

Are New Zealand managers getting less literate and, if so, should we care?

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Abstract

According to the ALL (Adult Literacy and Life Skills) survey, New Zealand managers' literacy competencies fell substantially in the ten years 1996 to 2006. This may undermine national aspirations that New Zealand managers should be able to succeed in what is usually described as the competitive, knowledge-based international economy of the future, where sophisticated, creative capabilities in the workplace are increasingly deemed necessary. Persisting skill shortages may have brought into managerial ranks people with less than desirable education for management work, while high demands on managers' time often make it difficult or impractical for them to upgrade their functional literacy. However, a strong challenge to surveys like ALL comes from situated learning literacy researchers, who reject the cognitively-based theories of learning on which such surveys are based, insisting that literacies can be understood only within grounded contexts. This paper attempts to assess the implications of the particular nature of managerial work for literacy learning.. Insights from situated learning research will remain critical in revealing barriers and conduits to improved managerial literacy, but, in our view, surveys like ALL also provide some valid and complementary ways of exploring the state of managerial literacy. For research into literacy to progress, this paper argues that the impasse between situated learning and cognitive/ policy theory must be resolved, permitting learners' and their teachers' aspirations for strengthened functional literacy to be supported by inspirational and consensual literacy theory.

Keywords

literacy, literacies, managerial literacy, Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey

Introduction

The release by the Ministry of Education of the 2006 New Zealand ALL (Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey) results during 2008 contained a revelation disturbing to many. In comparison to essentially a very similar survey undertaken in New Zealand ten years previously (the 1996 IALS, International Adult Literacy Survey) the document literacy capabilities of respondents describing themselves as managers now showed a radical decline. Back in 1996 managers' document literacy had not looked especially impressive with 29% of managers assessed as possessing 'low' document literacy, a level thought to be less than the minimum needed for work in a modern economy. However, 10 years later the results were substantially worse, with 44% of respondent managers apparently displaying low document literacy. This paper explores this rather staggering statistic and its implications using a theoretical lens that embraces both the study of managerial work and insights from situated learning theory.

ALL is an international adult literacy study across 15 countries jointly managed by a collection of agencies including the OECD, Statistics Canada, and the US Dept of Education. It produces internationally comparable statistics on adults' competencies in four areas: prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving.

Prose literacy refers to the skills of sense-making from continuous text such as news stories, fiction, or newspaper editorials. Document literacy means ability to understand discontinuous text such as in charts, forms, maps, tables, graphs and diagrams. Numeracy pertains to the knowledge and competencies of performing mathematical calculations; while the problem-solving component of ALL had respondents attempt to define the nature of problems presented to them and then solve them, in situations where they probably possessed no previous specific knowledge of how to analyse such data.

From May 2006 to March 2007 interviewers from the New Zealand research company National Research Bureau, contracted by the Ministry of Education, completed over 7000 90-minute home-based interviews with a nationally representative sample of adults aged 16-65. In addition to the literacy and numeracy component, ALL also explored a collection of demographic, health and socio-economic variables, including use of ICT (Education counts, 2008).

Why are governments around the world participating in big macro literacy surveys such as IALS and ALL? The argument is, essentially, that modern economies are becoming

progressively and inevitably more demanding and knowledge-based, newly including much greater reliance on utilising the potential of ICTs. In tandem with this, the nature of work is also considered to be evolving and becoming more complex, requiring heightened levels of adaptability, lateral thinking and creativity from people in the workplace. Much higher expectations are now evident in respect of literacy and numeracy in occupations and jobs of all kinds and character, so that “new technology and rising global competition are increasing workplace skills demands” (Hilton, 2008, p. 63). Literacy and numeracy are thought to be of rising importance in helping employees to function as independent, proactive thinkers in increasingly more challenging knowledge-based work environments.

