‘LITERACY AND ILLITERACY: A CAPABILITIES PERSPECTIVE ON THRESHOLDS AND WELLBEING’


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Abstract

This paper examines the arguments on literacy as a centrally important human capability, and illiteracy as a powerful form of capability deprivation. The paper critically analyses the notion of ‘minimum thresholds’ of literacy functioning. This is informed by a reading of Nussbaum (2006) who utilises the notion of threshold in her discussion of central human capabilities. The paper begins by locating the concept of threshold within the literature on poverty and capabilities. It examines arguments in ethnography and education that reject the notion of a clear dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy, and broader debate on the implications and robustness of threshold concepts in ethics and social policy.

The paper explores two contrasting perspectives on thresholds. The first draws on the literature on core poverty and basic capabilities. It notes insights provided by poverty measures on questions of lines and thresholds, subjective measures, and inequality. The paper suggests that distribution sensitive poverty measures, and the literature on ‘fuzzy set’ theory and vagueness (e.g. Qizilbash 2004) can readily be applied in the analysis of literacy thresholds. A contrasting perspective is examined viewing thresholds in relation to Victor Turner’s (1969) concept of liminality.

The paper integrates these perspectives in an analysis of literacy thresholds based on the identification of literacy functionings (as beings and doings). This is illustrated with qualitative data from Bangladesh. The paper suggests that localised measures based on valued literacy functionings can be theoretically robust, and should replace the current drive toward normative measures and standardised comparison. The model of capability-based literacy assessment proposed combines analysis of literacy functionings, and the forms of capability deprivation (disadvantage, harms) associated with illiteracy. This would also enable a more sensitive analysis for the distribution of literacy and illiteracy, and the severity (or depth) of illiteracy in terms of distance from the threshold. This, it argues, implies a more transparent and deliberative process in setting thresholds within the realm of democratic politics. The paper concludes by drawing some policy implications, and argues that it is a mistake to abandon the distinction between literacy and illiteracy which enables an important indicator of educational disadvantage.

Keywords: Literacy, Thresholds, Capabilities, Poverty, Wellbeing, Inequality, Bangladesh.
INTRODUCTION: LITERACY THRESHOLDS AND FUNCTIONINGS

The increasing influence of multi-dimensional understandings of poverty and wellbeing imply significant changes to the ways in which we promote and understand human development. These approaches are now well integrated into the capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2006). They suggest deep ramifications in terms of challenges to epistemological traditions and orthodox institutional practice, and the emergence of a more deliberative and contextually informed politics. In this paper I examine the implications of such multi-dimensionality for how we understand and measure literacy. More specifically, the paper asks whether the concept of a threshold level of capability (Nussbaum 2006) is sufficiently robust to accommodate plural and multi-dimensional understandings of literacy, and the implications of this for a threshold view for social policy.

‘..my approach uses the idea of a threshold level of each capability, beneath which it is held that truly human functioning is not available to citizens; the social goal should be understood in terms of getting citizens above this capability threshold. (That would not be the only important social goal: in that sense I aim only to provide a partial and minimal account of social justice)’ (p71).

The ‘threshold’ operates as an important organising concept in the capabilities approach. This reflects the perceived importance of a core of ‘basic’ (Sen) or ‘central human capabilities’ (Nussbaum) that are required for wellbeing. This reflects a consequentialist concern with the achievement of functionings.

‘The capabilities approach uses the idea of a threshold: for each important entitlement, there is an appropriate level beneath which it seems right to say that the relevant entitlement has not been secured’ (2006:191-291).

Nussbaum’s approach to minimum thresholds and adequacy is grounded in the concepts of human flourishing and the Marxian idea of a “truly human” life (1993:73, 2006:74). Sen shares similar philosophical commitments, but is also influenced by work on poverty and famines, and perhaps as a result, has a slightly different orientation to thresholds and adequacy. This is clearly influenced by liberal philosophy (e.g. Hume, Mill, Smith), and has resonance with wider debates on destitution, poor law and the moral economy. Sen recognises the multi-dimensional nature of human wellbeing, and although he has been reluctant to specify a list of capabilities (Sen 2004), his work draws our attention to a core of relatively few ‘basic capabilities’ (Sen 1993, 1999), that are necessary to avoid the worst kinds of human deprivation: ‘There is an irreducible core of absolute deprivation in the concept of poverty’ (1981:24). The emphasis on adequacy or ‘minimality’ (Clark and Qizilbash 2005: 7) implies a ‘bottom line’ (Qizilbash 2004: 357), as critical points of demarcation, below which one locates core poverty and capability failure (Gasper 1996).

Whether the concept of minimum threshold is informed by ideas on human flourishing or concerns with poverty and destitution, it raises a number of theoretical and procedural questions that have been discussed in recent literature.¹ One set of questions relates to the idea of ‘arbitrariness’, and the inherent (and necessary)
‘vagueness’ of multi-dimensional poverty measures. These questions were raised by Sen in ‘Poverty and Famines’ (1981):

‘The exercise of describing the predicament of the poor in terms of the prevailing standards of ‘necessities’ does of course, involve ambiguities, which are inherent in the concept of poverty; but ambiguous description isn’t the same thing as prescription. Instead, the arbitrariness that is inescapable in choosing between permissible procedures and possible interpretations of prevailing standards requires recognition and appropriate treatment’ (Sen 1981:23).

Sen appears to make a virtue out of an insight that might lead others to altogether dismiss measures of poverty. Criticising the concept of minimum threshold in the capabilities approach, Arneson (2000a), for examples argues:

‘One difficulty is how one nonarbitrarily sets the threshold level. Why here and not higher or lower? What we have is a smooth continuum of possible levels of overall capability for flourishing. Higher capability is always better than lower capability. But I do not see how any unique level (not even a broad thick line) can be picked out such that if a person has that level, she has enough’ (p56).

