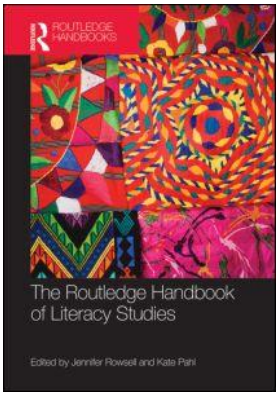

The Routledge Handbook of Literacy Studies

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The New Literacy Studies

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315717647.ch2
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Published online on: 26 May 2015

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THE NEW LITERACY STUDIES[1]

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Introduction: The New Literacy Studies

'The New Literacy Studies' (sometimes just referred to as the NLS) names a body of work that started in the 1980s (Brandt and Clinton 2002; Gee 2000b; Hull and Schultz 2001; Pahl and Rowsell 2005, 2006; Prinsloo and Breier 1996; Street 1993, 1997, 2005). This work came from linguistics, history, anthropology, rhetoric and composition studies, cultural psychology, education, and other areas (e.g., Barton 1994; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Bazerman 1989; Cazden 1988; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Gee 1987; Graff 1979; Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; Heath 1983; Kress 1985; Michaels 1981; Scollon and Scollon 1981; Scribner and Cole 1981; Street 1984, 1995; Wells 1986; Wertsch 1985). The work not only came from different disciplines but was written in different theoretical languages that never became unified. Nonetheless, such work seemed to be converging on a shared view about literacy.

Historical perspectives

The NLS opposed the then traditional psychological approach to literacy. This traditional approach viewed literacy as a 'mental' or 'cognitive' phenomenon and defined literacy in terms of mental states and mental processing. Reading and writing were treated as things people did inside their heads.

The NLS argued that literacy was something people did in the world and in society, not just inside their heads, and should be studied as such. It saw literacy as primarily a sociocultural phenomenon, rather than a mental phenomenon. Literacy was a social and cultural achievement centered in social and cultural practices. It was about distinctive ways of participating in social and cultural groups. Thus, it was argued, literacy should be studied in an integrated way in its full range of contexts and practices, not just cognitive, but social, cultural, historical, and institutional, as well.

Psychology at the time saw readers and writers as primarily engaged in mental processes like decoding, retrieving information, comprehension, inferencing, and so forth. The NLS saw readers and writers as primarily engaged in social or cultural *practices*. Written language is used differently in different practices and used in different ways by different social and cultural groups. In these practices, written language never sits all by itself and it is rarely if ever fully cut

off from oral language and action. Rather, within different practices, it is integrated with different ways of (1) using oral language; (2) of acting and interacting; (3) of knowing, valuing, and believing; and, too, often (4) of using various sorts of tools and technologies.

People read and write religious texts differently than they do legal ones and differently again than they do biology texts or texts in popular culture like video game strategy guides or fan fiction. And, too, people can read the same text in different ways for different purposes. For example, they can read the Bible as theology, literature, history, or as a self-help guide. They can read a comic book as entertainment, as insider details for expert fans, as cultural critique, or as heroic mythology.

People do not just read and write texts; they *do* things with them, things that often involve more than just reading and writing. They do them with other people – often people who share a socially significant identity – people like fundamentalists, lawyers, biologists, manga otaku, gamers, or whatever. These people often make judgments about who are 'insiders' and who are not.

So what determines how one 'correctly' reads or writes in a given case? Not what is in one's head, but, rather, the conventions, norms, values, and practices of different social and cultural groups: lawyers, gamers, historians, religious groups, and schools, for instance, or larger cultural groups like (certain types of) Native Americans, African-Americans, or 'middle class' people. (By the way, Wittgenstein's famous 'beetle in the box' argument – Wittgenstein 1953: par. 293 – makes this same point about language and meaning in general.)

So 'literacy' is plural: 'literacies.' There are many different social, historical, and cultural practices which incorporate literacy, so, too, there are many different 'literacies' (legal literacy, gamer literacy, country music literacy, academic literacy of many different types). People do not just read and write in general. They read and write specific sorts of 'texts' in specific ways. And these ways are determined by the values and practices of different social and cultural groups.