Literacy levels

- In the IALS and ALL surveys, respondents’ prose and document literacy were assessed against what are described as five cognitive levels (Education counts, 2008). These levels mean as follows:

One	Can read simple documents and perform simple, one-step calculations
Two	Can search a document, filtering out some simple distracting information, making low-level inferences
Three	Can perform somewhat more complex information-filtering and carry out some multi-stage inferences
Four	Can integrate information from a long passage and demonstrate more complex inferences
Five	Can perform high-level syntheses, employ specialist knowledge and not be distracted by multiple complexities or distracters in the data.

Very low literacy is thought of as comprising level one. Low literacy is held as meaning levels one and two. Very high literacy is designated by level four or five – but because few respondents score at level five, typically for reporting purposes responses at levels four and five are aggregated. Level three is sometimes described as being the minimum level needed to cope successfully with work in a modern economy, so that levels one and two are considered to be “below those needed to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work” (Literacy, language and numeracy, 2008, p. 6).

Occupational groupings

The IALS and ALL participants were allocated by self-report into nine occupational groupings which employed the ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupation) standard. These are **manager** (legislators, senior administrators and managers), **professional, technician** (technicians and associate professionals), **clerical** (clerical workers, secretaries, receptionists), **service and sales** (service workers and shop and market sales workers), **agriculture and fisheries** (orchardists, fishery workers, farmers), **trades** (craft and related trades workers), **machine** (plant and machine operators and assemblers), and **elementary** (cleaners, labourers).

Between the 1996 and 2006 surveys, as a proportion of the working adult population, three of these nine occupations decreased minimally by one percentage point (**clerical, service and sales, and trades**). However two occupations decreased quite radically, **ag and fish** (nine to five percent of the population) and **machine** (13 to seven percent of the population). The decline in these occupations, if the survey findings are to be taken literally, suggest a substantial change in the nature of work being done in society.

Four occupations increased as a proportion of the population but the only two showing a major rise were manager (from 11% to 17% of the population) and professional (from 11% to 16% of the population). We observe that the decline of agriculture and machine operators (collectively from 22% to 12% of the working population) in tandem with the increase in managers and professionals (from 22% to a full third of the working population) nicely tracks the transition to an economy showing characteristics of postmodernity.