The question of arbitrariness is central to Arneson’s critique of thresholds (2000a:47-59, 2000b:346, 2006:17). He is sceptical about the empirical basis of thresholds, and rejects their use as a basis for an ethics of social justice. Arneson (2000a) describes the capabilities approach to minimum thresholds on of ‘satisficing’:

‘The principle of justice that Nussbaum espouses asserts that the first priority of justice is to bring it about that every person gets a decent level of capability for each of the functionings that are needed for a genuinely good quality of life. For each person, what justice requires is not maximising any aspect of her condition, but satisficing: making sure that she has a sufficient level of capability’ (Arneson 2000a:47)

Arneson’s representation of the capabilities approach and of Nussbaum’s work appears partial and somewhat inaccurate (Nussbaum 2000b:124-128). Nevertheless, it does draw our attention to the implications of the approach, and some alternative approaches to social justice. His ‘prioritarian’ argument provides a useful contrast to the focus of thresholds in the capabilities approach: ‘The root idea of prioritarianism is that one ought as a matter of justice to aid the unfortunate, and the more badly off someone is, the more urgent is the moral imperative to aid’ (2000b:343, also see
2000a: 57). In suggesting the idea of a smooth continua (2000a:56), and his argument on arbitrariness, Arneson seems to entirely reject the idea that there can be an empirical basis for the concept of minimum threshold. This is problematic, as it denies the possibility of critical levels of capability that can lead to transformations in people’s functionings and quality of life, or below which people’s wellbeing becomes untenable. I see no intrinsic reason why the notion of smooth continuum should be any more plausible or theoretically robust, than the concept of thresholds.

These questions are not unrelated to recent debates over the measurement of literacy, where similar questions of arbitrariness have led some researchers to reject the distinction between literacy and illiteracy. The ethnographically informed ‘New Literacy Studies’ argue that there is no clear point of demarcation between literacy and illiteracy, or between literacy and orality, and that such categories operate as the source of ethnocentric discrimination (Street 1993, 1995, Collins and Blot 2003, Robinson-Pant 2004). These arguments are based on the ethnographic understanding of the multiple forms of literacy practice and literacies that exist within social contexts. From this perspective, the distinction between literacy and illiteracy marks procedures of institutional and epistemic violence that privilege dominant forms of literacy, while under-reporting, or relegating ‘other’ literacies to the illiterate category. As Street (1995) argues: ‘It is not only meaningless intellectually to talk of ‘the illiterate’, it is also socially and culturally damaging’ (p19).

The distinction between literacy and illiteracy is also rejected by some recent literacy survey approaches (the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey, and UNESCO Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme), which promote the idea of multiple levels (or thresholds) along a continuum of competence;

‘The IALS no longer defines literacy in terms of an arbitrary standard of reading performance, distinguishing the few who completely fail the test (the “illiterates”) from nearly all those growing up in OECD countries who reach a minimum threshold (those who are “literate”)’ (OECD 2000, pX).

‘LAMP will provide a methodology to assess individual literacy levels over a range of competence to get away from the idea that one is either literate or illiterate’ (UNESCO 2004, p1)
These arguments provide a significant challenge to the continued use of the concept of a threshold between literacy and illiteracy. They highlight its multi-dimensional, complex and imprecise nature; the subjective nature of understandings; and the significance of social context and practices in understanding their importance. They also question the legitimacy of a single scale or a ‘continuum’ (Street 1993:2-4) and its validity for international comparison (Hamilton 2001:192). These arguments are not however insurmountable, and are familiar to the literature on capabilities, and studies on poverty and wellbeing. Similar challenges, for example, have been posed on other dimensions of poverty. Writing on malnutrition, Sen (1981) notes a series of arguments that question its viability as a measure of poverty:

‘.while it can hardly be denied that malnutrition captures only one aspect of our idea of poverty, it is an important aspect, and one that is particularly important in many developing countries. It seems clear that malnutrition must have a central place in the conception of poverty. How this place is to be specified remains to be explored, but the recent tendency to dismiss the whole approach seems to be a robust example of misplaced sophistication’ (Sen 1981, p14).

Rather then abandoning the concept of malnutrition, Sen strengthened its theoretical basis in his theory on ‘entitlements. The rejection of the distinction between literacy and literacy might, despite its obvious insights, also be viewed as a ‘robust example of misplaced sophistication’ (ibid). These debates then, illustrate the wider challenges involved in developing multi-dimensional understandings of wellbeing and poverty. The challenges of multi-dimensionality and contextual complexity are discussed by Grusky and Kanbur (2006), who argue that further conceptual and methodological work is required in ‘defining the dimensions’ that describe inequality; ‘characterising multi-dimensional space’ including the development of new methods that adequately respond to differences between social groups; and ‘new approaches to remediation’ which integrate understandings of causality (2006:2). This paper is structured according to these themes. The next section then, focuses on ‘defining the dimensions’: the phenomena of literacy and illiteracy, and the relationship between them. It develops the idea that illiteracy is not simply the absence of literacy (i.e. synonymous with orality), but is a characteristic of capability deprivation and inequality. Literacy is viewed in terms of functionings (doings, beings, capacities) and their potential to enhance wellbeing and human development. The second section
focuses on ‘characterising multi-dimensional space’. It discusses approaches to arbitrariness and vagueness, the multiple uses of literacy, and how we might conceptually and procedurally define a threshold between literacy and illiteracy. Some alternative understandings of threshold are examined, and the paper attempts to provide some new insights into the severity (or depth) and distribution of literacy inequalities. This is illustrated through an exploratory model of literacy thresholds. The concluding section suggests some ‘new approaches to remediation’ and their policy implications.

