

# Literacy in Community Settings

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A rich direction of research in literacy studies in recent decades has been around literacy in community settings. The impetus for such work has been the challenges coming from linguistic anthropologists and literacy ethnographers to the notion of literacy as the same thing across all kinds of settings and under all kinds of conditions. The tendency is often to ask why certain people do not read and write, rather than to ask what forms of reading do happen. A focus on literacy in community settings, on the other hand, shows that reading and writing can be taken up in different ways by different individuals and groups of people. Literacy is seen as embedded in social and cultural practices, not simply as a skill learned through formal schooling and detached from other social practices. This focus suggests that it is not helpful to think in terms of a single literacy when there is a remarkable diversity in the ways that people read and write for the performance of widely varying personal, social, and economic functions.

## Varying “Ways With Words”

A strong impetus for an interest in literacy in community settings came from Heath’s (1983) classic study of south eastern communities in the USA. Heath questioned why Black students were failing in the recently desegregated schools, and she contrasted their language and literacy socialization in community settings with children of White mill-workers in a neighboring community as well as with middle-class children in the same town. She found that reading and writing happened in all three communities but that local communities had varying histories and different rules for socially interacting and sharing knowledge and opinions. For example, a letter sent from school to a middle-class parent was treated as a private and confidential exchange, whereas in the Black working-class community of Trackton it was a collective event, with one person reading the letter aloud and neighbors and family discussing its meaning and what the response should be. This literacy event was characterized by a particular blend of text, talk, distribution of action and, turn taking in communication that was community-specific and consistent with patterns of mutual child raising which contrasted markedly with the other local communities in the study. Heath argued that the different ways that children learned to use language, including written language, were dependent on the ways in which each community structured its family life, defined the roles that community members could assume and their concepts of childhood that guided child socialization. As regards the relationship between speech and text, she suggested that literacy events have social interactional rules which regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written, and define ways in which oral language reinforces, denies, extends, or even sets aside the written material. These rules, she argued, vary across distinct cultures, local groupings, or speech communities. Heath contrasted these local “ways with words” with expectations and rules for text-linked activities in the formal institutional setting of schools. She argued that the ways of meaning of socially positioned individuals were not the same across communities and that middle-class children were advantaged by the closeness to school ways of their home and community ways with language.

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Heath's findings supported Scribner and Cole's groundbreaking research (1981) of literacy and cognition in the African state of Liberia, which found that cognitive skills associated with literacy varied dramatically in relation to the wider social practices within which literacy was embedded. Scribner and Cole sought to understand literacy as always constituted within socially organized practices which make use of a symbolic system or systems as well as a technology for producing and disseminating it. The nature of these practices, including, of course, their technological aspects (their scripts, languages, and media), would determine the balance of skills and the consequences associated with literacy. Scribner and Cole thus noted that letter writing amongst the Vai in Liberia (perhaps using the Vai script and language) must be considered as a literacy practice different from, for example, the keeping of a personal diary, or a ledger, since each of these required different measures and weightings of technology, knowledge, and skills, as they were part of different social activities or practices.

Street's (1984) study in Iran helped to shape the idea of there being different kinds of literacy, and of there being real differences between what reading and writing were about in various contexts. As he described it, while doing anthropological research in a village he started to notice the variety and complexity of literacy activity at a time when his encounter with people outside of the village suggested the dominant representation was of "illiterate backward villagers." Looking more closely at village life he saw several different sorts of reading and writing going on: in a traditional "Quoranic school," in the new state schools where English was the language of learning, and on the part of traders in their buying and selling of fruit to urban markets. Versions of literacy by outside agencies (e.g., state education, UNESCO, and national literacy campaigns) did not capture these complex variations in literacy happening in one small locale where the people were generally characterized as illiterate.

### **Reading and Writing as Social Practices**

These studies set the basis for later research which focused on literacy as situated social practice (sometimes described as the "New Literacy Studies," as in Gee, 1996). This approach to literacy studies questions the stereotype of the ideal reader as, generally, a book reader who reads for pleasure or for "staying informed"; or a student who successfully carries out reading and writing tasks to the satisfaction of her instructor. In one example, Taylor's (1983) study of family literacy showed that even in the poorest and most marginalized inner city communities, literacy played a part, enabling families to make sense of the world and to interact with it. Literacy researchers study literacy in community settings, in everyday social life, on the understanding that reading and writing practices are always embedded in particular kinds of social activity; that reading and writing are best studied not as basic skills and not as the same things under all circumstances; that they follow different meaning conventions, and require different skills for their successful use, when they function in different social contexts, for different purposes, as part of different human activities. This work thus opposes the position which views literacy as merely a matter of general skills, as a unitary process, one where "readers" and "writers" are generalized subjects without any social location and who are more or less efficient processors of text.