That is the reason the NLS tended to study not literacy itself directly, but such things as 'activity systems' (Engeström 1987); 'Discourses' (Gee 2011 [1990], 2014 [1999]); 'discourse communities' (Bizzell 1992); 'cultures' (Street 1995); 'communities of practices' (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998); 'actor-actant networks' (Latour 2005); 'collectives' (Latour 2004); 'affinity groups' or 'affinity spaces' (Gee 2004) – the names differed and there are others – but they are all names for ways in which people socioculturally organize themselves to engage in activities. The moral of the NLS was: follow the social, cultural, institutional, and historical organizations of people (whatever you call them) first and then see how literacy is taken up and used in these organizations, along with action, interaction, values, and tools and technologies.

The NLS – thanks to its opposition to traditional cognitive psychology – had little or nothing to say about the mind or cognition. It paid attention mostly to the social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts of literacy. It had little to say about the individual apart from the individual's 'membership' in various social and cultural groups. It, thus, too, had little to say about learning as an individual phenomenon. Learning was treated – if it was treated at all – as changing patterns of participation in 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Critical issues and topics

In the 1980s psychology itself changed. New movements in 'cognitive science' and 'the learning sciences' began to argue that the mind is furnished not primarily by abstract concepts, but by records of actual experience (e.g., Barsalou 1999a, 1999b; Churchland and Sejnowski 1992; Clark 1989, 1993, 1997; Damasio 1994; Gee 1992; Glenberg 1997; Kolodner 1993, 2006).

Earlier work in cognitive psychology – often based on a metaphor that saw the human mind as like a digital computer – argued that memory (as in a digital computer) was severely limited (Newell and Simon 1972). The newer work on situated cognition argued that human memory is nearly limitless and that we can and do store almost all our actual experiences in our heads and use these experiences to reason about similar experiences or new ones in the future (Churchland 1986, 1989; Churchland and Sejnowski 1992; Gee 2004).

This newer work comes in many different varieties and constitutes a 'family' of related but not identical viewpoints. For want of a better name, we might call the family 'Situated Cognition Studies' (see also Brown *et al*. 1989; Hawkins 2005; Hutchins 1995; Lave and Wenger 1991). These viewpoints all believe that thinking is connected to, and changes across, actual situations and is not usually a process of applying abstract generalizations, definitions, or rules.

Situated Cognition Studies argues that thinking is tied to *people's experiences of goal-oriented action in the material and social world*. Furthermore, these experiences are stored in the mind/brain not in terms of abstract concepts, but in something like dynamic images tied to perception both of the world and of our own bodies, internal states, and feelings (Churchland 1986; Damasio 1994; Gee 1992). Thus, consider the following quotes, which give the flavor of what it means to say that cognition is situated in embodied experience:

> comprehension is grounded in perceptual simulations that prepare agents for situated action.
>
> *(Barsalou 1999a: 77)*

> to a particular person, the meaning of an object, event, or sentence is what that person can do with the object, event, or sentence.
>
> *(Glenberg 1997: 3)*

> Increasing evidence suggests that perceptual simulation is indeed central to comprehension.
>
> *(Barsalou 1999a: 74)*

> higher intelligence is not a different kind of process from perceptual intelligence.
>
> *(Hawkins 2005: 96)*

On this viewpoint, humans think, understand, and learn best when they use their prior experiences (so they must have had some) as a guide to prepare themselves for action. The argument is that humans look for patterns in the elements of their experiences in the world and, as they have more and more experiences, find deeper and more subtle patterns, patterns that help predict what might happen in the future when they act to accomplish goals (this is, of course, a dynamic version of schema theory; see Gee 1992).

You can see the mind connecting language to experience in the following simple example. If I say 'The coffee spilled, go get a mop' you bring to bear an association with coffee as a liquid, but if I say 'The coffee spilled, go get a broom' you bring to bear an association with coffee as grains. Compare also: 'The coffee spilled, stack it again' (Clark 1993).

Despite the fact that the NLS had little interest in the mind, there is a natural affinity between Situated Cognition Studies and the NLS. This affinity has, for the most part, not been

much built on from either side. Situated Cognition Studies argues that we think through paying attention to elements of our experiences. While this is a claim about the mind, we can ask 'What determines what experiences a person has and how they pay attention to those experiences (i.e., how they find patterns in their experiences or what patterns they pay attention to)?' The answer to this question is this: What determines what experiences a person has and how they pay attention to the elements of these experiences is their participation in the practices of various social and cultural groups. And these practices are mediated by various tools and technologies whether these be literacy or digital media or other tools. And, of course, this was just what the NLS wanted to study.

For example, bird watching clubs and expert bird watchers shape how new bird watchers pay attention to their experience of birds and environments in the field (Gee 1992). And these experiences are mediated in important ways by various tools and technologies such as bird books, scopes, and binoculars. Obviously one experiences a wood duck in a vastly different way when looking at it through a powerful scope than through unaided vision. Furthermore, such technologies allow distinctive social practices to arise that could not otherwise exist (e.g., debating the details of tiny aspects of feathers on hard-to-tell-apart gulls).

Thus, a situated view of the mind leads us to social and cultural groups and their tools and technologies. Both Situated Cognition Studies and the NLS point not to the 'private mind' but to the world of experience – and that experience is almost always shared in social and cultural groups – as the core of human learning, thinking, problem solving, and literacy (where literacy is defined as getting and giving meanings using written language). This was the argument I made in my book, *The Social Mind* (1992) at a time when I was trying to integrate learning into the NLS and to link Situated Cognition Studies and the NLS.

Founding works in the NLS

Several founding works helped initiate the NLS. I will briefly discuss three of these here: Ronald and Suzanne Scollon's *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication* (1981); Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983); and Brian Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984). What I want to make clear in my discussion below of these three founding works – all now 'old' – is the ways in which from the outset work in the NLS melded the study of culture, discourse, language, literacy, and often history and politics.

Scollon and Scollon

The Scollons believe that discourse patterns – ways of using language to communicate, whether in speech or writing – in different cultures reflect particular reality sets or world views adopted by these cultures. Discourse patterns are among the strongest expressions of personal and cultural identity. The Scollons argue that changes in a person's discourse patterns – for example, in acquiring a new form of literacy – may involve change in identity. They provide a detailed study of the discourse practices and world view of Athabaskans in Alaska and northern Canada, and contrast these with the discourse patterns and world view in much of Anglo-Canadian and Anglo-American society (see also Wieder and Pratt 1990).

Literacy as it is practiced in European-based education ("essay-text literacy" in the Scollons' phrase) is connected to a reality set or world view the Scollons term "modern consciousness." This reality set is consonant with particular discourse patterns, ones quite different from the discourse patterns used by the Athabaskans. As a result, the acquisition of this sort of literacy is

not simply a matter of learning a new technology; it involves complicity with values, social practices, and ways of knowing that conflict with those of the Athabaskans.

Athabaskans differ at various points from mainstream Canadian and American English speakers in how they engage in discourse. A few examples: (1) Athabaskans have a high degree of respect for the individuality of others and a careful guarding of their own individuality. Thus, they prefer to avoid conversation except when the point of view of all participants is well known. On the other hand, English speakers feel that the main way to get to know the point of view of people is through conversation with them. (2) For Athabaskans, people in subordinate positions do not display, rather they observe the person in the superordinate position. For instance, adults as either parents or teachers are supposed to display abilities and qualities for the child to learn. However, in mainstream American society, children are supposed to show off their abilities for teachers and other adults. (3) The English idea of 'putting your best foot forward' conflicts directly with an Athabaskan taboo. It is normal in situations of unequal status relations, for an English speaker, to display oneself in the best light possible. One will speak highly of the future, as well. It is normal to present a career or life trajectory of success and planning. This English system is very different from the Athabaskan system in which it is considered inappropriate and bad luck to anticipate good luck, to display oneself in a good light, to predict the future, or to speak badly of another's luck.

The Scollons list many other differences, including differences in systems of pausing that ensure that English speakers select most of the topics and do most of the talking in interethnic encounters. The net result of these communication problems is that each group ethnically stereotypes the other. English speakers come to believe that Athabaskans are unsure, aimless, incompetent, and withdrawn. Athabaskans come to believe that English speakers are boastful, sure they can predict the future, careless with luck, and far too talkative.

The Scollons, as I mentioned above, characterize the different discourse practices of Athabaskans and English speakers in terms of two different world views or "forms of consciousness": bush consciousness (connected with survival values in the bush) and modern consciousness. These forms of consciousness are 'reality sets' in the sense that they are cognitive orientations toward the everyday world including learning in that world.

Anglo-Canadian and American mainstream culture has adopted a model of literacy, based on the values of essayist prose style, a model that is highly compatible with modern consciousness. In essayist prose, the important relationships to be signaled are those between sentence and sentence, not those between speakers, nor those between sentence and speaker. For a reader this requires a constant monitoring of grammatical and lexical information. With the heightened emphasis on truth value rather than social or rhetorical conditions comes the necessity to be explicit about logical implications.

A further significant aspect of essayist prose style is the fictionalization of both the audience and the author. The 'reader' of an essayist text is not an ordinary human being, but an idealization, a rational mind formed by the rational body of knowledge of which the essay is a part. By the same token the author is a fiction, since the process of writing and editing essayist texts leads to an effacement of individual and idiosyncratic identity. The Scollons show the relation of these essayist values to modern consciousness by demonstrating that they are variants of the defining properties of the modern consciousness as given by Berger *et al.* (1973).

For the Athabaskan, writing in this essayist mode can constitute a crisis in ethnic identity. To produce an essay would require the Athabaskan to produce a major display, which would be appropriate only if the Athabaskan was in a position of dominance in relation to the audience. But the audience, and the author, are fictionalized in essayist prose and the text becomes decontextualized. This means that a contextualized, social relationship of dominance

is obscured. Where the relationship of the communicants is unknown, the Athabaskan prefers silence.

The paradox of prose for the Athabaskan then is that if it is communication between known author and audience it is contextualized and compatible with Athabaskan values, but not good essayist prose. To the extent that it becomes decontextualized and thus good essayist prose, it becomes uncharacteristic of Athabaskans to seek to communicate. The Athabaskan set of discourse patterns are to a large extent mutually exclusive of the discourse patterns of essayist prose.

Shirley Brice Heath

Shirley Brice Heath's classic *Ways with Words* (1983) is an ethnographic study of the ways in which literacy is embedded in the cultural context of three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the U.S.: Roadville, a white working-class community that has been part of mill life for four generations; Trackton, a working-class African-American community whose older generation were brought up on the land, but which now is also connected to mill life and other light industry; and mainstream middle-class urban-oriented African-Americans and whites (see also Heath 1994).

Heath analyzes the ways these different social groups 'take' knowledge from the environment, with particular concern for how 'types of literacy events' are involved in this taking. Literacy events are any event involving print, such as group negotiation of meaning in written texts (e.g., an ad), individuals 'looking things up' in reference books, writing family records in the Bible, and dozens of other types of occasions when books or other written materials are integral to interpretation in an interaction.

Heath interprets these literacy events in relation to the larger sociocultural patterns which they may exemplify or reflect, such as patterns of care-giving roles, uses of space and time, age and sex segregation, and so forth. Since language learning and socialization are two sides of the same coin (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), Heath concentrates on how children in each community acquire language and literacy in the process of becoming socialized into the norms and values of their communities.

As school-oriented, middle-class parents and their children interact in the pre-school years, adults give their children, through modeling and specific instruction, ways of using language and of taking knowledge from books which seem natural in school and in numerous other institutional settings such as banks, post offices, businesses, or government offices. To exemplify this point, Heath analyzes the bedtime story as an example of a major literacy event in mainstream homes (Heath 1982, all page references below are to this article).

The bedtime story sets patterns of behavior that recur repeatedly through the life of mainstream children and adults at school and in other institutions. In the bedtime story routine, the parent sets up a 'scaffolding' dialogue (Cazden 1979) with the child by asking questions like 'What is X?' and then supplying verbal feedback and a label after the child has vocalized or given a pre-school response. Before the age of two, the child is thus socialized into the 'initiation-reply-evaluation' sequences so typical of classroom lessons (Mehan 1979).

In addition, reading with comprehension involves an internal replaying of the same types of questions adults ask children of bedtime stories. Further, 'What is X?' questions and explanations are replayed in the school setting in learning to pick out topic-sentences, write outlines, and answer standardized tests. Through the bedtime story routine, and similar practices, in which children learn not only how to take meaning from books, but also how to talk about it, children repeatedly practice routines which parallel those of classroom interaction: "Thus, there is a deep

continuity between patterns of socialization and language learning in the home culture and what goes on at school" (56).

Children in both Roadville and Trackton are unsuccessful in school despite the fact that both communities place a high value on success in school. Roadville adults do read books to their children, but they do not extend the habits of literacy events beyond book reading. For instance, they do not, upon seeing an event in the real world, remind children of similar events in a book, or comment on such similarities and differences between book and real events.

The strong religious Fundamentalist bent of Roadville tends to make parents view any fictionalized account of a real event as a lie; reality is better than fiction and they do not encourage the shifting of the context of items and events characteristic of fictionalization and abstraction. They tend to choose books that emphasize nursery rhymes, alphabet learning, and simplified Bible stories. Even the oral stories that Roadville adults tell, and that children model, are grounded in the actual. The sources of these stories are personal experience. They are tales of transgression which make the point of reiterating the expected norms of behavior.

Thus, Roadville children are not practiced in decontextualizing their knowledge or fictionalizing events known to them, shifting them about into other frames. In school, they are rarely able to take knowledge learned in one context and shift it to another; they do not compare two items or events and point out similarities and differences.

Trackton presents a quite different language and social environment. Babies in Trackton, who are almost always held during their waking hours, are constantly in the midst of a rich stream of verbal and nonverbal communication that goes on around them. Aside from Sunday School materials, there are no reading materials in the home just for children; adults do not sit and read to children. Children do, however, constantly interact verbally with peers and adults.

Adults do not ask children 'What is X?' questions, but rather analogical questions which call for non-specific comparisons of one item, event, or person with another (e.g., 'What's that like?'). Though children can answer such questions, they can rarely name the specific feature or features which make two items or events alike.

Parents do not believe they have a tutoring role, and they do not simplify their language for children, as mainstream parents do, nor do they label items or features of objects in either books or the environment at large. They believe children learn when they are provided with experiences from which they can draw global, rather than analytically specific knowledge. Heath claims that children in Trackton seem to develop connections between situations or items by gestalt patterns, analogs, or general configuration links, not by specification of labels and discrete features in the situation. They do not decontextualize, rather they heavily contextualize nonverbal and verbal language.

Trackton children learn to tell stories by rendering a context and calling on the audience's participation to join in the imaginative creation of the story. In an environment rich with imaginative talk and verbal play, they must be aggressive in inserting their stories into an ongoing stream of discourse. Imagination and verbal dexterity are encouraged.

Indeed, group negotiation and participation is a prevalent feature of the social group as a whole. Adults read not alone but in a group. For example, someone may read from a brochure on a new car while listeners relate the text's meaning to their experiences, asking questions and expressing opinions. The group as a whole synthesizes the written text and the associated oral discourse to construct a meaning for the brochure.

At school, most Trackton children not only fail to learn the content of lessons, they also do not adopt the social interactional rules for school literacy events. Print in isolation bears little authority in their world and the kinds of questions asked of reading books are unfamiliar (for example, what-explanations). The children's abilities to metaphorically link two events or

situations and to recreate scenes are not tapped in the school. In fact, these abilities often cause difficulties, because they enable children to see parallels teachers did not intend, and indeed, may not recognize until the children point them out. By the time in their education, after the elementary years for the most part, when their imaginative skills and verbal dexterity could really pay off, they have failed to gain the necessary written composition skills they would need to translate their analogical skills into a channel teachers could accept.

Heath's characterization of Trackton, Roadville, and Mainstreamers leads us to see not a binary (oral–literate) contrast, but a set of features that cross-classifies the three groups in various ways. The groups share various features with each other group, and differ from them in yet other regards. The Mainstream group and Trackton both value imagination and fictionalization, while Roadville does not; Roadville and Trackton both share a disregard for decontextualization not shared by Mainstreamers. Both Mainstreamers and Roadville, but not Trackton, believe parents have a tutoring role in language and literacy acquisition (they read to their children and ask questions that require labels), but Roadville shares with Trackton, not the Mainstream, an experiential, non-analytic view of learning (children learn by doing and watching, not by having the process broken down into its smallest parts). As we added more groups to the comparison, e.g., the Athabaskans (which share with Trackton a regard for gestalt learning and storage of knowledge, but differ from them in the degree of self-display they allow) we would get more complex cross-classifications.

