
Locating Literacy Theory in Out-of-School Contexts

KATHERINE SCHULTZ and GLYNDA HULL

In public discourse, literacy has long been associated with schooling. Talk about literacy crises is often accompanied by calls for better schools and more rigorous curricula, and images of reading and writing are closely connected to school-based or essayist forms of literacy. However, when we widen the lens of what we consider literacy and literate activities, homes, communities, and workplaces become sites for literacy use. It was in fact in these out-of-school contexts, rather than in school-based ones, that many of the major theoretical advances in the study of literacy have been made in the past 25 years. Studies of literacy out-of-school have been pivotal in shaping the field. Indeed, to talk about literacy these days, both in school and out, is to speak of events, practices, activities, ideologies, discourses, and identities, and at times to do so almost unreflectively, since these categories and terminology have become so much a part of our customary ways of thinking in academic domains. Through an exploration of three major theoretical traditions that have launched numerous studies of literacy, we show that in large part this new theoretical vocabulary sprang from examinations of the uses and functions of literacy in contexts other than school.

The three theoretical perspectives that we treat in this chapter are the ethnography of communication (e.g., Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), Vygotskian perspectives and activity theory (e.g., Engeström, 1998; Scribner & Cole, 1981), and the New Literacy Studies (e.g., Gee, 1996; Street, 1993a, 1993b). To be sure, these theoretical categories are not impermeable and current projects often draw on more than one of these traditions. For instance, a study might reflect both certain methodological insights from the ethnography of communication and also the interest in

power relations made manifest by the New Literacy Studies. And in some important ways, the more recent theoretical points of view are made possible by, even draw their life from, the earlier ones. However, our categories do provide a useful historical lens for seeing more clearly the pivotal role played by studies of literacy out of school, and they serve as well as a heuristic for mapping the ever-growing territory of research and practice in out-of-school settings, a topic we turn to in Chapter 2.

One other caveat before we begin. There are some ways in which the distinction between in school and out of school sets up a false dichotomy. By foregrounding physical space (i.e., contexts outside the school house door) or time (i.e., after-school programs), we may ignore important conceptual dimensions that more readily account for successful learning or its absence. We may fail to see the presence of school-like practice at home (e.g., Street & Street, 1991) or non-school-like activities in the formal classroom. Such contexts are not sealed tight or boarded off; rather, one should expect to find, and one should look to account for, the movement from one context to the other.

In a related way, Cole (1995) calls our attention to a possible danger in treating the notion of context as a container, as that which surrounds and therefore, of necessity, causes or influences or shapes. Writing primarily about hierarchical levels, Cole worries about the tendency to see a larger context (i.e., the school) as determining the smaller (i.e., the classroom). But his comments can be extended to apply more simply to our case of the adjacent contexts of school and out of school. That is, in any analysis of out-of-school programs, we will want to avoid the temptation to oversimplify the creative powers of context—to assume that successful learning in an after-school program occurs merely or only because it occurs after school.

All of this said, school has come to be such a particular, specialized institution, with its own particular brand of learning (cf. Miettinen, 1999), that it does seem useful to set it in opposition to other institutions and different contexts for learning. Doing so will allow us to consider what we've grown accustomed to taking as natural and normal as actually an artifact of a particular kind of learning that is associated primarily with schooling.

The Ethnography of Communication

We turn first to a series of studies that take what is now known as a sociolinguistic perspective on literacy and schooling. These studies reflect the conceptual leap made by bringing anthropological and linguistic perspectives

and research methods to the study of literacy. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars from traditions outside of education, in particular anthropology and linguistics, looked beyond schools to family and community settings to understand how urban schools might reach students from cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds that differed from the mainstream. Educators were concerned that students of color, especially those from low-income families, were not doing well in school. Up until that time, the most prevalent explanations for children's difficulties in school were deficit theories that blamed students and families. Anthropologists interested in the study of language and literacy in schools brought to the study of classrooms a view of culture as "patterns in a way of life characteristic of a bounded social group and passed down from one generation to the next" (Eisenhart, in press, p. 4). This view of socialization and culture prompted researchers to look to settings outside of schools in order to understand the patterns of school success and school failure across groups of students.