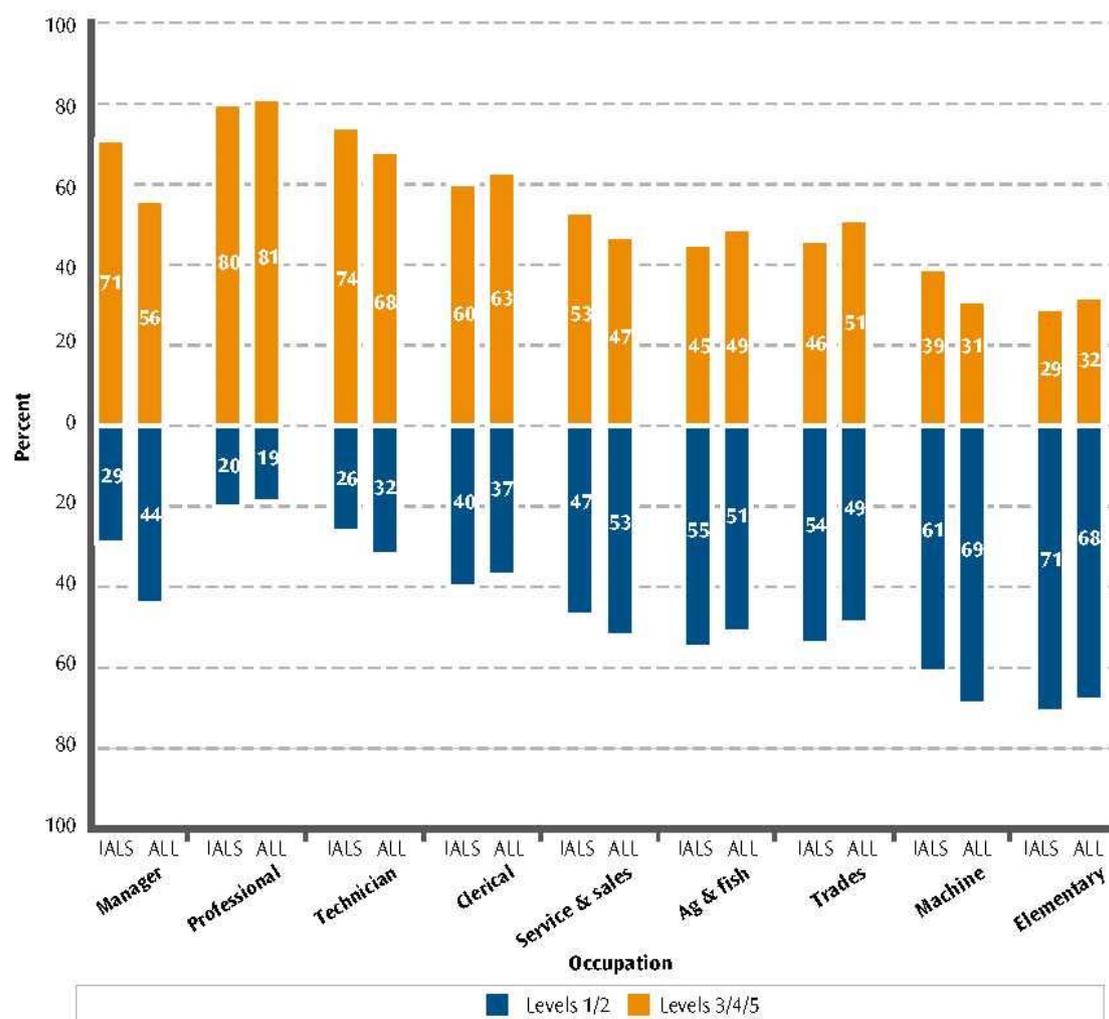


Figure 1. Document Literacy Levels, IALS (1996) and ALL (2006). Source: Satherley, Lawes & Sok, 2008, p. 31.

In respect of managers in Figure 1, note that in 1996 29% of people describing themselves as managers were at IALS levels one and two, i.e., low literacy, and therefore were considered in international policy circles likely not to be of a level sufficient to permit them to function well in a modern, complex economy. But by 2006, as stated, 44% of managers now performed at the low document literacy levels of ALL one and two, with the remaining 56% distributed across levels three to five.

Therefore, from the ALL statistics, it appears that a substantial and increasing percentage of managers possess only low document literacy. If managerial literacy really is in such radical decline, then this does not bode especially well for New Zealand's national aspirations to have a managerial workforce that is capable of keeping up with and even improving its standing among developed nations such as in the OECD. Just over half of the managerial

group being able to achieve at a literacy level of anything above “poor” is hardly an encouraging sign in respect of this country’s ability to foot it in what is often described as a highly competitive, knowledge-based and sophisticated international economy of the future.

Most of the discussion in the current paper is about document literacy (since this is the measure on which most statistics are available from the Ministry of Education) but managers’ prose literacy featured an even more radical slump:

IALS Survey 1996	
Proportion of managers with prose literacy levels 3, 4 or 5	74.3%
Proportion of managers with document literacy levels 3, 4 or 5	70.9%
ALL Survey 2006	
Proportion of managers with prose literacy levels 3, 4 or 5	54.7%
Proportion of managers with document literacy levels 3, 4 or 5	55.8%

(Source: P. Satherley, personal communication, January 29, 2009)

That is, document literacy fell by around 15 percentage points while prose literacy dropped by almost 20 percentage points over the ten year period.

