy and practice). The 'illiterate Indian village woman' represented as a site of resistance, throughout this paper, displaces homogeneous representations of the 'illiterate' which situate her in the role of 'dependent' or 'victim', as failed attempts to rob her of her historical and political agency (Mohanty 1996). Through narrating other 'images' of refusal in my ethnographic vignettes, I hope to recognise different individuals' sense of agency, at all levels, as embedded in and evolving through forms of collective action that activate differences in order to develop possibilities and sustain hope for transforming historically rooted discursive practices of inequality. I provide ethnographic accounts of resisting 'literacy' programme participants, based in different villages in Bihar (Northern India), as accounts of resistance impacted on by notions of norms, translating and interpreting Others, networks and empowerment.