In 1962 Dell Hymes and John Gumperz organized a panel for the American Anthropology Association that brought together researchers from the fields of linguistics and anthropology. In his introduction to the proceedings, Hymes (1964) urged linguists to study language in context and anthropologists to include the study of language in their description of cultures. Hymes proposed the concept of an "ethnography of communication," which would focus on the communicative patterns of a community and a comparison of these patterns across communities. Although Hymes intended the ethnography of communication to include writing and literacy, the early focus on speaking led many to believe his emphasis was on spoken language (Hornberger, 1995).

Then, in 1965, a group of scholars from a range of disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and education, were brought together by the Office of Education to examine the relationship between children's language and school success. Since this came in the midst of Lyndon Johnson's expansive Great Society programs, researchers were asked to consider why schools were failing "low-income and minority" children (Cazden, 1981). The conclusion reached by the group was that many "school problems" of "minority" students could be explained by discontinuities, specifically differences in language use, between a child's home and school communities (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972). As a result, the National Institute of Education funded a number of studies to examine these issues. A major finding from this initial work was that children socialized in diverse contexts come to school differentially prepared to respond to the demands of school. As a result they experience school differently, resulting in success for some and failure for others. Hymes's (e.g., 1974) notion of the communicative event, which included components such as the setting, participants,

norms, and genres, became a useful framework for the documentation of language use, including literacy, in and out of school settings.

Following this initial work in language and speaking, Basso (1974) suggested that an ethnography of writing should be the centerpiece of ethnographies of communication. He called for studies of writing as it is distributed across a community rather than a single focus on the classroom. Basso introduced the term *writing event*, describing it as an act of writing and characterizing writing, like speaking, as a social activity. Building in turn on Basso's work and prefiguring the theory behind the New Literacy Studies (e.g., Gee, 1996; Street, 1993a), Szwed (1981) argued for an ethnography of literacy and proposed that, rather than a single continuum or level of literacy, we should imagine a variety of configurations or a plurality of literacies.

Although Basso's description seemed to arise out of an academic interest in bringing together sociolinguistics and anthropology, Szwed's focus on an ethnography of writing was a response to the "literacy crisis" of the 1980s. He suggested that despite the claims of a crisis of "illiteracy," we had not yet conceptualized literacy, nor did we know how literacy or reading and writing were used in social life. He linked his research interest directly to schools and explained that the definitions of reading (and we can add writing and speaking) that schools use may not take into account the reading a student does out of school. Thus he called for a study of the relationship between school and the world outside it and specified that the focus should be an inventory of one community's needs and resources. Szwed's call for the cataloguing of how and where literacy occurred in the community was the basis for many studies that sought to document empirically this new concept of multiple literacies (cf., Hornberger, 1995; Shuman, 1986; Weinstein-Shr, 1993; see also Chapters 3, 4, 7, this volume).

Around the same time, Heath (1981) signaled the importance of documenting the social history of writing, for which she coined the term *ethnohistory of writing*. Like Szwed, Heath made explicit links between writing in social or family settings and methods of writing instruction in school. Using preliminary data from what would become a pathbreaking ethnography, Heath described ethnographic research begun in response to complaints made by junior and senior high school teachers that it was impossible to teach students to write. According to the teachers, their classrooms were filled with students who planned to work in the textile mills, where reading and writing were not needed for work. Heath concluded that while there was a debate about how to teach writing in school, there was little systematic description of the functions of writing for specific groups of people. Her study suggested the possibility of using ethnographic studies of writing to reorganize schooling with potentially dramatic results. This early work, followed by her well-known study detailed later in this chapter

(Heath, 1983), supported the notion of teacher and student research and prompted both teachers and students to investigate the functions and uses of literacy in their communities in order to inform classroom practice.

Likewise, Hymes's (1981) ethnographic research funded by the National Institute of Education, which included Heath as a team member, used conversations with teachers about their difficulties in teaching language arts as a starting point. Researchers worked with teachers to uncover the dimensions of their difficulties with students and to understand students' perspectives on their school experiences. The researchers were quickly convinced that any investigation of school phenomena would require the study of classroom and school structures as well as those in children's homes and wider communities. This work became the core of Gilmore and Glatthorn's (1982) collection of educational ethnographies, *Children in and out of School*. Throughout the studies reported in this volume, schools were portrayed as cultures organized around a set of values and beliefs that frequently were not shared by the students and surrounding communities in which they are located. A major finding of this research was that children socialized in different contexts come to school differentially prepared to participate in school, which may result in failure—an argument now referred to as continuity-discontinuity theory (see Jacobs & Jordan, 1993). Heath (1982) explained in this volume that if education is seen as a process of cultural transmission, then formal schooling is only a part of this process. In her chapter on ethnography in education, Heath made an early argument for the need to study schools and classrooms in relation to the broader community or culture. She called for comprehensive, broad-based community studies.

