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### **Renewing literacy studies**

Literacy has emerged strongly in recent times as an applied linguistic research focus, exemplifying in many ways the expanding scope of applied linguistics. There is now a network of literacy researchers from many parts of the world who are engaged in the empirical and theoretical study of literacy practices in a wide range of settings and social contexts. The AILA Special Interest Group on Literacy has contributed to the international networking that has brought together these scholars, furthering collaboration through international seminars, colloquia and conferences, that started in Tokyo in 1999, and has continued in Campinas, Brazil, Santa Barbara, U.S.A., Leeds, U.K., Cape Town, South Africa, Singapore, Ghent, Belgium and Wisconsin-Madison, U.S.A. Papers given at these events have been published in journal special editions and elsewhere (Baynham and Prinsloo 2001; Baynham and Baker 2002; Luke and Baynham 2004) and in this volume we have invited researchers involved in the AILA literacy meetings both to revisit their work and to present fresh contributions. The invited articles presented here provide a range of perspectives on literacy studies, rather than a single focus, but they all draw on or relate to a body of work that has become known as the ‘New Literacy Studies’ and has brought an ethnographic focus to the study of literacy. The collection offers a body of empirically and

theoretically based papers on literacy ethnography as well as providing engagements with critical issues around literacy and education. They offer multiple, diverse but complementary perspectives on research and theory in literacy studies. The studies presented here expand the earlier focus on literacy as text to include attention to image and other semiotic forms, as well as multi-modal texts that include visuals and sound.

Originally introduced in the early 1990s in the work of Gee (1990) and Street (1993), the term New Literacy Studies (NLS) has been associated with the work of literacy researchers from a range of disciplines. They have studied literacy in everyday social practice, on the understanding that literacy practices are always and already embedded in particular forms of activity; that one cannot define literacy or its uses in a vacuum; that reading and writing are studied in the context of social (cultural, historical, political, and economic) practices of which they are a part and which operate in particular social spaces. Literacy, from this perspective, is a shorthand term for the social practices of reading and writing which can be ethnographically studied in particular contexts.

Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000: 1-15) helpfully summarised the characteristics of an NLS perspective on literacy as follows:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts;
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life;
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relations and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others;

- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices;
- Literacy is historically situated;
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making as well as formal education and training.
- The ways in which people use and value reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being.

Research in Literacy Studies has contributed to the development of grounded and research-focused approaches, concerned with the study of literacy as situated practices embedded within relations of culture and power in specific contexts. Researchers have shown that literacy-related skills and practices are often distributed amongst co-participants, and that literacy in use is closely linked with other communicative modalities, most obviously speech but also image and gesture. They have shown the complex varieties of text-mediated social practice that characterise various socio-cultural settings, both across different societies and within specific societies. As regards education they have contributed important ways of understanding low school achievement and the failure of large sections of children and adults to benefit from schooling. However, this work has not been without its problems, and the papers presented here address various of these problems and try to take the work forward, in ways that we go on to describe.

### **Literacy events and practices**

A key term in the study of literacy in social context, since the work of Heath (1983; 1982), has been that of the literacy event, where "the occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (Heath 1982). Literacy events, in Heath's conception included those moments when inscription or decoding of text featured in any way, but not necessarily centrally. What was central was the configuration of action, talk and text, in multiple and socially varying ways. Such a focus, drawing from sociolinguistic research broadened the focus in literacy studies by taking account of the role of texts in social interaction. Subsequent research has shown the extent to which texts change social interaction in ways that have not before been generally recognised, in sociolinguistics or in sociology (Barton 2001). Baynham (1995) examined the way that people shift between text and talk in social interaction referring to this process as mode switching. Bilingual talk around monolingual text in school and community settings is characteristic of most multilingual social contexts (Martin-Jones and Jones 2000). As Barton summarised it, "much talk is about texts. Much of the 'language as spoken by ordinary people in their everyday lives', the focus of most sociolinguistic research, is in fact talk about texts" (Barton 2001:100). Subsequent work in Literacy Studies to that of Heath (1983), starting with Street (1984), added the concept of literacy practices, to provide a further analytical dimension. Where events involve the particular doings with texts, literacy practices are the more general sociocultural framing that gives significance to particular acts (see Street 1984; Barton 1994; Baynham 1995, for discussions). Researchers have thus used the term literacy practices to refer to those understandings about and orientations towards literacy that people bring to a literacy event; that shape the way they use and respond to literacy on that