Document literacy and other occupations

It is noteworthy that no occupation other than managers featured such a sharp drop in document literacy. Five of the nine occupational groupings improved their document literacy statistics over the ten years (professional, 1% point; clerical, 3%; agricultural, 1%; trades, 5%; and elementary, 3%). This suggests some success in measures put in place to improve literacy training and development in respect of trades and possibly clerical literacy. However four occupations declined in document literacy (manager, 15% drop; technician, and service and sales, both 6% drop; and machine, 8% drop). It is evident therefore that the falls in document literacy were overall more substantial than the increases, with the plummet in managerial document literacy much greater than any other.

How do the NZ results compare internationally?

How do the local results stand in relation to the other countries that engaged in both IALS and ALL with which New Zealand usually compares itself: Australia, Canada and the USA?

Interestingly, both Canada and the US suppressed their occupation data from the ALL

international dataset, apparently because of confidentiality concerns (P. Satherley, personal communication, January 29, 2009). Usually confidentiality has to do with ensuring that the privacy of natural persons is not compromised. However it is difficult to see how this could apply in the instance of very large national surveys, so the nature of those confidentiality concerns is not yet clear.

Then “Australia’s IALS and ALL datasets are available only within the Australian Bureau of Statistics because of Australia’s statistics legislation” (P. Satherley, personal communication, January 29, 2009). Therefore comparisons between Australia and NZ are not at this stage available.

In our view, ideally, Australian scholars with an interest in the subject should lobby the Australian government and the ABS with a view to seeing the results released. From the New Zealand perspective it would be desirable to undertake international comparisons with Australia in the first instance, then the USA and Canada, with the aim of seeing whether or not the NZ results are replicated elsewhere. If so, we could look for common trends across countries; if not, explore what it might be about the New Zealand context that could help to explain the results.

In the meantime, until any such release of comparative statistics, it is still desirable to explore the nature and correlations of the New Zealand situation by making comparisons, where possible, with internationally-accepted theoretical models. Doing so is normally the responsibility of literacy scholarship, and is not usually within the ambit of the Ministry of Education which is instead charged with making the statistics available to interested researchers.

Skills shortages and literacy decline

What are possible factors that might help to explain the apparent decline in document literacy capabilities? Pertinent to this is the issue of skills shortages, which were quite major and persistent in the years before 2006. The NZ Careers Services Dept works on the assumption that “occupations where less than 80% of vacancies are filled with a suitable candidate are typically regarded as experiencing skill shortages” (Skills shortages in NZ, n.d.), and indicated that skills shortages existed across the board in varying degrees among all the major ISCO categories:

Trades workers – 37% (of vacancies filled with a suitable candidate)

Service and sales workers – 51%

Professionals – 54%

Plant and machine operators and assemblers – 54%

Technicians and associate professionals – 57%

Clerks – 57%

Legislators, administrators and managers – 61%

Elementary occupations (such as labourers and freight handlers) – 63%

Agriculture and fishery workers – 65%.

Four of these nine could be described as “old economy” (trades, plant, elementary and agriculture) while the other five with skills shortages could be described as more closely corresponding to typical descriptions of the “new economy” (service, professionals, technicians and associate professionals, clerks, and managers).

Note as well that during the ten years to 2006 significantly more people were drawn into employment, some for the first time, by the demands of a growing economy. According to the IALS and ALL surveys, in 1996 68% of the adult population were in employment and 12% were homemakers, but by 2006 72% were employed, while homemakers had fallen by a third to 8% (Satherley, Lawes & Sok, 2008, p. 17). It is also relevant that homemakers and the unemployed usually score lower on IALS/ALL than persons in paid employment (e.g., Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000; Satherley, Lawes & Sok, 2008).

It is possible that because of persisting skills shortages in the years prior to 2006, people with insufficient aptitudes (such as in literacy) were inappropriately promoted into jobs with managerial or supervisory responsibilities. If a bulge of new recruits with lesser capabilities such as in literacy did in fact find its way into supervisors’ and managers’ jobs because better-qualified people were not available, then it can be surmised that such personnel’s capability to cope with sophisticated workplace demands might not be as secure as desirable.

Note though that the same effect did not apply in respect of professionals. They too represented a skills-short area, but rather than declining, their document literacy improved slightly over the period. We speculate that this is because professions generally have specific expectations of their members’ education (and therefore of their literacy). In contrast, entry into management positions has historically not been dependent on newcomers being educated to a professional person’s standard.

And, as well, job title enhancement?

The categories of service workers, professionals, technicians, clerks and managers were in 2006 and apparently still are at the date of writing apparently experiencing skill shortages. Therefore it might not be surprising if some employers were to enhance job titles with a supervisory flavour where possible, with the aims of making them sound more attractive, along with improved recruitment or retention.

Possibly occupational title inflation might have been a factor in the rise (from 11% to 17% of total) of jobs described as professionals or managerial. Given the increasing importance of the service economy, it seems unusual as noted above that the percentage of people in clerical and service and sales should drop, even minimally at one percentage point, while professional and manager should both rise radically. In 2006 the professional and manager categories now comprised a total of 33% of the working population rather than 22% just ten years previously. This appears as a rather large change in occupational types in a short timeframe.

If this kind of title inflation has in fact been occurring then the nature of work actually done becomes more difficult to elucidate and the capability to make accurate comparisons between, say, 1996 and 2006, becomes more challenging.

However, an additional factor in some instances may be that organisations started to rethink the nature of what their personnel do. If during the ten years 1996 to 2006 the work done by employees actually started to include a greater emphasis on professional or supervisory responsibilities, then it may have been that enterprises realised the need to give more recognition to the actuality of professional, supervisory or managerial factors in the work and jobs could have been renamed accordingly.

While the reasons for the poor results for managers' literacy outcomes are not yet fully understood, we surmise therefore that the apparently radical and worrying decline in managers' document literacy capabilities may arise from multiple causes. In particular, a greater cohort of younger and less qualified people may have been drawn up into professional or supervisory roles for which they were not especially well prepared. Then there was possibly a change in the ways in which organisations understand and then describe the activities and responsibilities of their personnel to better reflect actual professional or supervisory work characteristics.

Time and work overload

How much opportunity or time do managers have to upskill themselves in areas such as literacy? Various commentators have observed on the paucity of systematic training and development for managers that typically exist, especially in small businesses (Coetzer, 2005). Or even apart from whatever formally organised training and development programmes might exist, how much time do they have to undertake activities such as everyday book or magazine reading that may help to strengthen traditional literacy?

There is a good deal of anecdotal evidence about the increasing pressures on managers at work, especially and often associated with the skills shortage, but relatively less reliable data. People who are seriously overloaded at work are probably less able or likely to engage in formal or informal personal development work that might build literacy such as personal interest in further education, night classes and the like.

One recent New Zealand study, however, has shed some light on where the pressures of overwork seem to feature most strongly (*Working long hours*, 2008). This research was derived from the 2006 NZ national census, and defined 'long hours' as when more than 50 hours were worked per week. There is evidence that "a number of the occupations where long hours are most prevalent, in terms of absolute numbers of workers, are management positions" (p. 20).

Occupations are then ranked by the proportion of respondents who state that they work over 50 hours (*Working long hours*, 2008, p. 22). At the top of the list of occupations featuring long hours workers is the category of farmers and farm managers (57% of whom work 50+ hours per week); next chief executives, general managers and legislators (49% work 50+); road and rail drivers (49% 50+); mobile plant operators (47% 50+); hospitality, retail and service managers (35% 50+); and specialist managers (33% working 50+ hours). Thus of these six longest-working occupations, four are wholly or partially managerial in character. (Educators might be interested to know that the occupation ranked seventh in the long hours stakes was educational professionals, with 32% reporting they worked 50+ hours per week.)

The scenario for managers that starts to emerge from statistics of this nature provides an account of people who are systemically overloaded. For these individuals the extent of opportunities in the workplace or even in what remains of their leisure time to upskill in areas such as literacy, is probably much less than desirable. It is often observed that improving literacy is complex, demanding, and a slow and painful process, never amenable to quick

fixes (Sligo, Comrie, Olsson, Culligan & Tilley, 2005). For most people, advancing their literacy inevitably takes time and is an iterative process. Learners build their knowledge by returning to earlier lessons or insights previously obtained to consolidate and create new strata of literacy awareness (Sligo, Watson, Murray, Comrie, Vaccarino, & Tilley, 2007).

Questions raised, however, about the appropriateness of tests like IALS/ ALL make it desirable to step back and address the issue from a different theoretical standpoint.

IALS/ALL and its critics

The nature of what the word literacy means has changed radically over time. Generations ago it meant the ability of people individually to demonstrate they could derive meaning from simple texts. Also, people's understanding of literacy was largely binary in nature, so that a person was deemed to be either literate or illiterate. Now, however, the dominant definition of literacy on which tests like IALS or ALL are based is: "Literacy is using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Kirsch, 2003, p. 182). In other words, literacy is no longer a binary construct, but instead exists on a continuum. Importantly, the emphasis has changed substantially from someone's individual sense-making derived from a particular text, to how they use their knowledge in order to achieve particular personal or collective goals.

There is a strong academic critique of IALS/ALL, within a broad ambit of what is sometimes known as New Literacy Studies (NLS), social practice or situated learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). NLS authors point out that "more than two decades of critical, empirical and theoretical work ... is neither acknowledged nor allowed to influence the (IALS) study's design, conduct, or reported conclusions" (Graff, 1997, p. 4). In the 12 years since this concern with IALS was stated, an impasse has remained between the cognitive science-based assumptions of the IALS/ALL proponents, and the situated learning researchers who stress the grounded nature of literacy (or rather, literacies), arguing communication competencies at work or in the community can be understood only in particular contexts.

NLS proposes that it makes little sense to research literacy via pencil and paper tests such as IALS and ALL that possess no connection to respondents' everyday existence and which, therefore, cannot take any real cognisance of how the world works for such respondents in their individual work and community lives (Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000). In similar vein, Hamilton and Barton (2000) offer the view that "what the test (IALS) is really measuring is

an artificially constructed *test literacy* – This is *a literacy*, but it is not *literacy*” (p. 385) (italics in original).

Hunter (2004) challenges the value of the cognitive theories of learning and literacy popular in the 1970s and 1980s on which tests like IALS are based, pointing to their relative inability to explain the complexity of how people actually behave and interact in real settings. She contrasts cognitive theories of literacy unfavourably with social practice theories that demonstrate how literacy is closely engrained in everyday contexts. Given that employment of knowledge for particular purposes is the new orientation of IALS/ALL literacy, it is not surprising to encounter criticism about tests which draw inferences about literacy from how a person in isolation attempts to create meaning from a text, rather than explore what they actually do with any such knowledge.

Some authors (e.g., Gomez, 2000) draw a distinction between literacy derived from a person’s experience, as opposed to literacy derived from data as in a text. Gomez gives the example that a person in the countryside stung by an insect may know from experience what the remedy is, but a person from an urban setting also stung may be at a disadvantage in not having relevant experience, and also, presumably, not necessarily having immediate access to relevant helpful data to achieve their goal of counteracting the insect sting. But “in the urban context, society ascribes a higher value to information derived from data than it does to information based on experience. The IALS prioritises the handling of data-based information, as opposed to information that is experiential and contextualised” (p. 422-423).

That is, in the view of the situated learning researchers, a test that is solitary rather than collective, data-based not experiential, and without contextual meaning to a respondent, might have some application to a person who is used to deriving meaning from context-free written materials. However, its appropriateness is questionable for anyone whose practical, everyday intelligence is closely connected to interacting with others in a familiar setting in order to achieve collective outcomes.

In opposition to this perspective, scholars with an orientation to research into human cognition such as Jones (1997) advance the view that capabilities such as literacy and numeracy are not situation-specific, and can realistically be regarded as a general skill. It is perfectly meaningful, in their view, to use as a literacy research instrument a measure of general reading and comprehension ability. In this perspective “none of the research ... has to my knowledge shown that the cognitive processes involved in literacy are different when used for different purposes” (Jones, 1997, p. 22).

Given that the focus of this paper is on managers, and since their work role is both interactive and political in nature, what are the particularities of the managerial role of relevance to literacy practice and learning?

What do managers do?

More than 35 years ago the management theorist Henry Mintzberg published what became a very influential book out of his doctoral thesis, entitled *The Nature of Managerial Work* (1973), based on his ethnographic observations of managers in the workplace. Much of the rhetoric of the time (and still now to some extent) around what managers were thought to do at work, had postulated a quite heroic notion of managerial behaviour. The discourse assumed that managers prepared grand strategic plans then undertook the achievement of major workplace objectives in the role of valiant leader.

Mintzberg's observations of managerial behaviour, however, were the first of their kind, and he was the first to demonstrate that in reality, managers' work-lives are discontinuous and reactive, requiring them to jump incessantly from task to task. Their work is characterised by incessant diversion, since they are constantly distracted by the latest crisis brought to their attention. Little time is available to address any long term or strategic issues, but nor did Mintzberg find that managers seemed to have any wish to engage with major strategic questions. Instead, managers are drawn to tasks that are current, non-routine, and practical, rather than abstract, and they work at unrelenting speed. They prefer spoken rather than written communication, because of the better immediacy and feedback inherent in oral rather than written discourse. They interact closely with their interpersonal networks of internal and external contacts, because these give them the possibility of building coalitions in order to get around the many constraints on what they can achieve at work.

Bounded rationality and satisficing

Writing shortly after Mintzberg, Herbert Simon (1976) invented two terms that he thought helped describe how managers approach their lives at work: bounded rationality and satisficing. Bounded rationality means that managers tend to engage with the issues they face with pre-established approaches and limits in mind. These create for them particular confines providing some predictability within which they expect to work. Essentially this is a means of managing complexity, creating parameters to enable managers to cope with the virtually infinite array of ill-defined and often un-measurable variables that they may encounter.

Then these boundaries are mitigated or altered to some extent by organisational structure, norms and values, which permit some room for managers to adapt to contingencies in ways appropriate to the circumstances in which they find themselves. In this way managers' bounded rationality provides them and their teams with shared templates and collective assumptions about how their world works.

The problem of how to manage organisational complexity also figures in what Simon described as satisficing, a phrase he coined, combining "satisfy" and "suffice". This denotes an action, decision or approach that is not perfect or even optimal, but would be "good enough" to satisfy internal or external stakeholders in the situation encountered (Simon, 1996, p. 27). In Simon's view, the pressures and incessant demands inherent in their work encourage managers to identify any perfect or ideal solution as unrealistic, and make them favour an outcome that simply functions well enough to permit managers to say this issue is dealt with, then move onto their next most pressing problem.

This is in contrast to the task of becoming more literate. As already observed, improving one's own personal literacy demands slow and painstaking work. The incremental nature of building better functional literacy may be resisted or found impossible to cope with by managers of low literacy who are not used to any such persisting activity, and who consider themselves and often are very time-poor.

One issue in whether IALS/ALL is the best means of assessing managers' literacy is that their work is highly contextualised. As a generalisation, it is much less common for managers than for some other organisational personnel to sit down alone (in a way that might be more familiar to people in professional roles) and try to solve abstract problems derived from data, as in an ALL test. Instead, as already noted, it is much more characteristic for managers to be continually putting out fires, often to do with human issues, in specific and localised parts of their organisation in close liaison with other people, rather than be wrestling with abstract or theoretical problems. This lack of familiarity with protracted, pencil and paper tasks may be reflected in lower managerial ALL skills.