Heath's (1983) long-term examination of and participation with three contiguous communities over a decade in the 1960s and 1970s illustrated how each community—a black working-class community, a white working-class community, and a racially mixed middle-class community—socialized their children into very different language practices. Heath documented each community's "ways with words" and found, for instance, that members of the white working-class community rarely used writing and generally viewed literacy as a tool to help them remember events and to buy and sell items. Although parents collected reading and writing materials so that children were surrounded by print, the parents rarely read themselves and used reading and writing mostly for functional purposes. In contrast, while residents of the black working-class community did not accumulate reading materials, reading was more seamlessly integrated into their daily activities and social interactions. Literacy was jointly accomplished in social settings.

Heath concluded that, "The place of language in the life of each social group [in these communities and throughout the world] is interdependent

with the habits and values of behaving shared among members of that group” (1983, p. 11). When children from each of these communities entered school, only the middle-class students, whose language use was similar to that of the teachers, were successful. In this way, Heath demonstrated how children from each of these communities were differentially prepared for school, which promoted and privileged only middle-class ways of using language. This study inspired and paved the way for many other research projects, though most were not as extensive or long term as Heath’s own work (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1984; Gilmore, 1983; Weinstein-Shr, 1993). These studies helpfully documented both the functions and uses of literacy practices in various communities as well as the differential preparation children from different communities brought to school.

Begun as a turn away from schools and toward communities, Hymes’s conception of the ethnography of communication gave researchers and educators a frame for noticing the resources students bring to school and provided teachers with a way to imagine changing their pedagogy and curricula rather than assuming students themselves had to adapt and change. Subsequently, many researchers began to catalogue and describe the ways in which young people used language in competent and, indeed, exciting ways, in and out of school, in a manner that their teachers might not have noticed or acknowledged. This work not only reframed and broadened conceptions of literacy, it also gave researchers a new lens for documenting learning in out-of-school contexts.

Vygotskian and Activity Theory Perspectives

If the ethnography of communication grew from the union of two fields—linguistics and anthropology—activity theory was born of the need to re-imagine a third discipline, that of psychology. As richly documented in various accounts (e.g., Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1998; Wertsch, 1991), this effort has centered on theorizing about and investigating not the mind in isolation or the mind as automaton, but mind in society or culture in mind. Whereas ethnographies of communication took and continue to have as their main focus the role of language in learning, with a special emphasis on language differences in and out of school, activity theory chooses a different centerpiece, learning and human development. To be sure, activity theory had its origins in the work of the Soviet scholar Lev Vygotsky, who placed a premium on the role of language as the premier psychological tool. He gave pride of place as well to written language. But it is certainly the case that many researchers who adopt an activity theory perspective get along quite well without directing their research toward language or writing per se (cf.

Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999). This is because they are interested instead in honoring “activity” as a unit of analysis, an enterprise that might or might not include an analysis of sign-mediated communication per se as a principle concern.

Thus our discussion in this chapter of Vygotskian perspectives and activity theory represents but a small, if significant, slice of the pie: those pivotal theoretical studies that have examined literacy—literacy, that is, as part of integral units of human life, motivated by human goals, enacted in the course of everyday activities, especially beyond the school. We begin by briefly revisiting Vygotsky’s ideas about the importance of writing, move next to attempts to test his claims empirically, and turn finally to a few projects that embody present-day formulations of activity theory. We ask, all the while, why these researchers have been interested in examining literacy out of school and what thereby they have learned.

Vygotsky believed that human sign systems, such as language, writing, and mathematics, have significant consequences for how we think and how we interact with the world. As the products of human history that emerge over time and vary in their nature and use from culture to culture, such sign systems, or psychological tools as Vygotsky called them, structure mental activity, mediating between thought and action and interaction. Writing, Vygotsky reasoned, is a sign system that is especially noteworthy for its far-reaching impacts on thinking. The effects of psychological tools such as writing will vary, he also wagered, depending on the nature of the symbol systems available at particular historical junctures and their uses in particular societies.