PART 1: LITERACY AND ILLITERACY – DEFINING THE DIMENSIONS

‘illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves. Not to be able to read or write or count of communicate is itself a terrible deprivation. And if a person is thus reduced by illiteracy and innumeracy, we can not only see that the person is insecure to whom something terrible could happen, but more immediately, that to him or her, something terrible has actually happened’ (Sen 2003:22).

As the ethnographic literature highlights, there are multiple forms of literacy use, and literacies, rather than a single literacy (Street 1995:19). These vary within and between social contexts. The ethnographically informed ‘New Literacy Studies’ argues that the multiple meanings and uses of literacy can best be understood in terms of the wider social, cultural and institutional practices in which they are embedded (Gee 2000, Collins and Blot 2003). As Street (1984, 1993) argues, literacy does not operate ‘autonomously’ (independently from social context and practice). The benefits of literacy acquisition can therefore be viewed as socially contingent. As a result, many ethnographers have been reluctant to attribute ‘consequences’ to literacy, or to promote literacy as an unqualified social good (Maddox 2007 and forthcoming). Nevertheless, ethnographic studies also highlight broad patterns of literacy use, and associated benefits that are not entirely dissimilar with those highlighted by the capabilities literature. Such benefits can be linked to the multiple social uses of literacy, its instrumental benefits, and from the necessary engagement with the literacy-based practices of material and institutional culture. An ethnographic perspective might seem to be at odds with the promotion of literacy in the capabilities approach. Nussbaum is uncompromising in her promotion of literacy
in human development, and is deeply critical of relativist arguments, that might question such universality (1993:243, 2000:78). This is reflected in her robust defence of women’s literacy:

‘..let us get rid, once and for all, of the idea that literacy is a value that is peculiarly “Western”. Women all over the world are struggling to attain it, and some of the biggest success stories in the area of literacy are in non-Western societies’ (2003:332).

Nussbaum however, advocates the promotion of abstract (‘thick vague’) capabilities that can form the basis of overlapping consensus and enable pluralism (2006:78-79). As a result, she promotes capabilities, rather than functionings as the political goal (ibid. p79). As Nussbaum (1993:258-259) argues, this enables an approach that promotes literacy as a universal good (and important entitlement), while responding to local meanings and practices, ‘immersing itself in the concrete circumstances of history and culture’ (ibid. p259). This view then, is not entirely incompatible with the ethnographic sensitivity to pluralism and social context.

To apply the capabilities approach rigorously, ‘literacy’ can be understood not simply as cognitive abilities or competencies, but as functionings (i.e. as beings and doings). Nussbaum (2000b) makes a distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ capabilities. The internal refer to the ‘developed states of the person’ (ibid. p84). Gasper (2002) calls these ‘S-capabilities’ (i.e. as capacity, knowledge, skill). The external capabilities refer to opportunities and constraints that result from people’s social context. Gasper calls these ‘O-capabilities’ (2002:447). The idea of literacy functionings (or literacy related functionings) is similar to the concept of ‘literacy practices’ in the ethnographic literature (Street 1993). In combining ‘doings’ and ‘beings’, literacy functionings not only draw our attention to the social uses of literacy, but to their significance and embodiment in the production of social identities. These processes are also described in the ethnographic literature (Bartlett and Holland 2002). The capabilities literature adds an additional element that is largely absent in the ethnographic literature, by focuses on people’s future capacities or ‘potentials’ (Comin 2004). This recognition of potential ‘doings and beings’ relates to people’s substantive freedoms and agency, to relational identities, self-confidence, and what Appadurai (2004) called the ‘capacity to aspire’.
It is tempting to think of illiteracy as an absence of literacy (or insufficient literacy). However, in terms of its human and social consequences, this portrayal of illiteracy is inadequate, as literacy and illiteracy can be viewed as distinct social phenomena. Street (1995) argues that the Western concept of ‘illiteracy’ creates stigma, and that adult literacy campaigns ‘...have involved the construction of ‘stigma’ of illiteracy where many people had operated in the oral domain without feeling that it was a problem’ (ibid, 14). This however, seems an implausible and inadequate explanation for perceptions of inequality. Whereas ‘orality’ describes a distinctive (and relatively rare) cultural tradition which gives high status to spoken communication (Finnegan 1988), ‘illiteracy’ is a pervasive characteristic of social inequality and disadvantage. iii

It is in this sense of avoidable capability deprivation and relational inequality that Nussbaum (2006) cites global literacy statistics:

‘Adult literacy rates in the top 20 nations are around 99 percent. In Sierra Leone the literacy rate is 36 percent. In 24 nations the adult literacy rate is under 50 percent’ (2006:224).

These figures would be all the more telling, were Nussbaum to disaggregate them along lines of class, gender, ethnicity and caste. As Street (1995:19-24) suggests, some of these people may have been rendered ‘illiterate’ as result of using the ‘wrong kind’ of literacy (minority literacies, vernacular practices). Some may be unwilling to report their literacy capabilities due to privacy or proscribed practices (Maddox 2005), or actually use literacy, but not consider themselves to be sufficiently educated or learned to merit the status of literate (‘doing’ with literacy but not ‘being’ literate). Others still may ‘be’ illiterate, but be able to adequately ‘do’ literacy related functionings through networks of support and mediation. iv Street (1995) argues that non-literate people in developing countries are ‘accustomed to managing their daily lives, intellectual and emotional as well as practical and economic, through oral means, have not required the elaborate definitions and distinctions associated with literacy and illiteracy in the West’ (p19). While this may indeed be the case, the capabilities literature asserts that the majority of these people are not illiterate by choice, but as the result of social inequality and various forms of bad luck and disadvantage. To follow Nussbaum’s Aristotelian argument on virtues, we can
assume that for these people, literacy (and wider learning opportunities) would be a
valued dimension of a good life (also Qizilbash 2004:473).

In describing illiteracy as capability deprivation then, it is necessary to theorise the
nature of such disadvantage. For the purposes of this paper, this is understood in
terms of its impact on Nussbaum’s list of ‘central human capabilities’, and suggests
multiple causal connections.\textsuperscript{v} Perhaps the most obvious are the impact of illiteracy
on processes of ‘affiliation’ (item 7) which includes being able to \textit{engage in various
forms of social interaction}. ‘\textit{having the social bases of self-respect and
nonhumiliation}’\textsuperscript{vi}, and in terms of ‘\textit{Control over one’s environment}’ (item 10) which
includes the ability to \textit{participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s
life}. ‘\textit{having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others}’
(Nussbaum 2006:77). Broadly speaking, illiteracy can be viewed in terms of its
negative impacts in reducing people’s ability to function effectively and to lead the
kind of life they choose to value. More specifically, this disadvantage can be
attributed to inequalities due to difficulties that people may have in achieving valued
functionings in literate societies, where engagement with literacy is necessary for
adequate social participation (Dreze and Sen 2002).\textsuperscript{vii}
PART 2: ARBITRARINESS AND IDENTIFICATION: LITERACIES AND FUNCTIONINGS AS MULTIDIMENSIONAL SPACE

As we have seen, one of the major challenges to the notion of a threshold between literacy and illiteracy is the question of arbitrariness (Sen 1981:23). There is not a single literacy, but a plurality – multiple forms of literacy, literacy practices and functionings. This presents a challenge in terms of ‘identification’ (what counts as literacy). There is also the question of conceptualising and identifying literacy thresholds. Literacy and illiteracy, are not simply different amounts of the same thing, but distinct (if perhaps overlapping) social phenomena, with their own characteristics. Rather than the ‘smooth continuum’ that Arneson (2000a:56) suggests, this requires us to identify points of transformation at which people’s literacy functionings are adequate to enable flourishing and dignity, and avoid the forms of disadvantage associated with illiteracy.

These themes and problems have been discussed elsewhere in the poverty literature. In his paper ‘On the arbitrariness and robustness of multi-dimensional poverty rankings’, Qizilbash (2004) clarifies the conceptual distinction between ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ vagueness, and their application in identification of the poor (ibid. p357). Horizontal vagueness indicates ‘width’, and the range of dimensions to be included, while vertical vagueness indicates depth, or the intensity of poverty (ibid. p357). This clearly has relevance for literacy. There is often insufficient discussion about the (horizontal) dimensions of literacy that are included in measures (i.e. which literacies and functionings) and the rational and procedures for their inclusion.

The vertical component is often entirely missing from literacy statistics which have similar limitations to ‘headcount’ measure in poverty measurement (see Sen 1981:32, Basu and Foster 1998). The headcount measure indicates the proportions of people who are above or below the line, but does not adequately inform understanding of the distribution of people, and the severity of their poverty: ‘It matters not at all [in the headcount measure] whether someone is just below the poverty line or very far from it, in acute misery and hunger’ (Sen 1981:33). This weakness has been identified by Basu and Foster (1998) who developed an alternative analysis that accounted for the
proximity of illiterate people to other literate members of their household or community. Their distribution sensitive measure of ‘effective literacy’ recognises the benefits of ‘sharing’ literacy for ‘proximately illiterate’ people, that are not available to ‘isolated illiterates’. Their measure has subsequently been developed and refined to account for aspects of proximity, sharing and inequality (Basu, Foster and Subramanian 2000, Gibson 2001, Basu, Narayan and Ravallion, Subramanian 2004, Maddox 2007). The approach is however limited by a lack of vertical hold.

The lack of access to vertical dimensions on the severity of illiteracy, or strength of literacy capabilities has limited the ability of literacy measures to account adequately for the size of literacy poverty gaps, the nature of inequality, and their distribution between different social groups. There is no equivalent, for example to distribution sensitive measures such as the ‘Foster, Greer and Thorbecke’ measure in poverty analysis. The ‘vertical’ dimension of literacy would provide insights into the way that levels of literacy ability impact on people’s functionings. It might also support the identification of ‘minimum thresholds’. As Qizilbash argues:

‘In most exercises, where vertical vagueness is allowed for, there is some level of well-being above which, a person is definitely not poor, and another, below which a person is definitely poor’ (Qizilbash 2004, p357).

The literature on horizontal and vertical vagueness seem to offer new possibilities for the measurement of literacy, and for the identification and analysis of minimum literacy thresholds. These developments involve methods for a) the identification of appropriate dimensions, and b) appropriate procedures for setting minimum thresholds. A number of people have applied ‘fuzzy set theory’ to manage difficulties of arbitrariness and identification of poverty in situations of multi-dimensionality, inexactness, and contextual complexity (see Lelli 2001, Qizilbash 2004, Clark and Qizilbash 2005). This approach seems promising as there is no obvious cut-off point between literacy and illiteracy. Lelli (2001) notes that fuzzy sets allow for ‘an element to partially to belong to a set’, where.. ‘the transition from membership to non-membership takes place gradually rather than suddenly’ (ibid, p6). Literacy and illiteracy can be viewed as overlapping ‘fuzzy sets’, where there are degrees of literacy and illiteracy around the threshold, and where each these sets have
distinctive characteristics. People who fall below an agreed minimum threshold may still benefit from some lower level of literacy (see Maddox 2007b). Others who are marginally above the threshold may still face some difficulties in functioning.

In theorising the concept of literacy thresholds, there are a number of alternative models that we can consider. The first argues that the concept is entirely arbitrary. This is what is suggested by Arneson’s (2000a) idea of a smooth continuum, and by many ethnographic researchers who reject the concept of illiteracy, and view the term as an unwelcome imposition. As Street (1993) argues, drawing on the work of Besnier (1988), the notion of a continuum of literacy is also problematic ‘..the concept of a ‘continuum’ is inadequate because spoken and written activities do not in fact line up along a continuum but differ from each other in a complex and multidimensional way’ (Street 1993:4). Even if we impose a scale based on ideas of ‘competence’, this cannot fully predict people’s literacy functionings, as they will be dependent on wider contextual factors (Gaspers ‘O-capabilities’). As Besnier (1988) argues, genre types, such as a ‘letter’, vary considerably within social contexts, and have multiple sub-genres and registers (Besnier 1988:731, also see Kell 1999).

An alternative approach is to view the threshold as a point (a thick or thin line) that reflects qualitative transformations in people’s ability to function. This can still be viewed (as Qizilbash suggests) as somewhat arbitrary. However, rather than suggesting a ‘smooth continuum’, it is compatible with the idea of the threshold representing points of discontinuity and change. The question that one must inevitably ask is ‘what type of literacy functioning one wishes to identify or promote?’ Qizilbash (2004), and Clark and Qizilbash (2005), for example, focus on the identification of a ‘bottom line’, a ‘critical minimal threshold’ of core poverty. Nussbaum’s threshold relates to human flourishing, while Gutmann’s (1999) ‘democratic threshold principle’ argues that the appropriate threshold for literacy is not the economic orientation of many functional literacy programmes, but a higher threshold required for democratic citizenship: ‘the democratic standard is consistent with the view that there is some absolute minimum of literacy below which no democratic society could be said to promote an adequate education to its citizens’ (ibid, p139). Our attention is drawn then, not to some ‘natural’ point of demarcation, but for evidence of transitions in functioning related to particular social goals.
A somewhat different approach to thresholds is provided by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) in his work on *liminality*. The concept, based on the Latin, *limen*, ‘threshold’, draws on the work of Van Gennep (1909, 1960), and his work on rites of passage (Barnard and Spencer 1996:490). Turner’s theory described ritual processes (in Zambia), which involved processes of *separation, liminality, and reaggregation* into the social order. The *liminal* phase, he argued involved marginality and ambiguity, and a symbolic ‘anti-structure in which normal social conventions seemed to be turned upside down:

‘*The attributes of liminality or liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions in cultural space*’ (Turner 1969, p95).

This is clearly a quite different understanding of threshold to those discussed above. It draws our attention to a social space of *liminality* (a threshold space), in which transitions from literacy to literacy take place. This theory of the threshold may be useful in analysing the collective, and individual processes of transition associated with literacy acquisition. Adult literacy classes can be viewed as ritual spaces, where normal social conventions don’t apply (women are centre stage, people make grand pronouncements about social commitments and development). This ritual process is particularly strong in national literacy campaigns, which often appear somewhat surreal in their portrayal of the social order. While this does provide opportunities for learning and change, the subsequent process of ‘reaggregation’ often results in people (particularly women) being unable to actually use literacy in their daily life (see Puchner 2003). The concept of ‘literacy relapse’ may therefore be more to do with social opportunities (O-capabilities), than cognitive abilities (S-capabilities). This again draws our attention to the socially contingent nature of literacy related functioning.

‘*For the Person studying and measuring poverty, the conventions of society are matters of fact*’ (Sen 1981, p17)

The process of identification and setting of literacy thresholds involves important theoretical and procedural choices involving the status of local cultural and subjective
perspectives. Nussbaum, despite her criticism of relativism, gives considerable attention to culture and multiculturalism, and the local interpretation of capabilities (Gasper 2003:9-12). This is clearly illustrated in her discussion of Chen’s work on adult literacy in Bangladesh, where processes of localisation are central to her argument (Nussbaum 1993:258-259). While the capabilities approach entails strong normative themes (e.g. of universality), this recognition of the local, and cultural pluralism is a salient feature in the capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2006:78, also see Sen 1999, Crocker 2006). This is reflected in the status given to local and subjective perspectives of wellbeing, and in the commitment to public deliberation, and the ‘open ended’ nature of capability lists (Nussbaum 2006: 78-79).

This is recognition of the subjective and local is illustrated by Clark and Qizilbash (2005) in their paper on poverty measures in South Africa. They use participatory ranking to respond to problems of arbitrariness and in the identification of ‘core poverty’ (p5). Similar participatory approaches have been developed in subjective studies of wellbeing (see Gough and McGregor 2007, Camfield 2006). The status of subjective measures has been frequently raised in the literature on literacy measurement. Graff (1991) argued that the subjective nature of census measures does not undermine their reliability. This may in part relate to their vagueness of census specification. Even where subjective measures specify particular definitions of literacy, it is likely that people will apply their own interpretations based on local conventions.