Heath suggests that in order for a non-Mainstream social group to acquire Mainstream, school-based literacy practices, with all the oral and written language skills this implies, individuals, whether children or adults, must 'recapitulate,' at an appropriate level for their age, of course, the sorts of literacy experiences the Mainstream child has had at home. Unfortunately, schools as currently constituted tend to be good places to practice Mainstream literacy once you have its foundations, but they are often not good places to acquire those foundations (for example, to engage in the sorts of emergent literacy practices common in many middle-class homes).

Heath also suggests that this foundation, when it has not been set at home, can be acquired by apprenticing the individual to a school-based literate person, e.g., the teacher, in a new and expanded role. Heath has had students, at a variety of ages, engage in ethnographic research with teachers, studying, for instance, the uses of language or languages, or of writing and reading, in their own communities. This serves as one way for students to learn and practice in a meaningful context the various sub-skills of essay-text literacy, e.g., asking questions, note-taking, discussion of various points of view, as well as writing discursive prose and revising it with feedback, often from non-present readers.

This approach fits perfectly with Scribner and Cole's (1981) practice account of literacy. And, in line with Street's ideological approach to literacy (see below), it claims that individuals who have not been socialized into the discourse practices that constitute mainstream school-based literacy must eventually be socialized into them if they are ever to acquire them. The component skills of this form of literacy must be practiced, and one cannot practice a skill one has not been exposed to, cannot engage in a social practice one has not been socialized into, which is what most non-mainstream children are expected to do in school. But at the same time we must remember the Scollons' warning that for many social groups this practice may well mean a change of identity and the adoption of a reality set at odds with their own at various points. There is a deep paradox here and there is no facile way of removing it, short of changing our hierarchical social structure and the school systems that by and large perpetuate it.

Brian Street

The work of Scribner and Cole – another founding work in the NLS – calls into question what Brian Street, in his book *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984), calls "the autonomous model" of literacy: the claim that literacy (or schooling for that matter) has cognitive effects apart from the context in which it exists and the uses to which it is put in a given culture. This is also sometimes called 'the literacy myth.' Claims for literacy, in particular for essay-text literacy values, whether in speech or writing, are thus 'ideological.' They are part of an armory of concepts, conventions, and practices that privilege one social formation as if it were natural, universal, or, at the least, the end point of a normal developmental progression (achieved only by some cultures, thanks either to their intelligence or their technology).

Street proposes, in opposition to the "autonomous model" of literacy, an "ideological model." The ideological model attempts to understand literacy in terms of concrete social practices and to theorize it in terms of the ideologies in which different literacies are embedded. Literacy – of whatever type – only has consequences as it acts together with a large number of other social factors, including political and economic conditions, social structure, and local ideologies.

Any technology, including writing, is a cultural form, a social product whose shape and influence depend upon prior political and ideological factors. Despite Eric Havelock's (1976) brilliant characterization of the transition from orality to literacy in ancient Greece, for example, it now appears that the Greek situation has rarely if ever been replicated. The particular social, political, economic, and ideological circumstances in which literacy (of a particular sort) was embedded in Greece explain what happened there. Abstracting literacy from its social setting in order to make claims for literacy as an autonomous force in shaping the mind or a culture simply leads to a dead end. This is so because literacy's effects always flow from its social and cultural contexts and vary across those contexts.

There is, however, a last refuge for someone who wants to see literacy as an autonomous force. One could claim that essay-text literacy and the uses of language connected with it, lead, if not to general cognitive consequences, to social mobility and success in the society. While this argument may be true, there is precious little evidence that literacy in history or across cultures has had this effect either.

Street discusses, in this regard, Harvey Graff's (1979) study of the role of literacy in nineteenth-century Canada. While some individuals did gain through the acquisition of literacy, Graff demonstrates that this was not a statistically significant effect and that deprived classes and ethnic groups as a whole were, if anything, further oppressed through literacy. Greater literacy did not correlate with increased equality and democracy nor with better conditions for the working class, but in fact with continuing social stratification.

Graff argues that the teaching of literacy in fact involved a contradiction: illiterates were considered dangerous to the social order, thus they must be made literate; yet the potentialities of reading and writing for an underclass could well be radical and inflammatory. So the framework for the teaching of literacy had to be severely controlled, and this involved specific forms of control of the pedagogic process and specific ideological associations of the literacy being purveyed.