In the 1930s, with the help of Alexander Luria, Vygotsky saw the opportunity to test this theory by empirically investigating how intellectual functioning might be affected by cultural change. Mounting a major field-based research project, Luria traveled to Central Asia, where vast and rapid reforms were at that time in progress—reforms requiring nonliterate farmers to take part in collective ownership, for example, to use new agricultural technologies, and to acquire literacy through schooling. Luria found that the participants in his research did indeed respond differently to a variety of experimental tasks related to perception, classification, and reasoning, depending on their exposure to literacy and schooling. This he took as confirmation of Vygotsky’s theory that cultural change affects thinking. But given the complexity of the setting, we might ask exactly which change impacted thinking—was it literacy, or schooling, or collective farming, or other major shifts in the organization of everyday life? It is impossible to say. Further, Luria seemed to put too much stock in certain culturally biased test materials, in particular the syllogisms that were for a long time a standard part of the cross-cultural researcher’s experimental arsenal. He didn’t,

that is, take into account that such materials might merely measure an individual's familiarity with school-based types of tasks, rather than a person's ability to think abstractly or logically.

Thus a quick foray into the Soviet landscape of days gone by illustrates the preoccupation with literacy that was at the heart of Vygotsky's work, as well as aspects of his theorizing that still hold sway, especially his focus on writing as a mediational tool or the power of written language as an instrument for thinking. But the excursion also allows us to introduce the first important rationale within this tradition of work for juxtaposing school and non-school environments—that is, as a means (albeit often flawed) for ascertaining the effects of literacy/schooling on thought or cognitive development. If literacy is acquired in school, the reasoning went, and if adults and children differ in the amount of schooling to which they've been exposed, then whatever differences appear on tests of mental activity can be attributed to literacy—or at least to literacy coupled with schooling. A great deal of cross-cultural research during the 1960s was driven by just such reasoning. Although the majority of this work was limited by methodologies with a Western cultural bias, not to mention what now appears to be a naive faith in the efficacy of schooling, one within-culture comparison stands out both for its methodological *savoir faire* and its contribution to current conceptions of literacy: the monumental analysis of literacy among the Vai conducted by Scribner and Cole (1981).

In the early 1970s, at the same time that linguists and ethnographers had begun to apply the approach called the ethnography of communication to problems of language difference in and out of school in the United States, psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole were organizing a research project in Liberia. Hoping to pick up where Vygotsky's theorizing had left off, they devised an ambitious plan to investigate the cognitive consequences of literacy but to avoid the methodological confounds that marred Luria's work. In particular, Scribner and Cole drew on local cultural practices in designing the content of their experiments, and they also decoupled the effects of literacy from the effects of schooling. The latter they could accomplish handily, since the Vai boast the unusual distinction of having invented an original writing system, the learning of which takes place out of school. While classes in government-sponsored schools were taught in English, and Qur'anic study was conducted in Arabic, the Vai used their indigenous script for specialized purposes such as record-keeping and letter-writing. Thus this unusual patterning of languages, scripts, and acquisition practices made it possible to find people who were literate but had become so outside schooling, or who were literate through school and biliterate in two scripts acquired informally, and so on. Scribner and Cole's research team

gathered ethnographic and survey-based descriptions of language and literacy use, and they also administered a complex battery of experimental tasks designed to tap the cognitive processes traditionally believed to be connected to literacy—abstraction, memorization, categorization, verbal explanation, and the like.

In a nutshell, Scribner and Cole did not find that literacy was responsible for great shifts in mental functioning of the sort the Soviets and many policy makers and educators expect even today. But they did demonstrate that particular writing systems and particular reading and writing activities foster particular, specialized forms of thinking. For example, Qur'anic literacy improved people's performance on certain kinds of memory tasks, whereas Vai script literacy gave people an edge in certain varieties of phonological discrimination. In addition to sorting out the specialized effects of particular literacies, Scribner and Cole identified the equally specialized effects of schooling in and of itself apart from literacy—namely, the enhanced ability of schooled people to offer certain kinds of verbal explanations.

It should be noted that in scaling down the grand claims often made about the effects of literacy on cognition, Scribner and Cole took care to note that Vai literacy was a restricted literacy; it served relatively few, and a noticeably narrow, range of functions. They also made clear that in societies where economic, social, and technological conditions converge to warrant the increased use of literacy, the potential exists for literacy to serve many more functions and therefore to be more deeply implicated in thinking processes. The current moment, we would point out, is just such a time, as communication via the Internet for economic, social, and personal purposes becomes more and more widespread. Yet if we have learned anything from Scribner and Cole, it should be that literacy is not literacy is not literacy. Specialized forms of reading and writing, both in school and out, have specialized and distinctive effects, even in an information age. Scribner and Cole were the very first to teach us this.