A number of recent papers have however been critical of subjective measures of literacy, and have attempted to exclude them from literacy measurement. Schaffner (2005) uses demographic and health survey data (from Ethiopia and Nicaragua) to argue that subjective measures of literacy overestimate literacy rates. She creates a category of ‘false rates’ to indicate the difference between subjective rates, and the ‘objective’, test based measures: ‘False rates are calculated as the percent of individuals with positive subjective literacy supports who failed the objective literacy test’ (Schaffner 2005: 655). This however, seems to be a mistake, as it somehow assumes that the test based measures are less ‘subjective’ than the self-reported rates. This does not take into account of normative judgements or the procedural difficulties involved in a standardised literacy in diverse cultural contexts. Nor does it adequately
recognise the value of subjective measures in providing localised understandings of literacy. A similar stance is adopted by the International Adult Literacy Survey. The (2000) report also describes subjective measures as unreliable:

‘Many adults who score poorly in the literacy test do not themselves consider this to be a problem. Nonetheless, the data point to the real limitation low levels of skills bring – regardless of whether these limits are acknowledged by those with low skills’ (OECD 2000:53)

The stance of IALS and Schaffner (2005) on pluralism and subjectivity seems to be incompatible with the principles of the capabilities approach, as they privilege normative measures and standardisation as the basis for ‘hard’ facts, rather than understanding local meanings and practice. The relegation of subjective perspectives to ‘soft’ facts is a reflection of the institutional and epistemological politics involved.

‘..hardness’ is not located in the facts themselves, but in the community that agrees upon it, that is the community governing the politics of explanation.. The hardness of facts is an expression of social agreement rather than the quality of the facts themselves’ (Hastrup p734).

This preoccupation with objective ‘hard facts’ and standardisation as the foundation of comparative validity has been the source of much criticism (see Hamilton and Barton 2000, Hamilton 2001). As Hamilton (2001) argues the approach neglects local and vernacular literacy practices (those informal practices most connected with everyday life) and is partial in its account of literacy:

‘Testees can only respond in tightly scripted ways (or transgress by not responding) and they have no agency to define what literacy might mean to them. Adults’ self assessments, although recorded are down graded in relation to the objectivity of the test’ (ibid, 187).

Similar themes are discussed by Kanbur and Shaffer (2007), who highlight debates over epistemology and ‘validity criteria’ in mixed method approaches to poverty analysis. They note the tendency for such analysis to privilege ‘brute data’ that excludes ‘private sensations’ and ‘intersubjective knowledge claims’ (ibid, p186). They note a bias toward ‘standardisation, as a means of ensuring validity’ (ibid, p 192).
The tension between the normative promotion of capabilities, and locally informed specification is a significant challenge in the measurement and promotion of literacy. The response of IALS and LAMP to questions of validity and international comparison has been to adopt normative and standardised procedures couched in the language of technical expertise. This seems entirely unsatisfactory due to their exclusion of the local and subjective, and in their neglect of processes of cultural pluralism and public deliberation. They privileges ‘competence’ (which we can think of as internal ‘s-capabilities’), and almost entirely neglect ‘o-capabilities’ and the social context of literacy functioning.

PART 3: A CAPABILITIES PERSPECTIVE ON MINIMUM LITERACY THRESHOLDS AND WELLBEING

An alternative model proposed here is what I would describe as a capability-based literacy assessment. It attempts to integrate capabilities theory in the description, identification and setting of literacy thresholds. The model is tentative, and requires further elaboration. Its key characteristics however, are the following:

a) The model maintains the emphasis in the capabilities approach on ‘minimum thresholds’, through the application of ‘fuzzy set’ theory;
b) This incorporates the concepts of literacy and illiteracy, and suggests a ‘thick’ ‘threshold space’ (involving degrees of literacy and illiteracy, and characteristics of ambiguity and liminality), rather than a ‘thin’ line of demarcation;
c) The model therefore incorporates ‘vague’ notions of literacy and illiteracy. Their characteristics are used to inform a dual (and overlapping) scale. This inclusion of literacy and illiteracy, and the threshold between them are considered central to understanding the depth and severity of literacy inequalities, and their impact on poverty and wellbeing. Their purpose is primarily evaluative rather than descriptive;
d) the model incorporates plurality through the ‘horizontal’ identification of literacies, and functionings, and a ‘vertical’ dimension of depth (or severity) and capacity;

e) the emphasis in the model is on functionings rather than ‘competencies’. The analysis can therefore incorporate a combination of Gasper’s ‘S’ and ‘O’ capabilities, or simply focus on valued functionings (and capability aspirations), and people’s perception of difficulty. The level of ‘difficulty’ may therefore relate to intrinsic qualities of the literacy involved (relating to S-capabilities), or their wider social and institutional characteristics (relating to O-capabilities). The scope for rigour and national and international comparison is therefore in defining the position and proportion of people relative to the culturally defined literacy threshold, and the severity of such capabilities and inequalities, rather than comparison along a scale of competencies;

f) The identification and ranking of valued functionings, and setting of minimum thresholds should involve subjective and participatory processes, and be subject to public deliberation.

To illustrate this model, let me now focus on an analysis of literacy functionings in Bangladesh. The analysis is purely qualitative, and is based on a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and participatory action research (see Maddox 2005, 2007a, 2007b and forthcoming). The research process did it attempt to formally identify literacy thresholds, undertake a rigorous process of ranking, and was only conducted in a few small communities. As a result, the discussion (and diagram 1) is simply presented as an informal illustration of the approach.

Bangladesh (like most social contexts in South Asia and beyond), contains multiple forms of literacy, involving different languages and scripts. As a result of the Bengali language movement and nationalist movement in the 1950’s-1970’s, the dominant language is Bangla (Bengali) rather than Urdu or English. The context is nevertheless multi-lingual and multi-literate, including the practice and domain specific use of Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, and English, as well as indigenous languages and scripts. The most widely used language and script is Bangla. Its use includes significant variation in language between regions (Sylheti is sometimes considered to be a distinct language), and between ‘high’ and ‘low’ varieties (which are reflected in differences
between formal literature, and every-day speech). Many of the every-day uses of literacy can be described as ‘vernacular’. Barton and Hamilton (1998) describe ‘vernacular literacies’ as those which are informally learned and used. They are diverse and hybrid, and reflect the social contexts and practices in which they take place (ibid, 252). Barton and Hamilton (ibid) contrast such literacy practices with those the more formal and institutionally regulated ‘dominant literacies’ which are practiced in education, law, religion etc (ibid. p252). Whereas vernacular literacies reflect considerable play and variation, dominant (or official) literacies involve greater levels of standardisation (ibid, p252). This can be seen, for example, in the difference between informal accounts (‘hishab’) which combine literacy and numeracy use (and are widely used in Bangladesh in records of credit and debt, household and agricultural records, bazaar accounts), and the texts used in formal, and standardised ledgers and accounts (used in formal institutional practices such as credit programmes, government offices, and larger-scale business activities). A similar variety is evident in the formal and informal use of notes and letters. Often these informal vernacular texts are written in a style that is only understood by the author or the addressee. One might easily (and wrongly) describe such texts as illegible. This reflects their limited readership, which contrasts with the public transparency involved in formal accounts and records. This example illustrates the difficulty in assessing literacy related functionings on the basis of text type and competency.

People’s day literacy activities however also involve widespread engagement with formal institutionalised texts and practices (Barton and Hamilton’s ‘dominant literacies’). These include multiple forms of institutional engagement related to state services and entitlements, for example, the receipts and written records associated with the sale and purchase of livestock, and the complex written practices and documentations involved in the sale and registration of land, and the formal textual practices and events of religious literacies (such as in Koranic reading in Arabic).

The ethnographic and participatory research that informs this analysis was conducted with the participants of adult literacy classes (one class for women and another for men) and their wider neighbours in two agricultural communities in the North-West of Bangladesh. These Muslim and Hindu mixed communities were largely made up of landless agricultural labourers, rickshaw pullers, craftsmen and fishermen. The research process involved the participatory identification, analysis of valued literacy
functionings, followed by and applied learning of the literacy texts and practices involved. This ‘horizontal’ process involved the identification of multiple functionings, text types and practices (including practices in Bangla, Arabic and English). It also enabled a ‘vertical’ ranking and analysis of literacy functionings, which included recognition of their perceived value for wellbeing, their difficulty, and how they related to people’s aspirations (their place in future capabilities and learning). The process of developing people’s literacy functioning involved both ‘s-capabilities’ (knowledge and skills of literacy and numeracy, reading of different scripts, and handwriting and print styles, learning hand-writing, and styles and genre), and development of ‘o-capabilities’ (involving the negotiation and development of self-esteem, social and relational identities). The process of ‘being’ that is associated with literacy functionings, was sometimes harder (and more risky) than the learning of new knowledge and skills. This was most notably illustrated in the difficulties involved in the negotiation of new gender identities associated with valued literacy functionings. Challenges and social limits were experienced for men and women in institutional settings such as the bazaar and land-registry offices, where adequacy and effectiveness had strong social dimensions.

This experience provides some useful insights that can inform the identification and analysis of literacy thresholds. These are informally presented in diagram 1. The diagram is tentative and by no means represents an exhaustive analysis. It has been constructed retrospectively, and is not a substitute for a more participatory and deliberative process. Nevertheless, it does illustrate the viability of a capability-based literacy assessment. I have provisionally positioned literacy functionings according to a combination of their (emic) social value and importance attributed to such practices, and an element of social and cognitive ‘difficulty’. The option remains however, over whether to rank purely in terms of perceived importance of literacy functionings for wellbeing. The diagram illustrates the relevance of an application of ‘fuzzy set’ theory, as there is no clear point of demarcation between categories of literacy and illiteracy. However, it does suggest an area described as a ‘threshold space’ (which combines benefits of literacy use, and some disadvantages of capability deprivation), and above and below that, levels which appear to more unambiguously literate and illiterate. There is clearly scope for participatory and deliberative public processes on where such thresholds should be located.
CONCLUSIONS: NEW APPROACHES, POLICIES AND REMEDIATION

This paper has argued that despite arguments to the contrary, it is a mistake to abandon the distinction between literacy and illiteracy and the concept of a ‘minimum threshold’. Their value is primarily evaluative rather than descriptive, and provides important insights into human capabilities and inequality. As the paper has argued, literacy and illiteracy are not simply different amounts of the same thing, but distinctive social phenomena. In applying ‘fuzzy set’ theory, it suggests that literacy and illiteracy represent overlapping sets. The ‘threshold space’ (to apply Victor Turner’s concept of liminality), is therefore ambiguous. It represents a space in which literacy and illiteracy characteristics operate together.

Following Qizilbash (2003), the paper has highlighted the requirement of literacy assessment measures to recognise both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ dimensions involving the identification of multiple literacies and functionings. This builds on the cross-cultural ethnographic literature on literacy, and on the capabilities approach commitment to localisation and plurality. There are strong links therefore with approaches to multidimensionality in the analysis of wellbeing and poverty. The ‘vertical’ dimension is required to indicate the depth or severity of literacy related capabilities and deprivation. This promises insights into literacy inequalities and distribution that are not available from either conventional literacy measures or those of that integrate literacy sharing and proximity (i.e. Basu and Foster 1998).

The paper has argued that the identification and selection of horizontal vertical measures based on normative and standardised concepts of competency are incompatible with the capabilities approach. The alternative model of ‘capability-based literacy assessment’ that is proposed uses the concept of functionings (beings and doings), as the basis of literacy assessment. This can integrate concepts of difficulty (which has cognitive and social dimensions), or simply focus on the identification and ranking of valued functionings. The paper argues that participatory and public deliberation based on localised and subjective perceptions of literacy are an appropriate and robust way to identify the (horizontal) dimensions of literacy, and to establish a (vertical) scale and to locate minimum thresholds. The process of
setting educational policies on ‘minimum thresholds’ should therefore be informed by such perspectives and by debates over contrasting rationales and notions of adequacy and flourishing.

This discussion of literacy thresholds suggests that literacy capabilities are not best understood in terms of a ‘smooth continuum’, as the work of Arneson (2000) suggests, but in terms points of discontinuity in people’s ability to function. The identification of such thresholds has clear implications for targeting educational resources. The paper nevertheless also lends some support to Arneson’s (2000a, 200b, 2006) prioritarian critique of ‘satisficing’. It suggests that despite the significance of a threshold space related to adequate literacy functioning, ‘more literacy’ continues to improve people’s chances of human flourishing and a dignified life. At the same time, improvements of people’s literacy capabilities below an agreed threshold (such as learning to sign one’s name or recognise numbers) may also contribute to people’s quality of life. As one of the participants in the adult literacy classes described above commented, “a little bit of literacy can make a big difference”. This insight has important implications for policies of adult literacy and non-formal education, which may for various reasons fail to help people to reach desired thresholds, but may nevertheless make valuable contributions to human development.
Diagram 1. ‘Capability-based Literacy Assessment: An Illustration’

**Being ‘learned’ (shikito)**
(increased transfer between functionings, opportunities for higher social status)

- Literacy functionings in standing for political office (bureaucratic, campaigning related, speech writing)
- literacy requirements of religious leadership
- NGO/CBO literacy activities (such as formal letters, minutes and accounts, written requests and documentation in access to formal credit).
- Literacy and numeracy functionings necessary for high school participation
- reading poetry and literature in Bangla. Writing poetry and Songs
- documentation involved in institutional entitlements and engagement, e.g. land registration procedures, legal and ‘police cases’, health related records, inheritance procedures.
- Reading newspapers and magazines
- Religious reading of religious texts in Bangla

**Threshold Space - ambiguous identity space**

- religious reading (of Koran / Hadith) in Arabic.
- informal letters and notes (family communication, informal business transactions and agreements, shopping lists).
- Literacy and numeracy involved in helping pre-school and primary school children
- literacy requirements in basic democratic participation (e.g. voter registration, reading campaign posters, and voting)
- Literacy functionings in informal economic activities (records of property and exchange, receipts and taxation records in the sale of livestock)
- written records in access (and granting) of informal credit, bazaar and household accounts.

**Being illiterate (murkho, ohshikito)**
- increased vulnerability, risk and low status in literacy mediated social encounters

- signatures for official procedures (multiple), informal personal records and accounts (that may be unreadable / undecipherable to other people)
- reading and writing of number systems in Bangla and English (for measurement, weights and economic activities)
- reading road signs, bus numbers, shop and office sign boards, basic written instructions, product names (e.g. on food and seed packets).
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END NOTES

i These distinctions between underlying principles that inform concepts of minimality can be overstated. Qizilbash (2002), notes ‘shared values’ in the literature on capabilities, prudential values and basic goods, and some convergence of approaches.


iii Nussbaum (2007:224) cites recent statistics on literacy. These are aggregate statistics. Disaggregated statistics (along the lines of gender, class or ethnicity) would reveal much larger disparities.

iv There is a large ethnographic literature on literacy support and mediation (see Kell 1996, Malan 1996, Kalman 1999). This shows that such practices are widespread and often institutionalised.

v This paper rejects the notion that literacy is associated with particular modes of thought, or particular forms of social organisation. Such ideas have been justly criticised, and in any case, are beyond the scope of this paper (see Maddox 2005).

vi According to Gutmann (1999), the ‘primary harm’ of illiteracy is ‘dependency’: ‘Dependency is probably the primary harm that attends being functionally illiterate in our society’ (280). Gutmann focuses on North American social contexts, but the point is of interest. It highlights the importance of networks of mediation and support in dealing with such dependency. In societies where such support is not available, then a greater degree of ‘isolated illiteracy’ (Basu and Foster 1998) might occur. In contrast, societies where mediation and support is the norm might view this positively, as the kind of valuable support and ‘inter-dependency’ that studies of wellbeing discuss. As Subramanian (forthcoming) suggests, the availability (and acceptability) of such dependence or inter-dependence may vary in relation to social values, and the proportion (and distribution) of illiterate people in a society.

vii Street (1995) has argued that this portrayal of social disadvantage is inaccurate, and that people who are considered to be ‘illiterate’ are often quite able to function, and have many wider capabilities. One can also link this to the ethnographic observation of literacy mediation and collective practices and support. This argument is somewhat convincing. However, its relativist orientation seems to under-play the possible disadvantages and harms associated with illiteracy. As Dasgupta (1993) notes, adaptation to life below adequate thresholds of wellbeing is possible, but often comes at a cost.

viii The selection of dimensions of literacy, and the levels at which thresholds are set rarely involve transparent and democratic processes. It seems likely that this his reflects the historical and institutional politics involved. The capabilities approach offers and important opportunity to democratise such procedures, as it suggests that such questions are a legitimate and necessary topic for public deliberation, rather than the realm of technocratic and ‘expert’ decisions.

x Maddox (forthcoming) ‘What good is literacy?’
REFERENCES