### **Local and Vernacular in Contrast With Dominant and Institutionalized Literacies**

Barton and Hamilton (1998) observed community members in Lancaster, England and asked them to reflect on their literacy practices. They found the notion of community to be useful in examining the "realm of local social relations which mediates between the

private sphere of family and household and the public sphere of impersonal, formal organizations" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 15). They pointed out, following Heath's (1983) example, that, important as family practices are for children's literacy development, these practices take place in larger community contexts that influence family activities. The researchers drew a distinction between dominant (institutionalized) and vernacular (self-generated) literacies. Vernacular literacies were activities that included reading and writing as voluntary and self-generated:

The vernacular literacy practices we identified are rooted in action contexts and everyday purposes and networks. They draw upon and contribute to vernacular knowledge, which is often local, procedural, and minutely detailed. Literacy learning and use are integrated in everyday activities and the literacy elements are an implicit part of the activity, which may be mastering a martial art, paying the bills, organizing a musical event, or finding out about local news. Literacy itself is not a focus of attention, but is used to get other things done. Everyday literacies are subservient to the goals of purposeful activities and are defined by people in terms of these activities. Hamilton (2000, p. 5)

Hamilton (2000, p. 5) summarized the range of "vernacular literacies" that the researchers found:

Often they are humorous, playful, disrespectful, sometimes deliberately oppositional. When questioned about them, people did not always regard them as real reading or real writing. Some vernacular literacies are deliberately hidden: these include those which are personal and private, where reading or writing are ways of being alone and private, ways of creating personal space. There are also secret notes and letters of love, abuse, criticism and subversion, comics, scurrilous jokes, horoscopes, fanzines, pornography—some but not all of which will be revealed to the researcher's gaze.

### **The "Passing" Quality of Family and Community Literacy Practices**

Varenne and McDermott (1998) focused on literacy at a family level that supported the work on literacy in community settings. They described family literacy as not one for which the members are accountable in the same way that children are held to account in school. They pointed out that one does not fail familial or community literacy as it is all but invisible, embedded in other activities, like shopping, writing to a relative, paying an invoice, or applying for something or other. "In reading the label on children's medicine no such activity would end with the comment 'Good! You get an A for being able to read the label. Now let's do some math'" (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 195). This "passing" quality of family and community literacy has been noted by numerous researchers, where reading and writing are so much part of other activities that the literacy bits are hardly noticed. For example, Kell (1996, p. 24) studied the literacy practices of a middle-aged, unschooled woman who was a community-activist in a shack settlement outside Cape Town. This example both reverses the more familiar perspective of parent helping child and also illustrates the routine or "passing" nature of the literacy practices, where reading and writing are:

a delivery man . . . came around with the vegetables and gas cylinder that she needed. Winnie brought out her invoice book, and the deliveryman wrote down what she had bought . . . She said that her daughter Portia would check what he had written . . . As I left Portia came out of another room, picked up the book without a word between her and her mother and ran through the page very quickly.

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Kell's work, along with others (e.g., Volk & de Acosta, 2001), highlights the intergenerational nature of much of the literacy practices that occur in community settings. This intergenerational nature of family- and community-based literacy practices also disrupts traditional notions of expertise or what it means to teach. Children (or others who also do not fit the traditional "teacher/parent/elder" notion of experts) often become the leaders/experts in these literacy practices.

Following a similar ethnographic approach to Barton and Hamilton (1998), Prinsloo and Breier (1996) worked with a team of researchers and collected a range of studies of literacy practices in local communities in South Africa, including case studies of people attending voter education classes and voting in the first democratic national elections that ended apartheid as a system of government; of agricultural laborers on wine-making farms; of workers in an asbestos factory and at a school; on residents of urban and rural townships; of communal goat farmers in the Namaqualand semi-desert; of gangsters and social activists living in a shack settlement outside Cape Town; and of taxi-drivers in Cape Town, with and without schooling who had to deal with a range of kinds of reading and writing in their daily work. Researchers paid particular attention to evidence and accounts of unschooled adults developing literacy-linked capabilities and found that the learning of (often narrow) task-specific literacies in the course of task completion was the most frequent and sustaining form of literacy acquisition on the part of unschooled adults. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), the research described these kinds of learning as "apprenticeship processes," because these literacies were learned from other people, they were context-specific, and their acquisition was analogous to the ways crafts are learned, in that they were learned and used under guidance, in the everyday course of events. The research pointed to the importance of social networks and interpersonal relationships in these practices. People drew on these social networks to help them with particular literacy requirements. Within these networks it is possible to identify people acting as mediators, mentors, brokers, sponsors, and scribes for others. The research also points to the distributed, social, and power-shaped nature of literacy events and practices, where such assistance can be both enabling and constraining. The focus in this research thus shifts from literacy as something people in marginalized communities have not got, to the many different ways that people engage with literacy. The study of community literacies recognizes difference and diversity and challenges how these differences are valued within society.

Blommaert (2007b) brings the interesting idea of "scale" to the study of literacy in community settings. He suggests that language practices, including literacy practices, are subject to social processes of hierarchical ordering. One consequence thereof is that one can be a "good" user of language or literacy in the neighborhood network, but a "bad" one in the labor market or in the school system. He described what he calls "grassroots literacy," which he finds to be a characteristic form of writing across poor, marginal communities in the African settings that he studied. He describes it as a nonelite form, characterized by what he calls "heterography"—the deployment of graphic symbols in ways that defy orthographic norms: words are spelled in different ways, often reflecting the way they are pronounced in spoken vernacular varieties, rather than following conventional orthographic norms or prestige language forms. He also finds an uncertainty about linguistic and stylistic rules, as well as a common use of drawing as well as writing. He says that such texts often have only local value. Examined from beyond the local, they appear as inferior examples of writing, pointing to the low status of these persons on a larger stage (Blommaert, 2007a).

### “Funds of Knowledge”

Influential work carried out for a number of years by Moll and his colleagues has focused on studying household and classroom practices within working-class and rural Mexican communities in the southern USA. The research aims to describe the *funds of knowledge* of the home environment. These are “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). They include family know-how in areas such as agriculture, economics, construction, religion, arts, and repair. Families develop social networks that help them deal with their environment and develop and exchange resources. These networks are flexible and active and may involve persons from outside the home. The research is concerned to make such family knowledge and social relationships visible to educators as resources which can be used to enhance school learning. For example, children’s involvement in informal buying and selling activities was used by educators in schoolwork that started with various aspects of buying and selling, including the literacy involved, and developed into other curricula activities, in math and other areas. This work is concerned to show how the wider utilization of children’s cultural resources could assist the development of biliterate skills and practices in Spanish and English. In similar fashion, Barton and Hamilton identified areas of vernacular knowledge as including home economics and budgeting, repair and maintenance, childcare, sports, gardening, cooking, pets and animal care, and family and local history. Some people had also developed knowledge of legal, political, health, and medical topics (Hamilton, 2000).

Volk and de Acosta’s (2001) study of Puerto Rican children living in a poor neighborhood of a large US city examined what counted as literacy in the classroom, homes, and churches of three Spanish dominant children living in the USA. They were concerned to go beyond research that focuses *solely* on parent–child interactions, thereby missing the complexity and richness of literacy practices occurring in the everyday lives of these children in their wider interactions. They argued that the literacy practices of home blended literacy practices valued in schools with practices valued in their churches and in so doing created collaborative literacy practices rooted in their culture.

### Community and Schooling

Barton (2009, p. 43) points out that educators and educational policy makers sometimes find it frustrating that researchers studying everyday life in community settings do not immediately provide “solutions” for educational problems. However, he says that there is a set of steps:

firstly, there is a need to understand what people do, their practices; then it is essential to see how people learn; and only then can we turn to questions of how to teach, or how to support learning. Learning does not just take place in classrooms and is not just concerned with methods. The approach requires educators and researchers to look beyond educational settings to vernacular practices and informal learning, and to the other official settings in which literacies play a key role.

Dyson’s numerous studies (e.g., 1993, 2003) show how children from a variety of social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, if allowed to by their teachers, draw deeply upon their out-of-school knowledge of nonacademic social worlds to negotiate their entry into school literacy. Their family and peer relationships are social worlds that provide them with agency and meaningful symbols, and shape their decisions about what to write, and

with whom. With the help of a supportive teacher who helps them weave their own stories, interests, and experiences into the school curriculum, they reveal the breadth of their language and sense-making repertoire. Dyson advocates a permeable curriculum where responsive teachers can draw children into understanding and using symbols and resources in school-like ways, while continuing to develop their own agency as regards social relationships and meaning construction. Purcell-Gates (2007) makes a similar argument based on her research of literacy in community settings. If the curriculum does not relate to students' lives outside of school, their education slides right off them, she says. She argues that the more relevant teachers make literacy instruction to students' lives, the more likely they are to learn.

### **“Community” as a Shifting Signifier**

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that the idea of community as indicating a clearly defined physical and social space where members share a number of features has become increasingly displaced in recent decades by a sense of local neighborhoods as complex sites, where members often have diverse backgrounds, speak different languages and have other kinds of divergences. For example, a number of studies of multilingualism in local settings have been carried out (e.g., Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000; Collins & La Santa, 2006; Reese & Goldenberg, 2006; Perry, 2009) which examine the complex and mobile nature of people's interaction in social spaces under global conditions of movement and migration. In addition, children's and adults' engagements with “virtual communities,” where they can access literacy activities across space and time, expands in interesting and challenging ways the question of what counts as community literacy in contemporary times (Marsh, 2006).

**SEE ALSO:** Ethnographic Approaches to Literacy Research; Family Literacy; Qualitative Literacy Research; Sociolinguistic Studies of Literacy

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