In fact, they were the first, to our knowledge, to introduce the now-omnipresent term *practice* as a way to conceptualize literacy. Recently Cole (1995) has written about the current popularity of terms such as *practice* in studies of cognitive development. He attributes this popularity, as well as that of related terms such as *activity*, *context*, and *situation*, to a widespread desire these days to move beyond a focus on the individual person as a unit for psychological analysis. Cole has also traced the theoretical origins of this new language (1995, 1996). Looking back to Marx, for example, he explains that the notion of practice was a way to get around the separation of the mental and the material. Consulting post-Marxist social

theorists such as Giddens (1979), he reminds us that “practice” has also been offered as a construct that avoids the impasse of agency versus determinism.

In *The Psychology of Literacy*, Scribner and Cole (1981) did not reveal the theoretical etymology of their use of the term *practice*. But they did explain in some detail the framework they constructed to interpret their data, a framework centered on the notion of “practice.” They defined a practice as “a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge” (p. 236). Literacy, as a socially organized practice, “is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (p. 236). It follows that, “in order to identify the consequences of literacy, we need to consider the specific characteristics of specific practices” (p. 237).

Central to a plurality of literacies is the notion of practice, with its emphasis on purpose within context and the patterned interplay of particular skills, knowledge, and technologies. Within the Vygotskian tradition, research on out-of-school literacy sprang from the desire to contrast the schooled, and their presumed literacy-enhanced cognitive capabilities, with the non-schooled, who were suspected of thinking differently. Aware of the pitfalls of the tradition of cross-cultural research, Scribner and Cole redirected such efforts through a complex and culturally sensitive research design, and thereby they also changed our thinking in literacy studies. Like ethnographers of communication, they helped the field understand literacy as a multiple rather than a unitary construct, calling attention to the distinctive literacies that can exist beyond the schoolhouse door.

Scribner and Cole’s project is an example of early research within a then-burgeoning activity theory perspective (cf. Scribner, 1987). In subsequent years Scribner turned her attention to a major non-school endeavor, that of work, while Cole became invested in establishing sustainable after-school activity systems for children that juxtapose learning and play (see Chapter 6, this volume). In both their new research agendas, Scribner and Cole were interested in studying not the isolated mental tasks that were thought (erroneously) to be elicited by means of laboratory experiments, but thinking as part of ongoing activity. Activities, we learn from the theory by the same name, serve larger goals and life purposes, rather than as ends in themselves.

Thus it makes sense from this theoretical perspective to study thinking as part of a dominant life activity—such as school—but more significantly for our purposes in this essay, as part of play or work. As Scribner pointed out, we would be quite remiss were our accounts of human development to ignore entire realms of activity. For example, “While we are certainly

not wholly defined through our participation in society's labor, it is unlikely we can fully understand the life cycle of development without examining what adults do when they work" (1997, p. 299). At its very core, then, activity theory reminds us to look not just in school and in research laboratories but outside them, always with the goal of capturing "human mental functioning and development in the full richness of its social and artifactual texture" (Cole, Engeström, & Vasquez, 1997, p. 13). For literacy, this perspective opens the door to studies of reading, writing, and speaking within the context of a panoply of activities, activities themselves motivated by larger purposes and aims than literacy itself.

The New Literacy Studies

Located at the crossroads of sociolinguistic and anthropological theories of language and schooling and ethnographic and discourse methodologies is the recently conceptualized field of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993a). Characterized by their focus on an understanding of literacies as multiple and situated within social and cultural practices and discourses, these studies point to the central role of power. As compared to the emphasis on language, learning, writing, and development in the studies reviewed in the first two sections, the NLS research has as its focus literacy and discourse. Like the other two theoretical traditions, the New Literacy Studies are noteworthy for their emphasis on literacy in out-of-school contexts. New Literacy Studies build on the ethnographic tradition of documenting literacy in local communities, often adding an analysis of the interplay between the meanings of local events and a structural analysis of broader cultural institutions and practices. Gee, a linguist who has been central to this field, situates the New Literacy Studies—together with the ethnography of communication and studies based on activity theory—within a group of movements that have taken a "social turn" from a focus on the study of individuals to an emphasis on social and cultural interaction (Gee, 2000). He points out that while these movements claim that meaning (or writing or literacy) is always situated, they often fail to articulate the mutually constitutive nature of their contexts.

Most work done under the banner of the New Literacy Studies takes "literacy" as its central unit of analysis. But Gee introduced and popularized a broader category, "discourse," which he defines as "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or 'types of people') by specific *groups* of people. . . . [Discourses] are, thus, always and everywhere *social* and products of social histories" (Gee, 1996, p. viii,

emphasis in original). Gee explains further that people use discourses to affiliate and display their membership in particular social groups. Discourses are, in effect, an “identity kit” or a group of behaviors, activities and beliefs that are recognizable by others. Discourses are inherently ideological and, like literacies, are embedded in social hierarchies and reflect the distribution of power. The NLS research often explores the ways in which individual identities, social relationships, and institutional structures are instantiated and negotiated through what people say and do with texts (Maybin, 2000). Gee’s discussion of Discourses provides a frame for understanding the connections among literacy, culture, identity, and power. By virtue of turning our gaze to the larger construct of “Discourse,” and insisting that literacy is always about more than literacy, Gee’s framework draws our attention away from a solitary focus on learning and language use in school settings and positions us to understand learning, literacy, and identity construction in and out of schools and across the life span.

While Gee illustrates how the term *literacy* can be limiting, Street (e.g., 1993a; 1995; Street & Street, 1991) has argued that schooling and pedagogy constrain our conceptions of literacy practices. Street defines literacy as an ideological practice, rather than a set of neutral or technical skills as it is traditionally conceived in schools, adult literacy programs, and mass literacy campaigns (Street 1984, 1993a, 1993b, 1995). Rather than focusing on neutral bits of information, this conception of literacy highlights its embedded or social nature. Thus, according to Street, Western notions of school or academic literacy are one form of literacy among many literacies.

Street’s theoretical conceptualization of the New Literacy Studies is derived from his fieldwork in Iran in the early 1970s (1984, 1995). Through a careful examination of and participation in village life, Street identifies three different kinds of literacy practices used by youth and adults in the village where he resided. These include what he terms “maktab” literacy, or literacy associated with Islam and taught in the local Qur’anic schools; “commercial” literacy, or the reading and writing used for the management of fruit sales in the local village; and school literacy, associated with the state schools recently built in both villages and urban areas. Although teaching and learning in the religious schools was based on memorizing portions of religious text and traditional teaching methods, there were local reading groups connected to the “maktab” schools that gathered at members’ homes to read passages from the Qur’an and commentary on it, in order to generate discussions and interpretation. Thus Street, through close examination of literacy and learning in the context of village life and culture, paints a portrait that differs from the conventional descriptions of religious training in Islamic schools as consisting exclusively of rote memorization.

Street describes the ways in which the skills students learned through this “maktab” literacy were hidden in relation to Western notions of literacy. Children and adults educated in this manner were considered “illiterate” as compared to those educated in the state schools designed to prepare youth for jobs in the modern sector. However, according to Street, the skills connected with “maktab” literacy were a preparation for the “commercial” literacy that, as it turned out, were key to economic success during the early 1970s, when oil production resulted in an economic expansion. During this time, many students who went to the state-run schools in urban areas found themselves without work, while their peers, educated in the “backward” villages and drawing on their “maktab” literacy practices, prospered from their work selling fruit.

This study, along with others in the NLS tradition, connects microanalyses of language and literacy use with macroanalyses of discourse and power. It also points to the dangers of reifying schooled notions of literacy. As scholars in this field contend, and this study exemplifies, literacy must be studied in its social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts both in school and out (Gee, 1996, 2000). In this study Street articulates a conception of literacy as tied to social practices and ideologies, such as economic, political, and social conditions; social structures; and local belief systems. He connects the literacy practices with identity and social positions in a manner that contrasts sharply with the dominant discourse about literacy. He uses his theory, grounded in anthropological research, to argue for research that makes visible the “complexity of local, everyday, community literacy practices,” or literacies outside of school settings (Street, 2001).