occasion. The concept of literacy practices incorporates literacy events as empirical occasions to which literacy is integral and analyses them in terms of the models or preconceptions that make people decide who does what, where and when it is done, as far as reading and writing is concerned. At an epistemological level, the concept of literacy as a social practice provides the frame for an analysis of meaning making. Methodologically the approach has been grounded in linguistic ethnography and has drawn on discourse analysis as well as socio-cultural models of cognition and various strands of socio-linguistics and social theory for its analytical work (see Gee 2000 for an overview). Typically researchers have observed or recorded particular literacy events at their site of research and then tried to understand the wider discursive framings and social practices that cause such events to take their particular form and shape. "Literacy events" have thus provided the empirical units of analysis in the study of literacy, whereas "literacy practices" have provided an analytical frame that includes both activities and conceptualisations of reading and writing.

The 'first generation studies' of literacy of Street (1984), Heath (1983) and Scribner and Cole (1981) which set the frame for this work were followed by a substantial number of 'second generation studies', in the 1980s and 1990s, including Baynham (1995), Barton and Hamilton (1998), Besnier (1993), Kulick and Stroud (1993) and Prinsloo and Breier (1996), amongst a much larger range of studies carried out in Madagascar, Morocco, Ghana, India, Namibia, Peru, Australia, the USA, the UK and elsewhere. These studies generally followed the same methodology of recording literacy events and making sense of them by enquiring what the relation was between particular acts or events of communication and wider social categories, cultural understandings, and forms of social organization. The concept of literacy practices was used to enquire what habitualised ways of making meaning gave

shape to specific literacy events, and situated individual acts and interpersonal relations. It also opened up the space to examine the power dimensions that underlay particular uses of reading and writing and to ask how these were shaped by relations of inequality, struggle and resistance across class, language, gender, ethnic, educational and other kinds of social cleavages in contexts of social inequality.

### **The ethnographic perspective**

Most work in the NLS tradition has tried to avoid the pressure to impose preconceptions of what counts as literacy in particular contexts and how that literacy works. The starting point has generally been that literacy practices can be studied ethnographically, through asking the question: ‘What’s going on here?’ Studies of literacy as situated social practice have paid attention to the range of multiple contexts in which persons who are engaged in reading and writing and other forms of communicative activity and identity processes are situated. Literacy practices are thus studied as variable, contexted practices which link people, linguistic resources, media objects, and strategies for meaning-making in contextualised ways. Scribner and Cole (1981) showed, through their study of literacy and cognition in Liberia that cognitive skills commonly associated with literacy varied dramatically according to the wider social practices within which literacy was embedded. Heath (1983) showed the distinctive ways that three local communities in one town in the USA socialised their children into language and literacy practices. Street’s (1984) research in an Iranian village showed that there were multiple literacies, including a school literacy, a religious literacy associate with Koranic study centres, and a market literacy, which was an adaptation of the Koranic literacy. Barton and Hamilton (1998) provide a detailed study of the role of literacy in the everyday lives of people in Lancaster, England, where the

researchers used in-depth interviews, complemented by observations, photography and the collection of documents and records, a door-to-door survey in one neighbourhood and detailed case studies of people in a number of households in the neighbourhood, where the researchers observed particular literacy events and asked people to reflect on their practices.

### **Charges of ‘localism’**

There have been several concerns expressed in recent times that the ethnographic focus of research in the NLS tradition has contributed to a bias towards localism in that such research cannot see beyond the immediate context of its research focus. Rampton (1998) criticised the ethnographic focus on local culture and speech community for working with a relatively small number of informants and producing detailed portraits of internally differentiated but fairly coherent groups. Such work outlined the cultural integrity of distinctive literacy and speech practices, as well, sometimes, as the ways they are transmitted intergenerationally, he argued, but because of its focus on bounded identities, did not look at lines of social differentiation across such boundaries. Similar charges have subsequently been made about the localized ethnographic focus of NLS research, its inattentiveness to the larger social processes that shape the local and from which local events can be read translocally (Luke 2004; Brandt and Clinton 2002; Collins and Blot 2003). As Brandt and Clinton argued, “... if reading and writing are means by which people reach – and are reached by – other contexts, then more is going on locally than just local practice” (Brandt and Clinton 2002: 338). Luke (2004: 331) described the claim that literacy has social meaning as only a partial step and argued that ethnographic accounts need to be set against broader accounts of political economies of literacy, information and image. The study of local literacy needed to

engage with how the local is constituted in relation to the flows and ‘travelling cultures’ of globalisation.

