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# What Kind of Literacy? Reflections on the Experiences of Migrant Domestic Workers Negotiating Learning in London

Amy North

*UCL Institute of Education*

This article is concerned with the literacy learning experiences of a group of female migrant domestic workers from Nepal and India who participated in weekly literacy support sessions at the Migrant Resource Centre in London. The article draws on qualitative research to explore the women's engagement with different forms of learning, and considers how this was affected by the transnational nature of their lives and the way they navigate and negotiate identities across different contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

Maybe if we had a good education we could find a nice job but we don't, we didn't get an education we can't read and write, all we can be is domestic workers. (Nhanu, June 24, 2009)

Nhanu<sup>1</sup> is a migrant domestic worker from Nepal who, over a period of 3 years, participated in an informal literacy learning support group, together with other domestic workers from Nepal and India, at the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) in London. When I first met Nhanu in 2008 she was living and working in London and trying to learn to read and write for the first time. This article reports on qualitative data collected through weekly literacy support sessions that I ran with the group, and through life history interviews. Through the article I reflect on the way in which the women engaged with different forms of English literacy learning that took place in these sessions and in other classes that they attended, and consider how this was informed by their needs and experiences as migrant women moving between diverse social, cultural, and geographical contexts. I explore the way in which the women in the group exercised agency in negotiating their learning needs and in responding to the different approaches to literacy and English learning that they encountered. In doing so, I suggest a value in looking beyond some of the distinctions that are often made between different types of literacy

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Address correspondence to Amy North, Lecturer in Education and International Development, UCL Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL, UK. E-mail: [amy.north@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:amy.north@ucl.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup>To protect the anonymity of participants all names used are pseudonyms.

programs (as “technical,” “functional,” or “empowering”) and instead consider how different combinations of different forms of literacy learning may be important to support literacy learning in ways that draw on and support migrant women’s own experiences, needs, and aspirations.

Migrant domestic workers, such those who feature in this research, occupy a particularly marginal positioning within complex structures of power and inequality at both a global and a household level, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Understanding how they may be supported to engage with learning and how this learning may be valued by—and empowering to—them, is, I argue, therefore an important aspect of considering equity in relation to education for migrant groups.

### UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LITERACY LEARNING BEYOND THE LOCAL

In developing the conceptual framing for the analysis developed through this article I have drawn on an extensive body of research literature associated with the New Literacy Studies. In particular, I draw on Street’s distinction between an autonomous model literacy of that views literacy as a neutral technical skill, and an ideological model of literacy as a social practice, which emphasizes the way in which literacy practices are embedded in relations of power and social and cultural values (Street, 1984, 1994). Studies that have explored women’s experiences of literacy learning from an ideological or social practice perspective have, by focusing on literacy practices situated in particular local contexts, been valuable in unsettling commonly held assumptions about the relationship between literacy and women’s empowerment, pointing to the way in which this is contingent on the nature of the local environment (Chopra, 2004, 2011; George, 2004; Kalman, 2005; Maddox, 2005; Niño-Murcia, 2009; Prins, 2008; Robinson-Pant, 2000, 2001).

Such studies have also pointed to the need to pay attention to the nature of literacy programs themselves, including a concern with not just what is taught, but also how it is taught and the way in which this affects how learners engage with and use their learning. Taking an ideological approach to understanding literacy as a social practice has led researchers to engage critically with literacy programs that have focused on literacy learning simply as the transfer of autonomous or “technical” skills, which do not connect clearly to learners’ contexts or experiences (Street, 1984, 1994), or that have taken a “functional” approach to literacy. Although functional literacy has been defined broadly as relating to the improvement of “skills for general functioning” (UNESCO, 1988), functional literacy programs have tended to be much more narrowly focused on skills linked directly to income generation or employment (Hamilton & Burgess, 2011; Rogers et al., 2004), and the term itself has come to be associated with a human resource model that “links literacy directly with economic development, individual prosperity and vocational achievement” (Hamilton & Burgess, 2011, p. 6). Critiques of functional approaches to literacy have pointed to the way in which, by focusing on skills that adult learners lack, functional literacy programs have often reinforced a discourse that positions learners as “deficit” or “lacking,” and failed to recognize learner agency or build on the existing knowledge and practices of learners (Hamilton & Burgess, 2011).

Both “technical” and “functional” literacy programs are often seen in contrast to literacy programs that have a much more explicit focus on processes of “empowerment,” programs that

have been associated with the expansion of women's agency and ability to make choices (Kabeer, 1999a, 1999b), as well as changes in terms of identity, confidence, and self-esteem (see North, 2013). These include programs that, drawing on a social practice model, explicitly seek to engage with learners' interests, knowledge, and existing and everyday literacy practices (e.g., Kalman, 2005; Millican, 2004), or that are inspired by the critical pedagogy of Freire (1973), which emphasizes the need for adult education to support marginalized groups to analyze their own realities and causes of oppression (Archer & Cottingham, 1996; Attwood, Castle, & Smythe, 2004; Fiedrich, 2004; Prins, 2008). However, research suggests that the relationship between the type of literacy program and its consequences for learners is not a straightforward one. Robinson-Pant's (2001) research, for example, revealed how women participants took hold of the learning they experienced in their functional literacy program in unintended and unexpected ways. Meanwhile, ethnographic studies of Freirean inspired programs suggest that these do not always lead directly to collective empowerment or increased gender equality (see, e.g., Fiedrich, 2004; Prins, 2008).

In this article, I engage critically with these categorizations of "technical," "functional," or "empowering" forms of literacy learning, by examining the ways in which different forms of or approaches to literacy learning are valued by women in the group and situating this in the context of a wider understanding of their lives and literacy practices. I argue that my research points to a value in examining how combinations of different forms of literacy learning may be valued and considered important for different women in particular ways. I argue that this is affected by the literacy environment within which learners are located and the forms of literacy or literacy practices that they encounter and interact with, and by the symbolic value (Papen, 2005) that they place on the development of particular skills. In particular, I argue that for this group of women understanding the significance of particular forms of literacy learning requires paying attention to the transnational contexts of their lives and the way in which they move and make connections between different global or transnational spaces.

In developing my discussion of the women's engagement with literacy learning and how this is affected by their transnational movements and connections, I draw on an emerging body of research, which has engaged critically with the relationship between the local and the global in shaping literacy practices (see, e.g., Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009; Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Pahl & Rowswell, 2006; Reder & Davila, 2005; Street, 2012). A number of such studies, drawing on the notion of transnationalism, have highlighted how the literacy practices of "transmigrants" (Glick Schiller et al., 1995) may be affected by the way in which they move between different transnational or translocal spaces (Baynham, 2007; Lam & Warriner, 2012; Warriner, 2007, 2009). Such research has thus drawn attention to the way in which literacy—and literacy learning—may be involved in processes that transcend national boundaries, and play a role in maintaining transnational social networks and connections (Lam & Warriner, 2012; Meyers, 2014; Sarroub, 2009). Other studies that have considered the experiences of migrant domestic worker in particular (see, e.g., Cuban 2007, 2008; Rao, 2011), meanwhile, have revealed the complex nature of the relationship that exists between women's experiences of migration and domestic work and their engagement with literacy and learning.

For the women in the case-study group for this research, transnational movements and connections between spaces associated with their lives in the United Kingdom, their family members overseas, and their communities at home were particularly important. During the period of time over which I collected my data, all the women were living and working in

London, mostly in private households for international employers. However, they maintained close links to family and friends in their home communities, as well as in a range of other countries around the globe. They also participated in social gatherings with others from Nepal in the United Kingdom, and went to English classes attended by other domestic workers from a range of different countries. In an earlier article (North, 2013) I engaged explicitly with conceptual debates regarding the role of the local and global in shaping literacy practices, drawing on McNay's (2000, 2008) consideration of agency and constraint, to examine the way in which the women's literacy practices interacted with these processes of movement across different transnational spaces. In doing so, I argued that a consideration of the opportunities, constraints, and gendered power relations that the women experienced as they navigated across these spaces is critical for understanding the transnational—and transcontextual—dynamics of their literacy practices. In this article I focus in on the implications of this for the classroom space itself, as I consider how the women's transnational lives and experiences as domestic workers moving between spaces affected their engagement with the different forms of literacy learning they encountered within the literacy support sessions they attended.

## METHODOLOGY

In developing my approach to collecting and analyzing my research data, I drew on methodological insights from the extensive body of ethnographic research that has examined literacy as a social practice (e.g., Aikman, 1999; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Chopra, 2001, 2004; Heath, 1983; Kalman, 2005; Maddox, 2005; Robinson-Pant, 2001; Street, 1984). However, my research did not take the form of a classic ethnographic study: The group was not located in a geographically defined community, where the group would be amenable to researching through long-term immersion in their day-to-day lives. Rather, as live-in migrant domestic workers, they were physically scattered across private households in wealthy parts of London, and moved between very different cultural and geographical spaces, including the households in which they worked and their home communities in Nepal. The nature of their work meant that although one participant, Priya, did invite me to her employer's house on one occasion when her employers were away, their often difficult relationships with employers meant that it would not have been appropriate to expect them to negotiate for me to access employers' households. Instead, I developed an "ethnographic approach" (Green & Bloome, 2004, p. 183) to collecting data through the group sessions themselves, making use of "ethnographic tools" (Green & Bloome, 2004).

The data reported on in this article were collected between 2008 and 2013. Between 2008 and 2011 qualitative data were collected through the systematic documentation of weekly literacy support sessions, which I ran with the group of 11 women. Over the 3-year period I documented a total of 63 sessions through detailed observation notes. I also made copies of learning materials used and of the range of texts the women brought with them into the sessions, including, for example, SMS (short message service) messages, exercise books and worksheets from other classes, immigration forms, Nepali texts from their home communities, and letters. In addition, I conducted detailed life history research with three of the women, through carrying out in-depth semistructured interviews in 2008 and 2013, and through the documentation of more informal group and individual discussions held with the women before and after the literacy support sessions themselves.

My active role as a teacher/mentor meant that as I collected my data, I did not take on the silent participant-observer role sometimes adopted by ethnographers (Heath & Street, 2008), but was actively involved in shaping the sessions. This had clear implications for the sort of research I was able to carry out, presenting both challenges and opportunities with practical, ethical, and analytical dimensions. For instance, the fact that the women in the group came to the group looking for literacy support from me, rather than as purely as research participants, raised ethical concerns around the nature of consent. I was alert to the need to ensure that the women participating in the sessions understood the nature of my research and their own role in it. The changing composition of the group as new members joined added a layer of complexity to this, meaning that consent had to be continually renegotiated as new members joined the group.

My immersion in the group and the intensive nature of the sessions themselves provided me with an opportunity to make detailed reflective observation notes following each session, and my active role as a teacher/mentor providing literacy support meant that I was able to gain an in-depth insight into the extensive range of ways in which the women in the group used and hoped to be able to use different forms of literacy. As I discuss further in the sections that follow, my dual role also enabled me to draw on my observations and discussions with the women in developing materials and activities for the sessions. I thus drew on ethnography as a learning resource and as a research approach (Hamilton, 1999). However, I also was aware of the way in which my own ideas about literacy that I brought with me into the sessions as I developed activities and resources may also have influenced the women's own views and practices, particularly as for some of the women I represented their main or first source of formal literacy support in the United Kingdom.

In framing my data collection in relation to these sessions, and in developing my analysis, I drew on the notion of the literacy event as a methodological and analytical tool (Heath, 1983; Moss, 2007). I consider that the literacy support sessions themselves comprised literacy events, understood as time-bound moments in which "the role literacy plays in the immediate social interactions between participants becomes available for study" (Moss, 2007, p. 40). These occurred in a particular context, but the way in which the content of literacy learning that took place within sessions was negotiated between the different participants meant other contexts—and discussion of other events—were brought into the session space, as participants shared updates about friends and family from their communities back home, discussed their working lives, or brought in texts from outside the sessions. The group sessions and my analysis of the discussions and practices occurring within them thus provided an opportunity both to examine the women's engagement with literacy within the specific context of the group itself, and to try to understand how this linked to the wider, shifting contexts of their lives and the ways in which they encountered and drew on literacy as they moved between different transnational spaces.

## THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

As migrant domestic workers the women in the group form part of a growing body of migrant women: according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), women make up approximately half of the world's 215 million migrants (ILO, 2015). A substantial number of these women are employed as domestic workers: Of the estimated 53 million domestic workers worldwide, 83% are women (ILO, 2015). Often originally from the global South, these women

work—and often live—in the private households of wealthy families as housekeepers, nannies, cooks, and caregivers.

The women whose experiences I discuss in this article all come from Nepal except for Jyothi, who is from India. Although they do not represent a homogeneous group—they each had slightly different experiences and were at different stages with regard to their age, employment, or immigration status—they all shared common experiences of leaving their families and communities at a young age to start work. Few had completed any formal education in their own country or had the opportunity to develop their literacy skills in their first language, and, as the quotation from Nhanu at the beginning of this article makes clear, they linked becoming domestic workers directly to their lack of education and to poor economic opportunities in their own communities and the need to support their families.

The experiences of migrant domestic workers have been widely researched, with studies often pointing to the complex nature of the asymmetrical relations of power and dependency that exist between female workers and their employers, and the long working hours and vulnerability to abuse and exploitation that are often entailed (see, e.g., Anderson, 2000; Briones, 2009; Cox, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Parreñas, 2001). This was clearly reflected in the experiences of the women who participated in this research. Life as migrant domestic workers had not been easy for any of them. While their relationships with their current employers varied, all had stories of exploitation and difficult working conditions, which were often accompanied by ongoing uncertainty regarding their immigration status. They also all described working extremely long hours. This had a clear impact on their engagement with learning, often constraining their ability to attend classes regularly. As I discuss in the following sections, it also informed and affected the sorts of literacy learning support they needed and wanted to engage with.

### NEGOTIATING LEARNING: “TECHNICAL,” “FUNCTIONAL,” AND “EMPOWERING” LITERACIES

In the following sections I consider the group’s experience of literacy learning, focusing on their participation in our group literacy support sessions. In doing so I consider the range of approaches they encountered in these sessions and classes, and discuss how these relate to the distinctions between “technical,” “functional,” and “empowering” learning discussed earlier. First I consider how some of the learning the women brought into the sessions from their Sunday classes, learning that focused on grammar, the “correct” use of English, and the specific skills required for passing tests or exams, appeared to correspond to a “technical,” or autonomous, approach to literacy learning. I then turn my attention to the more negotiated forms of learning that took place within our own sessions, considering the “functional” nature of the literacy learning that characterized some of these sessions. Finally, I consider literacy learning that represented an attempt to build on the existing knowledge and interests of the women, linking this to approaches to literacy associated with “empowerment” and processes involving changes in self-esteem or identity, which are often emphasized in the ethnographic literature on women’s literacy learning (see, e.g., Robinson-Pant, 2004). Central to my analysis throughout this discussion is a consideration of the



agency of the women themselves and the ways in which they identified and negotiated the learning and support they needed.

### “Technical” Literacy

As well as attending literacy support sessions with me, all the women in the group attended—or had attended—other classes on Sundays. In some cases these were general English—or ESOL (English for speakers of other languages)—classes, and in other cases they were the ESOL and citizenship classes that the women were required to attend in order to be eligible to apply for indefinite permission to remain in the United Kingdom.

I did not participate in the Sunday classes myself and was not able to observe any of these directly. I am aware therefore that the view that I got of the group’s Sunday learning was a very partial one. Although Sudha regularly showed me all the writing that she had done in her exercise book, which included work both from our session and from her Sunday classes, on the whole members of the group tended to bring work from these classes to our sessions primarily when they had something they hadn’t understood or were struggling with. It was these examples, rather than examples of work that they found easier to engage with, that I was most exposed to. However the frequency with which they brought Sunday class materials to our sessions—I have documented materials and discussion relating to these classes for approximately one-third of all our sessions—and the way in which their learning in these classes came into our sessions, as they discussed their experiences of them or brought in work that they wanted help understanding, enabled me to gain a valuable insight into the ways in which they understood and engaged with the forms of learning that these classes seemed to represent. In this section therefore my concern is not with examining the nature of these classes as separate learning spaces, but rather to reflect on what the way in which learning from them spilled over into our own sessions suggests about the women’s engagement with the forms of literacy learning they encountered in those classes.

Although the Sunday classes attended by the women were English language rather than literacy classes, and for some were linked to obtaining certificate of proficiency in English by virtue of taking an oral—rather than written—exam in order to apply for indefinite permission to remain, it was clear from the way in which group members spoke about their classes, and from materials that they brought into our sessions from them, that they often made extensive use of written English. The literacy skills required to engage with this presented significant challenges for the women in my group. My observation notes frequently note group members bringing in materials and worksheets they had been given in their Sunday classes, which they wanted help with. Often they struggled not only to understand the language concerns being addressed, but also to understand what it was they were expected to do with the worksheets themselves. Copying things that the teacher wrote down on the board was something that they told me was also a problem, as can be seen clearly in the extract given next, which documents a discussion with two of the group members:

Sudha ... once again came saying how difficult [her Sunday class] had been and wanting help understanding what they had done ( ... she had copied down “I drive, I don’t drive, he drives, he doesn’t drive” etc., but clearly hadn’t been able to read what was on the board very well as all the letters were muddled and she had no idea what she had written). Sudha and Nhanu



then spent a bit of time talking about the [Sunday] classes and comparing them to our group [sessions] ... Both said that they thought other people in their [Sunday] classes also found [the classes] difficult ... Nhanu said how one person in her class had said not to worry [if she doesn't understand] but just to copy everything down, that that is what they had been doing for five years and now they were just starting to understand. Nhanu and Sudha both said they felt bad when they couldn't read or understand things and Nhanu said that she thought her head was "just not good for learning these things." ... she said how she thought she was like her aunty ... who had gone to classes for 5 years but still found it really hard. (Observation notes, December 3, 2008)

As can be seen here, although Nhanu had mastered excellent spoken English, her experiences in her Sunday English classes had led her to conclude that her "head was just not good for learning," even as she accepted the view of one of the other women in her class that she should just keep on trying to copy things down in the hope that she might eventually understand something.

The materials that the women brought to our sessions and the ways in which they discussed their experiences of English language classes suggested that much of the learning that they encountered in these classes reflected what, drawing on Street (1984), could be described as an autonomous or "technical" approach to literacy. The focus often seemed to be on acquiring technical skills—being able to use commas, complete worksheets, or use verbs and adjectives correctly—but with little sense of how these related to the realities of the women's everyday lives, or literacy practices. While this may have been important for satisfying language and citizenship learning requirements for immigration purposes, as can be seen clearly in Nhanu's comments just described, it appeared to have been less helpful in terms of building the women's confidence in their language and literacy skills.

However, despite the way in which the women often struggled with the technical learning activities associated with their Sunday English classes, it was clear that they also valued them and saw these classes, and the learning associated with them, as important to enable them to access "correct" English, as well as for their significance in enabling them fulfill immigration requirements. This was reflected in the frequency with which they brought work from those classes to our sessions, and the way in which they often prioritized getting help with it over other forms of literacy support. This was particularly true for Sunita, the youngest member of the group, who explained how important it was for her to master the correct use of grammar and punctuation, in order to ensure that she used English accurately when communicating with her friends and social networks through SMS and social media, discussed further in the following.

### "Functional" Literacies

As complements to—rather than replacements for—the classes that the women in the group attended on Sundays, our own Wednesday afternoon sessions were very different. Rather than constituting formal classes, the sessions were established under the mentor scheme at the MRC, which paired migrants wanting to improve an aspect of their English learning with volunteers able to help them. This affected the makeup of the group itself, which was based on existing friendships between group members, rather than the more diverse makeup of an open class. Moreover, the nature of the mentor scheme meant that the sessions did not carry with them an expectation of leading to any form of qualification or of needing to conform to a particular

set curriculum. Instead, as the “mentor” I could be guided by the particular needs of the group members.

Drawing on the view that literacy education should build on “the richness and complexity of learners’ prior knowledge” (Street, 2005, p. 417), and an understanding of the “literacy practices that learners engage within their everyday lives” (Papen, 2005, p. 5), my own approach to supporting the women’s literacy learning as their mentor was to try quite explicitly to connect classroom activities with their own needs and values in relation to literacy and in our sessions. I thus tried to find ways to “bring the outside in” (Baynham, 2006; Lytra & Møller, 2011; Simpson & Gresswell, 2012), so that I could ensure that the learning that took place within the activities drew on and was relevant to the women’s experiences outside the classroom. In developing activities with the women during our session times I therefore tried to develop and draw on my understanding of their existing literacy practices and put this alongside what they themselves identified as their literacy “needs and wants.”

Often these literacy “needs and wants,” identified by the women as being particularly important to them related to very practical concerns relating to the ways in which they needed to use literacy in their everyday lives as migrant domestic workers navigating life in the United Kingdom. These included literacies related to working lives—for example, shopping—as well as those associated with the ways in which they negotiated travel and immigration—particularly form filling—and communicated with family and friends at home and overseas, through, for example, SMS messaging. These were concerns that they returned to often over the course of time during which we met as a group, and I tried to develop activities that responded directly to these concerns, where possible drawing on “real literacy materials” (Rogers, 1999) that reflected the texts that they encountered and engaged with their everyday lives.

Thus, one particularly popular area of work that we developed over a number of sessions focused on shopping lists and reading signs in shops. As part of this work, we created a supermarket in the room, using printouts of photos of real supermarket signs (see Figure 1). When, several months later, I asked group members which of our sessions or activities they had enjoyed the most, two of the women referred back to this session. For both participants this activity, through connecting to their everyday literacy practices and some of the literacy



FIGURE 1 Example of one of the signs used in the supermarket activity, April 8, 2009.

demands they experienced as domestic workers on a daily basis, had seemed to play an important role in helping to develop their confidence in their ability to read and recognize words.

In other sessions, I similarly tried to draw on both what I knew about their existing everyday literacy practices, as well as the specific learning needs that they had identified to support them to develop the practical literacy skills they considered important for their day-to-day lives. A number of sessions, for example, were spent looking at SMS text messages, a form of literacy that I knew was important to the women as they communicated with each other and with their friends and family across the globe. This, their comments indicated, was important for them to be able to keep in touch with family across the globe, but also represented a way in which they were able to position themselves as literate in these communications. Developing the skills required to send SMS messages through the literacy support sessions thus acquired symbolic, as well as practical, importance for the women.

When we began our group sessions, while all the women used mobile phones, far fewer were familiar with or had access to computers. In a relatively early session one group member, Ramita, spoke about wanting to send e-mails, but this was not something that was seen as important to others in the group. However, this changed over time, as group members became aware of friends or family members having e-mail accounts or joining Facebook. Sunita in particular spoke about wanting to be able to use different forms of social media as a way of keeping up with her friends:

Sunita said that she was thinking of getting a laptop, which she wants to bring to class so I can teach her how to open an email account and Facebook etc. She says that people always ask her about her email account and if she's on Facebook, and why not—if she lives in London she should be, and she [said] "I just lie and make up that it's because I haven't had time." (Observation notes, January 20, 2010)

Sunita's comments point to the significance that being able to use such forms of technology had not only for keeping in touch with others but also in terms of the status attached to them. Although lack of Internet connectivity meant that we were not able to spend time looking at social networking technologies in our group sessions between 2008 and 2011, when, in 2013, I caught up with and interviewed three members of the group, it was clear that, in addition to SMS messaging, Facebook had become an increasingly important way in which they kept in touch with friends and family across the globe. Advances in mobile phone technology and the increased use and availability of smartphones meant that they did this using their phones, rather than needing to be able to access or use computers.

The literacy activities discussed earlier—relating to shopping, texting, and form filling—could be understood in terms of representing “functional” literacy learning, inasmuch as their primary focus was on supporting the development of practical literacy skills that the women considered important for their everyday lives. However, the sort of functional literacy learning that the women in the group engaged with was clearly quite different from classic functional literacy programs that more narrowly focused on employment or economic skills (Rogers et al., 2004). Although some aspects of the activities described linked to literacies they encountered in their working lives—as seen, for example, in activities focused on shopping—literacies associated with income generation or employability were not a main concern. Rather, the “functional” literacy activities that took place within our sessions were more often linked directly to the particular literacy demands associated with

their functioning as transnational migrant women crossing spaces, negotiating bureaucracies, and staying connected.

Rather than positioning the women learners as “deficit” or “lacking,” and, in doing so contributing to the removal of learner agency (Hamilton & Burgess, 2011), the activities concerned with “functional” literacies that took place within these sessions entailed very active forms of negotiation, and the way in which group members engaged with—and sometimes changed the shape of—the activities themselves was far from passive. This meant that while the starting point and explicit focus of these activities were on the development of functional skills, the activities were also associated with processes relating to confidence and identity, which highlighted the symbolic importance of particular practices. This was reflected in the way in which the women spoke about the increased confidence they felt, when, for example, traveling back to Nepal as a result of the work we did together practicing filling in forms, or when they described how pleased and proud they were to now be able to send SMS messages to family and friends.

### “Empowering” Literacy Learning

Although when they spoke about literacy the women in the group often emphasized their lack of skills or knowledge, it was clear from our conversations and their interactions within the sessions that they were in fact both highly knowledgeable and articulate. Indeed, the contrast between the way in which they spoke about their struggles with reading and writing and the way in which they acknowledged some of their other achievements as migrant women providing for families and communities was striking. In our sessions I therefore also tried to develop activities that explicitly sought to recognize, engage with, and build on these achievements and the knowledge that they entailed, drawing on what I knew about both their existing literacy practice and their wider interests and experiences.

One area, for example, that women in the group often discussed, and where they clearly shared particular expertise, was cooking. For many of the women this seemed to be the one area of their work as domestic workers in which they felt particular pride, and they often discussed how they prepared complicated dishes for dinner parties or other special events held by their employers. Sudha, for example, when referring to her expertise as a cook explained: “I can’t read and I can’t write but I carry so many dishes in my head, so many things I know how to cook, I carry them all in my head” (April 8, 2009). Taking this expertise as a starting point, one activity that we worked on as a group was our own cookbook, drawing on their culinary knowledge to develop the recipes. The extract shown next describes some of our initial discussions around the idea of a recipe book. It reflects both the very international nature of their knowledge and experiences, and the importance that cooking had for the identity of the two participants, as seen in the friendly—but competitive—banter they engaged in when discussing their extensive knowledge of different recipes:

As well as Indian dishes Jyothi listed chocolate mousse cake and cheese cake as two of her specialities. Sudha said she was good at cooking South Indian food as she learnt in Bangalore. She also described cooking Israeli food—“very easy, too rich, too much mayonnaise.” She seemed quite surprised when I also asked about Nepali food and she described momos (Nepalese

dumplings). They also both said that they can cook Thai curry. They were ... a bit competitive when talking about cooking different recipes—especially Indian recipes—for example when Jyothi said she made a certain kind of biryani, Sudha said—“oh that is very easy but can you make ...” and described another kind of biryani “that is very difficult.” (Observation notes, April 8, 2009)

My notes relating to this session reflect a concern that by suggesting that they should write their recipes down, I might in some way undermine the value of this expertise and the way in which they had learned and remembered recipes through experience rather than reading. However, to some extent, the recipe book project, in enabling the women in the group to assume the role of experts, allowed for a quite explicit shifting of roles: While I contributed expertise in terms of helping write out the recipes, with regard to the actual recipes themselves it was clear they were very much the teachers and I the learner.

In other cases my attempts to connect with the wider interests and experiences of the women in our sessions entailed a direct engagement with literacy experiences associated with the women’s lives and identities as domestic workers working in highly literate international households, and connected to aspirations for learning that went explicitly beyond a concern with merely “functioning.” For example, several women in the group had expressed a desire to be able to read “stories,” with one participant, Sunita, explaining that she would really like to read some “12–19 age range books, love stories, that sort of thing,” like those read by her employers’ daughter (October 14, 2009). Inspired by this, one activity that I developed with the group was the collective reading of stories. This was something that all the group members seemed to enjoy. However, they took hold of the texts in very different ways. Sudha, for example, while saying she enjoyed the actual stories, saw the texts largely as an opportunity to practice her reading and writing by reading and copying out extracts of text. In contrast, Sunita was quick to connect the reading that we did do together with her own experiences, identifying with the central character and describing her own journey to the United Kingdom, via India, as a migrant worker as “an adventure.” This led to her developing a piece of writing about her own experiences, as shown in Figure 2.

This was one of several occasions when we used the group sessions to develop writing about the women’s own experiences. The extract shown next, for example, relates to an earlier session, in which Sudha and Nhanu developed a piece of writing about their experiences before coming to London, and their hopes for the future:

To start them off [I] wrote up on the board “Before I came to London I ...”—which we then read together. This ... set off a lot of discussion about their lives and experiences ... Sudha got her English quite muddled in places whereas Nhanu was much clearer about what she wanted to write and what words she wanted to use, although she finds the actual writing harder ... Sudha finished before Nhanu and then set about reading it through to herself. When she got to the end she made a triumphant “yes!” sound and moved her clenched fist down to accompany it. (Observation notes, June 24, 2009)

Although, as discussed in the preceding, Nhanu in particular found literacy difficult and often expressed doubts about her ability to learn, in this session her confidence in expressing herself orally and the easy conversation that flowed between her and Sudha when discussing their own experiences seemed to help her feel more able to put things in writing. Meanwhile, Sudha’s growing confidence as a writer and evident satisfaction in her ability to compose something on

18/11/09  
 my adventures

First I lived in Nepal when I was 11 years  
 old I came to India then I was  
 working with a family. I was  
 working for 10 year for them.  
 the family was very nice and  
 kind I was very happy to work  
 with them later that I was very  
 happy because I got a visa to  
 to come to London when I  
 arrived in London I was  
 surprised and happy because  
 my dream had come true.

next

now I live in London and next  
 year I'm going to India to  
 meet the family and my friends and  
 my mum and dad I will buy some  
 presents for them I miss my  
 friends and my family so see you  
 next year all of you. good bye

FIGURE 2 “My adventure”—Sunita’s writing from session on November 18, 2009.

paper was clear in her clenching of her fist. Over the time that I meet with the group I found that writing about their own lives was often the time when even those who struggled the most with reading and writing seemed to develop confidence in themselves not just as readers but also as writers.

In discussing a literacy program carried out with older women in Muthande, South Africa, Millican described how for many participants the transcription of their personal histories “formed the high point of the project,” despite not being something that had been mentioned in their early analysis of local literacy practices (Millican, 2004, p. 199). She suggests that their “value was in their affirmation of a sense of identity among participants and recognition of their personal memories and individual voice” (Millican, 2004, p. 199). For the women in my study, this recognition and valuing of identity and memories was similarly important. Discussing and then writing their own stories seemed to entail not only a validation of their own memories and experiences of migration and dislocation, and of their identities as Nepali/Indian—and transnational—women, but also an acknowledgment of the significance of their achievements as migrant women who had crossed the world in order to find work and provide for their families and communities.

## DISCUSSION

It is clear that the different forms of literacy learning described here—the “technical” literacy learning associated with their Sunday classes, the “functional” literacy learning relating to their



literacy needs as migrant women, and the “empowering” learning that, building on the women’s existing interests and expertise, sought to recognize their knowledge and achievements—were all, in different ways, considered important and valued by the women in the group.

For all the group members, attending their Sunday classes was seen as essential to enabling them to meet the criteria for applying for indefinite leave to remain. The classes themselves were thus explicitly tied to requirements for citizenship, and—like the official literacies that they encountered as they navigated immigration bureaucracies—were associated with processes of forms of regulation and control (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Han et al., 2010). However, how they responded to the actual literacy learning that took place within these classes varied. Both Sudha and Nhanu, for example, had a vague sense that what they were being taught was important, so they should keep going until they understood it, but were less interested in the actual content of the classes, which they saw as being too difficult and a struggle, rather than as something relevant to them. This was in contrast to the enthusiastic ways in which they engaged with “functional” forms of literacy learning that they saw as highly significant to their lives, or with the way in which they seemed to enjoy the activities that recognized and drew upon their experiences and knowledge as migrant women.

Sunita, on the other hand, although she also found the Sunday classes difficult, valued the emphasis placed on learning correct grammar and she was thus keen to bring concerns with “technical” or “autonomous” forms of learning into our literacy support sessions. Like the participants in adult literacy programs in South Africa and Namibia studied by Papen (2005), she saw accessing “powerful” literacies through formal learning as important. Rather than being seen as something separate from the “functional” or “empowering” literacy activities that took place within our sessions, a concern with learning “correct” written English seemed to link directly to her wider aspirations to be able to read “girl and dog stories” and communicate effectively with her friends through SMS and social media.

Paying attention to the multiple ways in which the different women engaged with different forms of learning, and the meanings and values they attached to them, suggests a need to look beyond some of the distinctions that are often made between different types of literacy programs. Instead, it points to a need to consider the way in which different combinations of different forms of learning may be important to support literacy learning that is both useful (or “functional”) and “empowering” to particular women. Doing this requires paying close attention to what it is that learners themselves value. The women’s engagement with literacy learning within our sessions points to a value in forms of “functional” literacy learning that are attentive to the ways in which participants’ particular learning needs are shaped by their lived experiences, practices, and aspirations. However, it also suggests that for the women in the group the sessions themselves also held a value that went beyond this. Through the sessions and activities that built on their existing knowledge and experiences as migrant women, they were not only able to come together as a supportive friendship group, but they were also able to engage in and enjoy reading and writing for pleasure, away from the pressures and obligations that their lives as domestic workers entailed. For the women in the group, both forms of learning were associated with changes in confidence and identity that were important to them as they negotiated some of the tensions they experienced as migrant domestic workers and transnational women, managing relationships and navigating among diverse social, cultural, and geographical contexts.



## AUTHOR BIO

Amy North is a lecturer in Education and International Development at the UCL Institute of Education. Her research interests include gender equality, literacy, the experiences of adult learners, and migration, with a particular focus on the ways in which ideas and practices move between and are interpreted and realized across different contexts.

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