While the workers were led to believe that acquiring literacy was in their benefit, Graff produces statistics that show that in reality this literacy was not advantageous to the poorer groups in terms of either income or power. The extent to which literacy was an advantage or not in relation to job opportunities depended on ethnicity. It was not because you were 'illiterate' that you finished up in the worst jobs but because of your background (e.g., being

black or an Irish Catholic rendered literacy much less efficacious than it was for English Protestants).

The story Graff tells can be repeated for many other societies, including Britain and the United States (Donald 1983; Levine 1986). In all these societies literacy served as a socializing tool for the poor, was seen as a possible threat if misused by the poor (for an analysis of their oppression and to make demands for power), and served as a technology for the continued selection of members of one class for the best positions in the society. Yoshio Sugimoto (2003) talks about a parallel situation in Japan, where social class strongly dictates 'success' in society, despite the nation's high literacy rates and the mainstream acceptance of Japan as an egalitarian society with equal opportunities.

The New Literacies Studies

The NLS argued that written language was a technology for giving and getting meaning. In turn, what written language meant was a matter determined by the social, cultural, historical, and institutional practices of different groups of people.

A related and slightly later movement, which we can call 'The New Literacies Studies,' simply carries over the NLS argument about written language to new digital technologies. By the way, 'The New Literacies Studies' is parsed grammatically differently than 'the New Literacy Studies.' The NLS was about studying literacy in a new way. 'The New Literacies Studies' is about studying new types of literacy beyond print literacy, especially 'digital literacies' and literacy practices embedded in popular culture.

The New Literacies Studies views different digital tools as technologies for giving and getting meaning, just like language (Alvermann *et al.* 1999; Buckingham 2003, 2007; Coiro *et al.* 2008; Gee 2004, 2013; Hobbs 1997; Jenkins 2006; Kist 2004; Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Kress 2003; Lankshear 1997; Lankshear and Knobel 2006; New London Group 1996). Like the NLS, the New Literacies Studies also argues that the meanings to which these technologies give rise are determined by the social, cultural, historical, and institutional practices of different groups of people. And, as with the NLS, these practices almost always involve more than just using a digital tool – they involve, as well, ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, and knowing, as well as often using other sorts of tools and technologies, including very often oral and written language.

Just as the NLS wanted to talk about different literacies in the plural – that is, different ways of using written language within different sorts of sociocultural practices – so, too, the New Literacies Studies wants to talk about different 'digital literacies' – that is, different ways of using digital tools within different sorts of sociocultural practices. In this sense, the New Literacies Studies is a natural offshoot of the NLS, though the two fields do not contain just the same people by any means.

The New Literacies Studies has had an important historical relationship with the NLS, from which it partly stems.

Future directions

I have concentrated in this chapter on three founding documents in the NLS to give readers a feel for the basic ideas and approaches that formed the NLS. There are, of course, other equally important pieces of early work I could have surveyed. And, too, the work I have surveyed is now dated, though it still incorporates the core arguments for and approaches to literacy as social and cultural which are the foundations of the NLS.

For another discussion of the foundations of the NLS and some more current applications see Hull and Schultz (2001). Current work has continued along the lines of the foundational work I have surveyed (e.g., Gee 2011; Larson and Marsh 2005; Pahl and Rowsell 2005, 2006), though today NLS work is commonly combined with the New Literacies Studies to incorporate new forms of literacy, forms which often use not just (or even) the technology of print but digital media (e.g., Gee 2004; Knobel and Lankshear 2007).

I have also pointed out the failures of the NLS to deal more broadly with learning and the mind beyond 'communities of practice.' Early work sometimes verged on generalizations about groups that today sound like they are verging on stereotypes. These limitations meant, in practice, that the NLS sometimes had a hard time intervening in some of the core controversies around learning in school that arose in the post-NCLB (No Child Left Behind) era and in contemporary work on situated and embodied cognition. Work in the New Literacies Studies has focused more on changing, negotiated, contested, and hybrid social identities and social positioning and not just 'groups' with clear borders (Gee 2000a; Gee and Hayes 2010, 2011; Jenkins *et al.* 2006; Lankshear 1997; Shirky 2008). This has, in some respects, mitigated some of the earlier rigidities in NLS work.

Note

1 This paper discusses ideas more fully developed in Gee (2010, 2011 [1990], and 2012).

Related topics

Literacy, Learning, Technology, Sociolinguistics.

Further reading

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