Yet while the criticisms of IALS/ ALL have much validity, in our assessment, it is also not surprising that governments and literacy policy people worldwide object that a decline (or failure to improve) in literacy must be of significance in a world that demands increasing competence, creativity, and intelligence. It is difficult to object to the view that, as the well-worn phrase has it, the days of working harder must be replaced by working smarter. If New Zealand enterprises are to succeed in a time of increasing international competition, then there

is probably an increasingly greater expectation that all in the workplace will build their competencies and creativity at work. But how to measure workplace capabilities? In the view of policy people, even a possibly imperfect measure such as IALS/ ALL is better than none.

Should we care?

From a situated learning perspective, (e.g., Lankshear & O'Connor, 1999; Druine & Wildemeersch, 2000) the apparent radical decline over ten years in managers' prose and document literacy may be of little moment. The situated learning position is that even though workplace literacy as tested by such as IALS/ ALL may well be low, this says nothing at all "about the quality and effectiveness of workplace practices" (Lankshear & O'Connor, 1999, p. 33). As noted above, if IALS/ALL is in fact an assessment of literacy test-taking ability, as opposed to a test of situated literacies, then for some, context-free assessments of functional literacy like ALL may not be worth debating.

The present writers' perspective is, though, that a change in literacy performance of this magnitude is surprising, interesting, and deserves further investigation. Further research is needed, in our view, into the variables associated with managers' literacy test performance, including gender, ethnicity, income, tenure in the workplace, age of managers, and educational qualifications.

Yet further such research has to be underpinned by good literacy theory. In our view only theory which both researchers and practitioners find inspiring can produce quality analysis along with sound literacy learning practice. Therefore the current impasse between the situated learning and cognitive studies/ policy researchers, each school going its own way with minimal reference to the other, is not helpful in advancing either knowledge or practice in the adult literacy field. Needed is a mid-range theory that would acknowledge the significance of seeing literacy as grounded in particular environments, but would also be open to enhancing governmental, teachers' and policy-makers' understandings of literacy as something that can be measured in an objective sense.

In-depth localised studies, often employing ethnographic methods, of the real situations and struggles of literacy learners have been powerful in revealing to literacy researchers how learners actually make transitions into different and personally empowering literacies. However it is difficult to see how theorising of the adult literacy field can progress further, if only local perspectives on literacy are acknowledged and no generalising to broader contexts is possible.

Fortunately, some early indications of a break in the scholarly impasse have been signaled in a review paper by Reder and Davila (2005). Examining criticisms of the situated learning school, they suggest that “better theories about how contexts shape literacy practices should help teachers to see the literacy events in their classrooms and programs in relation to the multiple contexts in which they are situated” (p. 183). In this way, they point to the possibility of generalised new insights into literacy arising from situated learning research.

In our view, a renewed focus on the needs of the educator and the learner is timely and entirely appropriate. After all, what is the whole field of adult literacy learning all about? Its central purpose is to serve the goal of literacy learning of people who are attempting, usually against the odds, to improve their capability at work or in another applied context.

So the answer to the “should we care?” question is, in our assessment, yes. Surveys like ALL can serve a purpose in providing a literacy overview of a large, complex occupational group like managers that is spread across an array of disciplines. Macro signals from surveys like ALL may shed light on emergent or ill-defined problems. The kind of early analysis we have attempted in this paper, such as assessment of managers’ working hours, are a contribution to ongoing enquiry into managerial literacy. Yet we are ourselves sufficiently persuaded by situated learning perspectives to hold that more in-depth and focused enquiry into managers in their specialist contexts is also needed, in parallel with ALL, to add texture and grounded insights into the state of managers’ literacy.

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