Several papers in this collection address the limits and constraints of the ethnographic perspective and examine how the work of the NLS can be taken forward under conditions of globalisation and multilingualism in specific contexts. They follow recent work that has started to do that (e.g., Hamilton 2001; Kell 2001; Blommaert 2005; Pahl and Rowsell 2006). On one hand, the focus on literacy practices in the NLS has been sharpened by renewed engagement with theories of social practice from sociology and socio-linguistics, for example, with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, Dell Hymes, Norman Fairclough and Basil Bernstein, amongst others. In this collection, Bartlett, Pahl and Luke draw on Bourdieu, and Clarke engages with Latour and Actor Network Theory, while Pitt applies arguments from Bernstein and draws on Fairclough in her analysis. What these various perspectives have in common is their efforts to conceptualise and analyze the inter-relations between individuals and groups, agency and structure, personal and institutional processes. While they are concerned to retain the emphasis on the complexity of communicative action which has been the hallmark of work in the New Literacy Studies, in its focus on acts and events in their social, ecological settings, they are also concerned to apply fresh analyses on how particular acts or events of communication and literacy connect up with wider social categories, cultural understandings, and forms of social organization.

### **Literacy practices and *habitus***

Pahl, Bartlett, Luke and Blommaert in this collection make explicit use of arguments from Pierre Bourdieu’s work, particularly his concept of *habitus*, which is about the conditions

that pertain in individual's experience, and in collective history. These conditions are seen to dispose individuals in certain ways, rather than others, both enabling them and constraining them along particular lines. *Habitus* reflects those possibilities and resources, as well as their limitations, which people tacitly draw upon in their actions and interactions. Bourdieu describes them as durable, transposable dispositions, or embodied history internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history, that people draw on (Bourdieu 1991: 12). *Habitus* also refers to a person's competence as a strategic player in a social field, and how such personal resources are continually being sanctioned by relative successes and failures in social interaction. A notion of social practice that draws on the concept of *habitus* sees language and literacy production not as the outcome of static norms or pre-given social and cognitive techniques, but rather the effects of the positioning of individuals within social/political economies of language, literacy, information and communicative practices. *Habitus* thus outlines a mechanism of regulated behaviour as well as for structured creativity on the part of individuals. It offers a useful resource for enquiring about literacy practices both in relation to identity processes and at the level of social practices, where the attention is on embodied identity in practice.

### **Materiality and multi-modalities in literacy practices**

While earlier emphases in NLS research has been on social practice as what people do, the materiality and technological dimensions of such practices has received renewed attention in ways that have enriched literacy studies. In particular, Kress's work (Kress 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996) redirected attention to the 'stuff' of literacy, its materiality in the writing, the objects, artefacts and drawing systems that are part of literacy practices, as well

as the visual, and multi-semiotic dimensions of writing and drawing. Bartlett's attention in this collection to the artefacts of literacy is a case in point. Bartlett and others in this collection are influenced by actor network theory, particularly Latour's (1987, 1993) analysis of networked social practices, where the role of material things in sustaining social practices is emphasised, and this approach is discussed in detail in Clarke's paper in this collection. Latour's 'symmetrical anthropology' suggests an approach to the theorization of the material as *artefacts*, as 'things' which are necessary components of social networks or 'practices'. This approach encourages us to study ethnographically the resources that are mobilized to produce established ways of 'doing' reading and writing: the configuration of people, devices, texts, decisions, organizations and inter-organizational relations that contribute to sustained networks of practice, in varying degrees of extensiveness and complexity. A feature of such networks is that they usually draw local actors into broader configurations not of their making, and which play out away from the local scene.

### **Literacy, social goods, interests and norms**

An overview of how such an analytical perspective on projects of social ordering might apply to literacy studies was provided by Freebody (1999: 5) where he referred to the four ways in which the sociality of any given literacy practice is constituted. First, he says, each literacy practice has a material history, which is found in the writing materials and systems and the material traces they leave. Secondly, literacy practices are social through the interactional histories through which they have evolved. A third sense relates to their institutional histories. A fourth sense in which literacy practices are social, says Freebody, is that these material, interactional and institutional histories are themselves shaped by

ideological considerations. Yet, as Freebody (2001) pointed out, and Freebody and Freiberg discuss in their paper in this collection, literacy very often appears in policy discourses and schooling practices as an apparently inevitable and almost natural 'compacted concept', i.e., literacy comes to be seen as apparently self-evident, uncontentious and useful, its substance and validity confirmed and endorsed repeatedly by statistical correlations with one or other social good.

Freebody and Freiberg in this collection are concerned to enquire what gets delivered to school children under the rubric of 'literacy' in educational settings. They see what counts as literacy in schools as a particular 'compacted concept', streamlined for administration and for measurement, and tied to particular reasoning practices that teach children to attach layers of significance to the material objects of literacy, to 'see through' books and to make messages and texts of particular kinds. They show teachers teaching children what counts as reading, and setting up interactive practices which draw in children as collaborators in confirming what the appropriate 'line' through the text is that constitutes a classroom lesson. They suggests that this 'line' is also about aligning individual identities with public interests and structures, and emphasise the links to wider social processes as to how global dynamics are played out in particular settings.

Pitt's study in this collection makes a similar case about the intentions of a family literacy initiative that she studied. She examines the teacher training films as examples of a literacy pedagogy that targets women with limited formal education as particular kinds of mothers and adult learners. Drawing on Bernstein's constructs of regulative and pedagogical discourse she argues that the family literacy pedagogy of the interventive programme constructs mothers as prioritising their children's learning while also becoming particular

kinds of 'lifelong learners' who are recruited onto adult education programmes. She sees these dynamics as simultaneously rewarding and persecuting: through being co-opted into their children's education through their desire to be 'good mothers' and through their recruitment into ideas about 'reflexive adult learning' and certification processes, attitudes that are shaped through new capitalist ideology. Pitt draws on Fairclough's (1989) analytical approach where discourse is studied as text, as discursive practice and as social practice, focusing on the nexus of language/discourse/speech and social structure. Her study echoes Bartlett's account of 'literacy shaming' in this collection and Freebody and Freiberg's account in that they all develop perspectives on the way that literacy dynamics are tied up with identity processes under socio-political constraints, where individuals must act as authors and subjects of their own conduct, while they are subject to social constraints that shape their choices. In Foucault's terms, it is through the inculcation of social norms as personal attributes that the individual performs in self-policing, and attitudes to literacy play no small part in these processes, because of the links of literacy to educational institutional practices.

Bartlett is also concerned with the intensive social work required to "do literacy". She too develops an account of the ways in which individuals position themselves through literacy practices in social and cultural fields but focuses on social dynamics beyond the family. She argues that 'doing literacy' is largely about developing facility in literacy practices that are recognized as "legitimate", rather than about mastering a code. Through a close examination of her interview and observation data from a northern Brazil town, she describes what she calls "literacy shaming", where individuals feel bad, and are made to feel bad by others, about their inability to read or write something and also about the "uneducated" way in

which they speak. Doing literacy in that context is tied up with “feeling literate” and “seeming literate”, which in turn are tied into socially sanctioned behaviours and personal identity work under these social constraints. Bartlett pays close attention to the role of what she calls ‘cultural artefacts’ in such literacy processes. She refers to both material objects like books and to cultural categories such as “good girls” and “bad boys” as cultural artefacts, and shows how they serve to produce ‘figured worlds’ which are, as she says, evoked, grown into individually, and collectively developed. Gee, in this volume, talks in a related way about ‘models’ (cultural models, discourse models) which he describes as resources which help people act and interact in situations where they apply, or seem to apply; for example, how to talk, act and write as a young man who is propositioning a woman.

Ahearn’s study in this collection presents a complex narrative about Nepalese social and cultural change, seen through the lens of changing gender identities and the interactional dynamics of romantic love letters. She argues that the new practices of love-letter writing in Junigau, Nepal in the 1980s and 1990s signal and facilitate a shift from arranged and capture marriage. She shows that this practice draws on a discourse of romantic love that has become respectable in more recent times because of its western or modern connotations. She examines the uneven and unanticipated consequences of these new practices as they provide expression for but also set limits on women’s independence and freedom in those social settings.

## **Semiotic domains**

Gee draws broadly on related arguments and broad theoretical insights to those describe above to develop an account of how literacy happens within semiotic domains, where domain members share a set of practices, a common language, genre or register (what Gee calls a social language), a set of common goals or endeavours and a set of values and norms. His examples include video games, theology and midwifery, but could equally included school literacy classes, ‘family literacy’ meetings or love letters. Within a domain, words, symbols, images, and/or artifacts have meanings and combine together, thanks to what Gee calls the design grammar of the domain, to take on complex meanings. These meanings are situated meanings, not general meanings that can be defined once and for all, Gee suggests, in ways that are related to Bartlett’s concept of ‘figured worlds’. Gee says that in order to understand any word, symbol, image, or artefact (or combination thereof) in a domain, a person must be able to situate the meaning of the word, symbol, image, or artefact (or combination thereof) within (actual or mentally simulated) embodied experiences of action, interaction, or dialogue in or about the domain.

Ahearn’s study shows strongly how localised practices reshape the attitudes to and uses of literacy. In this, her work aligns with earlier NLS studies (particularly the ‘cross-cultural’ studies collected in Street 1993) on how people locally ‘take hold’ of literacy, in ways that produces surprising and unanticipated outcomes.

Pahl, in this collection, is similarly concerned to examine what she refers to as the more durable, long-term cultural resources that families bring to oral and written texts, using *habitus* as a lens to look at the communicative practices, firstly of a Turkish family in

London, and secondly at the family resources, practices and identity-processes that show up in map-making activities at a school in South Yorkshire. She shows how family resources and embodied history show up in the multimodal literacy practices of young children. She suggests through this work that the notion of habitus might be more flexible and productive and less deterministic than is sometimes claimed, particularly when new fields of practice, such as western school literacy, are encountered by migrants from elsewhere in the world.

Prinsloo, through his study of children at play, also takes the multimodal turn and is concerned to show them taking hold of the range of semiotic resources available to them from home and school, and reshaping them in creative and novel ways. In his examination of the semiotic resources brought into play in children's games in *Khayelitsha*, he shows how many of the cognitive abilities said to underpin literacy development are abundantly present and unrecognized in these games, how the games incorporate self aware, parodic routines derived from school activities, demonstrating a critical meta awareness of the practices of schooled literacy and how ultimately there is a distressing gap between the multimodal exuberance of the resources deployed in play and the 'narrow band' focus on writing in schooling. This leads him to endorse Kress and Gee's call for an expansion of the semiotic resources in the school curriculum. Prinsloo shows how the socially situated focus on NLS work can be turned back onto a consideration of schooled literacy.

Baynham turns to 19<sup>th</sup> century literary sources in English (Dickens and Mrs Gaskell), asking what these can show us about how literacy operates as a social and semiotic construct in the fictional worlds evoked, thus how they might count as evidence of historically distant literacy practices and how these might enrich understanding of literacy practices in contemporary times. He shows how NLS constructs such as 'events',

‘practices’, ‘institutions’ and ‘discourses’ can be used as analytical tools to uncover elite and powerful literacies, in novels written at a time when the universal penny post was dramatically expanding the semiotic opportunities for communication and a push for mass literacy was gaining momentum. As such the chapter invokes the historicity of literature. While the bulk of work in the NLS has been sociological, anthropological or sociological in orientation, this paper points to the potential relevance of NLS work in the disciplinary areas of literary studies and history.

De Souza, finally, with his emphasis on place of enunciation and asymmetry of power brings the literacy researcher into the picture in an interesting and provocative way, pulling apart accepted and taken for granted theoretical assumptions in literacy research which may, he suggests, turn out to be new versions of the autonomous, decontextualizing intellectual tendency that Street spotted so productively in the early 1980s. Again the modal shift is in evidence in de Souza’s focus on vision and the visual in Amerindian writing practices. Exploring concepts such as vision, perspective and relationality, de Souza evokes a landscape of ontological, epistemological and indeed ethical assumptions which have been systematically misunderstood by generations of investigators who have been unable ultimately to step out of a universalizing mindset. Exploring these assumptions gives de Souza the possibility of re-visiting and reconfiguring Kress’s notion of reading images, pointing to the dynamic interrelationship of visual and scriptural, not the visual as a simple accompaniment to the verbal (written) text. De Souza takes us deeper than is perhaps usual into the culturally situated construction of reading and by extension writing practices. His study is an apt closing perspective in a collection that starts with Freebody and Freiberg’s analysis of the currently dominant perspectives on what counts as literacy in (western)

educational settings. De Souza takes on the dominant Western Cartesian perspective which asserts itself in non-Western contexts and suggests there are coherent ontological/epistemological/ethical alternatives.

To conclude this introductory chapter, we have grouped the chapters in this collection under four headings. The discussion in individual chapters overflows such boundaries, their themes overlap and criss-cross. Nonetheless, for reading purposes we have grouped the chapters under these broad headings:

- I. literacy and power: aligning literacy learners with dominant discourses and practices;
- II. global and local: taking hold of literacy;
- III. theoretical developments in the study of literacy as situated social practice;
- IV. literacy practices in time and space.

Together, the chapters in this collection provide an account of the current issues and approaches that are shaping the study of literacy as situated social practice.

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