Over the years, Street has repeatedly raised the question: When there are so many different types of literacy practices, why is it that school literacy has come to be seen as the defining form of reading and writing? He describes the “pedagogization” of literacy, or the defining of literacy solely in terms of school-based notions of teaching and learning while marginalizing other forms of literacy (Street & Street, 1991). This contrasts with historical evidence that suggests that in the past literacy was associated with social institutions outside of school (Street & Street, 1991; see also Cook-Gumperz, 1986). For instance, educated middle-class women in seventeenth-century China wrote poems as a way to construct a community of women (Yin-yeo Ko, 1989, cited in Street & Street, 1991). Historically, and across cultural contexts, women have used literacy in informal, nonreligious, and nonbureaucratic domains (Heller, 1997; Rockhill, 1993; Street & Street, 1991). Street and Street (1991) argue that these uses of writing have been marginalized and destroyed by modern Western literacy “with its emphasis on formal, male, and schooled aspects of communication” (p. 146). One conclusion from this analysis is that rather than focusing on the conti-

nuities and discontinuities between home and school in ethnographic research, there is a need to focus on ethnographies of literacies more broadly and to document, as the authors do, the ways that school imposes a version of literacy on the outside world (Street & Street, 1991).

Extending Street's (1984, 1995, 1996) framework, Barton and colleagues demonstrate the importance of carefully documenting literacy in everyday lives. Through work conducted primarily in Lancaster, England, they illustrate how everyday literacies involve various media and symbol systems, and they document how different literacies are associated with particular cultures and domains of life within the cultures. Rather than locating literacy solely within the life of individuals, they emphasize the ways in which families and local communities regulate and are regulated by literacy practices (Barton, 1991, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Clark & Ivanic, 1997).

In a similar vein, Prinsloo and Breier (1996) have drawn from the theoretical perspectives lent by the New Literacy Studies to look for the meanings of everyday literacy practices in a wide range of contexts in South Africa. Like Street's (1984) early research in Iran, these studies point to the disjuncture between local practices and the new adult literacy programs begun in the post-apartheid era. The authors seek to describe the practices undertaken by people who might be considered "illiterate" by school or state standards. Consonant with the New Literacy Studies, their work documents what people actually accomplish with literacy, rather than judging them as deficient (Street, 1996), and presses for a reconceptualization of literacy that takes it out of the context of school and into the context of local practices (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996).

Most recently, Barton and colleagues have emphasized the interplay of structure and agency, focusing on insiders' perspectives of what constitutes local practices and the ways in which these practices reflect and shape social structures (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). This focus on the term *literacy practices* draws from the anthropological tradition to describe ways of acting and behaving that reflect power positions and structures. Street (2001) makes a distinction between practices and events, explaining that one could photograph an event but not a practice. Literacy practices, according to Street, embody folk models and beliefs, while events might be repeated occurrences or instances in which interaction surrounds the use of text (cf. Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Hornberger (2001) offers a useful distinction between literacy practices and literacy events, explaining that the reading of a bedtime story in middle-class U.S. homes is a literacy event (Heath, 1986), while these individual and repeated events are explained and undergirded by a set of literacy practices or conventions and beliefs about the value of reading to young children, assumptions about parent-child relationships, normative routines around bedtime, and the like.

It is important to note that, while studies growing from an activity theory tradition and those taking the NLS as a starting point both use the term *practice*, the usage is different in important ways. In Scribner and Cole's early work, for example, *practice* explicitly includes notions of skill, technology, and knowledge as well as patterned activity. In the NLS, on the other hand, the focus is clearly on the ways in which activity is infused by ideology, and there is little interest in specifying the cognitive dimensions of social practices. Thus recent literacy theorists often employ the term *practice* in a narrower sense that is consonant with their focus on culture, ideology, and power, though this specialized use of the term is usually not acknowledged.

While literacy theorists have worked to conceptualize the New Literacy Studies, there has been a parallel and, at times, overlapping focus by researchers and practitioners in an area captured by the term *critical literacy*.¹ Predating the work in New Literacy Studies, much of this field is directly related to schools and pedagogy rather than to everyday practice. While both share a commitment to defining literacy in relation to power and identity, critical literacy has a stronger focus on praxis and schooling. Luke and Freebody (1997) recently defined critical literacy as "a coalition of educational interests committed to engaging with the possibilities that the technologies of writing and other modes of inscription offer for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity, and political enfranchisement" (p. 1). This tradition, noteworthy for its explicit political agenda, owes the most to Paulo Freire (e.g., 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987), whose teaching methods have been central to several national literacy campaigns around the world. Freire's focus was on the ways in which education and literacy should support people to question and shape their worlds. As he explains, "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world . . . [and] transforming it by means of conscious practical work" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35).

Although much of the work in the area of critical literacy is located in school contexts, it has clear implications for thinking about (and rethinking) literacy out-of-school (see Chapter 5, this volume). For instance, Lankshear and Knobel (1997) propose a rereading and rewriting of our impoverished notions of citizenship in order to produce a new discourse of active citizenship that enables students to understand their social positionings in relation to their identity formation and subjectivities. Lankshear and Knobel describe how this new discourse might look in an English class, but their formulation has implications for learning more broadly construed.

In 1996, a group of scholars from the United States, England, and Australia met and spent the following year in dialogue to develop a way of talking about the social context of literacy learning, including the content

and form of literacy pedagogy. Calling themselves the New London Group (after the site of their first meeting in New London, New Hampshire), they built this dialogue in part on notions developed by researchers and practitioners identifying themselves with the critical literacy and New Literacy Studies movements as well as researchers from a range of disciplines. Their findings can be summed up by their central term—*multiliteracies*—that signals multiple communication channels, hybrid text forms, new social relations, and the increasing salience of linguistic and cultural diversity. As they explain, “Multiliteracies also creates a different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (New London Group, 1996, p. 64). In their discussion of multiliteracies and the implications of what Gee and his colleagues have termed “fast capitalism” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), Luke and Freebody (1997) raise persistent questions about who will get access to the new forms of writing and representations and how the traditional fractures of race, culture, class, gender, and sexuality will get reinscribed. As they explain:

The challenge then is not just one of equity of access (or lack of access) to such technologies and institutions, but also of the possibilities of using discourse and literacy to reinvent institutions, to critique and reform the rules for the conversion of cultural and textual capital in communities and workplaces, and to explore the possibilities of heteroglossic social contracts and hybrid cultural actions. The challenge is about what kinds of citizenship, public forums for discourse and difference are practicable and possible. (p. 9)

Gee and colleagues (1996) take up this challenge in their recent book, *The New Work Order*. They extend the notion of literacy as social practices to include their concept of sociotechnical practices, which they describe as “the design of technology and social relations within the workplace to facilitate productivity and commitment, sometimes in highly ‘indoctrinating’ ways” (p. 6). These researchers go on to write that while old forms and organizational structures of work may have been alienating, new workplaces are asking workers to invest themselves in their work, merging public and private lives, in ways that might be considered coercive. They raise a number of provocative questions that suggest a blurring of the lines separating literate practices in and out of school. These questions include: “How should we construe learning and knowledge in general in a world where the new capitalism progressively seeks to define what counts as learning and knowledge in a ‘knowledge economy’ made up of ‘knowledge workers’ doing ‘knowledge work’” (p. 23)?

The New Literacy Studies thus focus our attention to the shifting landscape of home, community, work, and schools and give us a language and set of theoretical constructs for describing the close connections between literacy practices and identities. Perhaps more than any other theoretical tradition, the NLS have embraced out-of-school contexts, almost to the exclusion of looking in schools, and have unabashedly valued out-of-school literacy practices as distinct from those associated with schools. At the same time, the close description of literacy practices in out-of-school contexts and the concurrent focus on how these practices are shaped by power and ideology lead us to look with fresh eyes at what kinds of literacy we teach in school and what we count as literate practices.

What would our conceptions of literacy be like had researchers such as Hymes, Heath, Scribner, Cole, Street, and Gee never ventured in their formulations outside of schools, either literally or figuratively? We believe that our understandings of literacy, literacy learning, and literacy “problems” would be narrower, less helpful and generative. We suspect that what we now acknowledge as appreciable differences in home and school language and literacy practices, we might still treat, knee-jerk fashion, as a lack or a deficit. We might yet be content to see literacy in monochrome, as singular, as neutral, as just a skill. We would surely be less savvy about the rainbow of literate practices that color the world and less aware of how, as social practices, literacies come stitched tight with activities, identities, and discourses. In the next chapter, in order to provide particular, on-the-ground instances of these and other theoretical insights, as well as to think through their implications, we turn to recent research in the traditions of the ethnography of literacy, activity theory, and the New Literacy Studies.

Note

1. We don't review here but want to acknowledge the important scholarship associated with “critical discourse analysis,” a field that, like the critical literacy area, is politically alert but uses the tools of discourse analysis to critique and challenge dominant institutional practices. See, for example, Fairclough (1995).

References

- Barton, D. (1991). The social nature of writing. In D. