Form-filling, power and the ILP:
Tensions and tutor strategies in one adult literacy classroom

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Introduction

In recent years, many domains in which we live our lives have become increasingly textualized, including the places in which we work and learn (Iedema and Scheeres, 2003; Iedema, 2003). This is the result of an audit culture that 'is informed by practices confined to no single set of institutions and to no one part of the world' and whose concern with accountability has 'acquired a social presence of a new kind' in the past few decades (Strathern, 2000, p.1). Indeed, in *Powerful Literacies 1*, Fawns and Ivanič (2001) highlight that 'We can't even receive a parcel without having to add our signature to a specially designed form to provide official confirmation that it has been delivered', and that 'Such administrative transactions are part of an information society which increasingly controls and dominates us' (p.80).

In adult education, form-filling of various kinds now plays a very visible role, with audit culture placing increasing importance upon mandatory processes of accountability and recording (Apple, 2005). The introduction of the *Skills for Life* Strategy in 2001 (Department for Education and Employment 2001) signalled many changes for literacy teaching and learning in England as the policy brought with it a new curriculum framework, funding specifications, professional qualifications for tutors, and accreditation for learners. In turn, there has been an increasing emphasis on paperwork in adult literacy education in the past decade (Tusting, 2009) and Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) have become an important 'part of a system of performance measurement based on quantifiable indicators of teaching and learning' (Hamilton, 2009, p.221).

Why focus on the ILP?

Textualization of the workplace has led to increasing paperwork pressures for employees across many sectors (see Troman, 2000; Jeffrey and Troman 2004) and, for adult literacy tutors, paperwork such as the ILP can occupy a significant amount of time both inside and outside the classroom. When interviewing tutors in adult education in Canada, Darville (2002) observed that 'talk often turns to "the burden of paperwork", even when no questions have directed attention to it' (p.63). Equally, for adult literacy tutors in England, ILPs are part of the 'endless change' within this sector in recent years (Edward et al, 2007). Hamilton (2009) describes ILPs as 'something they frequently talk and worry about, but were nevertheless surprised that anyone would want to research' (p.221). While paperwork may represent a time-consuming burden for many, it can prove difficult to explore the role of texts such as the ILP. The problem with researching texts in the social sciences, as Smith (2005) puts it, is 'their ordinary "inertia"' and 'the local *thereness* of the text' (p.102):

> We construct them, I suppose, as a world that isn't present in our lived spaces and thus don't recognise texts as being "active" in coordinating what we are doing with another or others. When we are reading, watching, or listening, somehow or another we treat texts as given; we are responding to their internal temporal

organization, the shape of a song or a concerto, or the page, the chapter, what's on the monitor, but not to their *occurrence* in time and place.

(Smith, 2005, p.102, italics in original)

The first reason for focusing on the ILP in the adult literacy classroom is that, however synonymous with inertia and the mundane such texts have become, interactions with these texts in fact play an active role in co-ordinating the activities and learning that take place. As Hamilton (2009) suggests, ILPs also play an important role in normalising the adult literacy learner and the tutor, aligning them with particular subject positions within the *Skills for Life* strategy. The ILP is situated and negotiated within the specific teaching practices and relationships which are built up in the classroom setting. Burgess (2008) explores how, through the use of ILPs, 'teachers and students are co-opted as active agents into the processes of Skills for Life policy' and how the ILP 'mediates power and control' between the local and the global (p.49). The second reason for focusing on the ILP in the literacy classroom is therefore to explore the ways in which tutors respond to the demands imposed on them by such paperwork and the extent to which they negotiate these.

What is an ILP?

In this chapter, the use of the term 'ILP' refers to a range of paperwork and form-filling practices involving both learner and tutor in the literacy classroom. The design and content of the ILP differs depending on the institution, administration, provision, tutor and learners. Indeed, the visibility and use of the ILP also differs from classroom to classroom. The ILP discussed in this chapter is from one adult literacy classroom and contains a variety of forms that were completed at different stages of the course by both the tutor and her learners. The following table illustrates the content and use of the various forms which make up this particular ILP:

Form name	Description of content and use
Learner record form	Personal details, contact information, course details, disability status, ethnic origin, employer details, qualifications held
Train to Gain: Self-Declaration of Eligibility	Declaration of eligibility sections for completion by learner, employer and course provider
Summary of Training Needs Analysis, Initial Assessment and Learning Plan	Prior learning, qualifications, work experience and other skills Group goals and personal learning objectives Initial assessment results, preferred learning style and additional support requirements
Qualification Learning Objectives	Individual learning objectives Key support and development needs Estimated time required for achievement of qualification
Learning Styles Questionnaire	The results from this are recorded on the 'Summary of Training Needs Analysis, Initial Assessment and Learning Plan' form
Learning and review log	Record of each lesson's activities, learning and reflections, with a section to record practice test results
Mid-course review	Tutor feedback on learner progress, learner feedback / suggestions, and revised objectives / test date
Information, Advice and	Completed at the end of the course to record the learner's:

Guidance	• future employment and learning plans, along with information required by the learner and provided by the tutor.
Learner Satisfaction Survey	• evaluation of different aspects of the course including venue, teaching methods, content and organisation

Table 1: Overview of the ILP content and use

This chapter explores the role of this particular ILP in one adult literacy classroom in the North West of England in 2010. By focusing on this one classroom, which was both a workplace and a place of learning, we contribute to research on the increasing textualization of people's lives, and to the understanding of power and the ILP in adult literacy education. We describe processes associated with completion of the ILP in this classroom, and demonstrate that form-filling is a collaborative practice between teacher and learner. We identify the tensions and complexities that arise from these form-filling practices, focusing in particular on those aspects of the ILP for which the tutor has developed strategies to negotiate such tensions. This chapter illustrates how one literacy tutor draws on three particular strategies when responding to the demands of ILP form-filling in her classroom: mediating, sequencing and embedding. As we will illustrate, these strategies are creative approaches to fulfilling the demands placed upon the tutor and upon her learners.

The research, tutor and classroom

The data discussed in this chapter is from Sandra's doctoral research[i], focusing on one of the adult literacy tutors who participated in the study. Christine[ii] is based in a Lifelong Learning department within a local authority in the North West of England and the literacy course discussed in this chapter was delivered over twelve weeks for a total of thirty guided learning hours, taking place as a result of employer engagement within the local authority itself. The data we draw on includes completed ILPs from three of the five learners enrolled on the course, along with tutor interview data, in which the ILPs and paperwork practices were discussed.

Responding to and negotiating tensions inherent in the ILP: lesson 1

As illustrated in Table 1, the ILP used by Christine brings together a number of policy documents and proformas. ILP paperwork is inextricably bound up with funding requirements, creating tensions in Christine's classroom. Because of the funding implications, for example, a number of forms must be completed by her learners in the first lesson, including the enrolment form and Train to Gain eligibility form. Christine described the enrolment form as being 'particularly daunting', having been designed by their MIS[iii] team with the aim of collecting the data needed to claim funding for the learner. Christine talked of supporting her learners to complete this form and also about using their responses to it as additional initial assessment information. However, it is clear from the way she described it that this is a form which she assumes will be threatening for learners. She contrasts it to a new set of forms with fewer boxes to fill in which look 'more friendly'. The enrolment form therefore creates a tension in Christine's classroom at a time when she is only beginning to establish relationships of trust with them. As a strategy to overcome this, she therefore takes up a *mediating* role in relation to this form in lesson one.

The Train to Gain eligibility form, which must also be completed in lesson one, was described by Christine as even less user-friendly than the enrolment form, representing it as 'a nightmare' because of what she describes as its 'very legalistic' content and design. Learners must declare, for example, that they are 'lawfully resident in the UK' or that they 'fulfil the LSC's residency criteria'. This could be perceived as a potential threat by some Skills for Life students, particularly some ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners who might already have been engaged in protracted legal struggles to establish residency status. They must also confirm their 'Employment Status' and sign to acknowledge that: 'if I have declared false information the provider may take action against me'. The act of signing such a form is represented by Christine as a potentially anxiety-provoking one. As with the enrolment form, the Train to Gain form represents a clash of understandings and priorities because, while it 'doesn't mean anything' to Christine's students, their signatures are crucial to the institution, as the means by which the funding is unlocked. However, Christine is acutely sensitive to the possibility that being asked to sign a legal document of this nature may be a threatening act for students and, again, takes up a mediating position in this first lesson between the demands of the institution and the needs and likely responses of the students. In order to mitigate the possibility of students becoming intimidated by this 'legalistic' form, Christine adopted the mediating strategy of "talk[ing] around them rather than read[ing] them all out", although she also gave them the opportunity to read the form if they wished to. She also explained the purpose of the form, using mitigating language to minimise the possibility of threat, and to highlight the benefits of completing the form: 'I just explain that this is how we can continue to offer these courses for free'.

The point at which these forms are introduced in the first session is therefore important to Christine in managing any potential threat associated with completing them. Although describing them as 'forms that you've got to just get through somehow', Christine explained that she would not present them at the very beginning of the first lesson. Instead, Christine describes how she starts with 'some kind of ice-breaker activities', carefully chosen to fit the learner group, which facilitates introductions from both the learners and Christine. The example Christine gave was of a 'Jelly Baby tree', where the learners were shown a tree with jelly babies sitting on different branches, in different positions, displaying different emotions - some hugging in groups, some doing adventurous activities, some falling off the tree. They were asked to identify themselves with a particular jelly baby and explain why. This is a very different sort of activity from the filling-in of extensive statistical information and the legalistic signing of a document. Instead, this ice-breaker is multimodal, using pictures and colour, and the product of the activity is not a completed piece of paper, but a conversation. The focus is on feelings, not on facts. It is only after engaging in this conversation, which lays the basis for relationships and knowledge of one another and one another's feelings within the group, that Christine judges it is appropriate to introduce the potentially more threatening forms. Along with mediation, Christine therefore draws on another strategy to balance paperwork demands with the needs of her learners in the first lesson, that of *sequencing*.

Not all forms in the ILP are described as problematic or unfriendly. The 'Move On Skills Checklist', for example, is described by Christine in a much more neutral fashion, as requiring learners to indicate their achievements and generic skills, 'like decorate a room or organise a children's party'. This form is also addressed in the first lesson but does not require a great deal of writing, does not require legalistic commitment, and makes sense in relation to learners' everyday activities. It highlights what they can do, rather than what they

can't. It was not represented by Christine as problematic, and no particular strategies are described around completing it. Of interest, this form is not actually present in the ILP record itself (see Table 1) because, as Christine explains, the learners 'would keep that'. The 'Qualification Learning Objectives' form is also described unproblematically by Christine, as a form that didn't require any strategising, perhaps as it clearly relates to learners' aims of working towards a qualification.

By the time the 'learning styles questionnaire' is addressed in this same lesson, however, what becomes important is not just the form in itself, but also its relation to all the other forms which the learner has been faced with, despite the tutors' consistent attempts to mitigate their impact by providing learners with support to complete them. Christine felt that by this point, learners started to feel that the form-filling was taking away from their learning time, that they were 'waiting to do their English course [...] they know why they're there, this is just another form that they have to fill in to record that intention' for external bodies. For this reason, Christine dislikes the way this questionnaire is presented in the learner paperwork because 'it seems like here's another form to fill in', explaining that she instead 'would tend to do it as a separate activity'. Here, it is the volume and materiality of the forms which is problematic, with learners being faced with a stack of paperwork. Christine managed this by re-framing it, presenting it not as a 'form' but as a 'separate activity', turning it into 'a bit of a fun thing'. In addition to mediation and sequencing, we therefore see Christine drawing on yet another strategy in lesson one to balance paperwork demands with the needs of her learners, that of *embedding*.

Along with the learning styles questionnaire, Table 1 illustrates how the 'Summary of Training Needs Analysis' form draws on several other sources to identify a learner's needs. The personal learning objectives section was discussed during the first two weeks of the course and Christine discussed the tension that arose from this. She explained that the way in which her learners may describe their own goals, for instance 'Spelling', may not satisfy the kinds of descriptions Christine felt were being called for by the institution, namely SMART[iv] targets. Christine therefore had to negotiate the tensions between terms meaningful to the learners, and terms expected by the various institutions within which they are positioned, requiring her to again draw on her mediating strategy.

Form-filling and strategies in later lessons

Many of the ILP forms discussed so far require learners and teachers to think about the future: their goals and purposes for being involved with the course. The remainder of the forms in the ILP pack require reflection and reviewing. The 'mid-course review' form, for example, was described by Christine as having 'worked really well'. It included a space for tutor feedback, which she filled in before the lesson, and a space for the learners' feedback. Christine felt that this openness allowed the learners to express what they felt they had achieved, whatever this is: 'you can say whatever you want and they can say whatever they want'. All of these forms had been filled in extensively by her learners. She contrasted this to a newer version of the form, in which there was no space for tutor feedback. Instead learners were asked questions which related much more closely to the objectives set in the previous forms, asking, 'Have you achieved your objectives?' The notion that a course begins with set objectives, and is judged on the basis of whether or not these are achieved, is part of the discourse of SMART targets referred to above. Christine felt this change in paperwork to be a step back, and that learners found it harder to respond in this constrained way. The framing of the form is not necessarily meaningful in their terms – 'They don't

actually know what objectives *are* necessarily' - and people ended up just writing one or two lines which she feels did not reflect adequately what they had actually done: 'It's not they lack literacy skills and can't fill in the form, it's just a hard thing to think about.' Therefore, although Christine had not previously needed to draw on any of the three strategies to successfully negotiate the mid-course review, she now had to borrow from all three since this change in paperwork.

Another, more regular opportunity for review was provided by the "Learning and Review Log" form, which was expected to be completed at the end of each session. Christine found this constraining – 'sometimes it gets a bit squeezed out because of timing' - so she took a creative approach to the sequencing of this log as the class was going on. If there was what she calls a 'learning moment' taking place, she might pause the class and ask them to reflect on that moment in writing. There was a space for tutor feedback on the form, but she did not prioritise this, giving students maybe one or two written comments on the form over the duration of the course. For her, much more important is immediate, verbal feedback: 'Maybe that's a bit slack on my part but it's not like they don't get feedback during the course. So continually, through the course, I'll be giving them *actual* feedback, *verbal* feedback.'

Christine discussed the tension that often arises from the need to document information in the ILP. Where her learners may feel unsure about what to write on forms, for example, she explained that in conversation 'you get really good feedback from learners because they discuss what they've achieved and how they feel'. To respond to this tension, Christine has in the past embedded some form-filling requirements within other paperless activities, for example recording end of course verbal discussions to capture the plenitude of this feedback and extracting a few key comments to serve the auditing purposes represented by the written form. Through the use of this embedding strategy, Christine felt the real pedagogical value was in the group discussion which cannot be captured in the ILP.

Summary of strategies

Christine's approaches to and attitudes regarding the ILP allow us to draw out insights and understandings both about the tensions associated with the forms, and the specific strategies she adopts in order to negotiate these tensions, to enable the completion of these forms to be as productive and positive a part of the pedagogic processes as possible. Key tensions identified in the above include the different purposes of the forms, which serve the purposes both of record-keeping for MIS (particularly to unlock funding) and of structuring the pedagogic process. In interview, for instance, Christine discussed 'the dynamic and balance between what MIS and the funding require of us and what is manageable and user-friendly with the students'. Another, more subtle underlying tension is between the managerial model of pedagogy implicit in the design of the form - set SMART objectives at the start of the course, and regularly review progress towards achieving them - and the much more open process Christine described of getting to know her learners' feelings and hopes through dialogue, and negotiating their way through the course responsively.

Christine adopted a range of strategies in order to find her way through these tensions. She placed herself in a mediating position between the forms and the learners, re-articulating parts of the language of the forms which she felt might be threatening for them by 'talking around' forms rather than reading them out, making explicit the implicit purposes of the forms and the reasons they are presented in the way they are, and supporting learners in completing them. She managed the sequencing of the forms quite carefully, minimising the amount of form-

filling which has to be done in the first lesson of the course by delaying what she could, and ensuring that the potentially more threatening legalistic forms were addressed only *after* an ice-breaker activity which was designed to elicit joint sharing of feelings and thereby develop trusting relationships in the classroom. The sequencing of paperwork appears to be a two-fold strategy: 1) the distribution of forms *over the duration* of the course; and 2) addressing paperwork at appropriate moments *within* individual lessons. Like the forms themselves, the sequence Christine employed is subject to constant change and also 'would depend on the group'.

Form-filling was also embedded within other pedagogical activities, with Christine saying she 'always tr[ied] to find innovative ways of introducing' the forms to her learners; placing them within a new context, for instance the 'fun activity' of the learning styles questionnaire, or the 'pause before coffee to reflect and record' of the learner log. This re-framed the meanings of the forms, for instance by turning the learning log record into a space for verbal dialogue with students, much of which is seen as being of value in itself, without the need to be recorded in writing.

Not all ILP forms required management through the use of strategies, particularly where they related more closely to learners' own priorities, activities and meaning frameworks. However, in general for Christine the ILP paperwork is a site of 'struggle' for her as a tutor, something she feels 'you've got to just get through somehow'. When faced with a form that she cannot find a way to reframe and make meaningful within her pedagogical context in this way - she gives the example a new learner induction checklist presented as a list of around forty tick boxes - she feels very frustrated. The strategies of mediating, embedding and sequencing identified here are key to her finding her way through this meaning-making process.

Conclusion

We began by making the point that Individual Learning Plans and other related forms can be interpreted as agents of policy, following Hamilton's (2009) analysis of the ways in which such texts align teachers and learners with particular subject positions within the *Skills for Life* strategy. However, the data presented here has shown that at the same time as these forms are positioning learners and teachers in relation to national strategy, the local meaning of the ILP is also being negotiated through the specific teaching practices, strategies and relationships which are being developed in a particular setting.

Christine's strategies are mediating, sequencing and embedding. By placing herself in a mediating position between the learners and the form, Christine is also placing herself in a mediating position between the students and the various institutions within which their learning is framed. She translates the requirements of the form into a format and language that the learners can understand and engage with. Through careful management of the sequencing of the forms in the classroom, Christine is also managing the overall effects of them on learners' experiences, and is minimising the impact of form-filling on that. By embedding form-filling practices within other activities, she re-frames its meaning and mitigates some of the potential problems brought about particularly by the volume of forms interfering with other pedagogical activities.

The context of adult literacy and numeracy education has changed dramatically in the first years of the 21st century, with the *Skills for Life* strategy encouraging changed notions of

professionalism and the sector shifting from a locally-responsive to a much more centrally policy-driven approach (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). One of the results of this change has been to increase the numbers of forms teachers and students have to complete, a very direct example of the processes of increased textualisation related to audit society with which we began this chapter. We have demonstrated here with one detailed example how such processes play out in practice, and the form-filling practices and strategies adopted by one teacher in response to these. While data from interviews with other tutors suggest tutors draw on a range of strategies to address these issues, in addition to those Christine adopts, the underlying tensions they describe around form-filling are similar. Many of the tensions described relate to the multiple and potentially conflicting purposes of the forms, which have to fulfil firstly the administrative demands of management information systems related to funding streams, and secondly the pedagogical functions of planning and reviewing. There is also an underlying tension between the model of pedagogy assumed in the forms - setting SMART objectives and reviewing progress towards them - and the more responsive, dialogic, evolving model represented by the tutor's account. However despite the emergence of these constraints and tensions, we have also shown that it is nevertheless possible for tutors to negotiate these in creative ways which still promote the autonomy of the learner and the pedagogical practices the tutor is committed to developing.

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[i] Undertaken while based in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

[ii] Tutor's chosen pseudonym

[iii] Management Information Systems

[iv] SMART targets are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed.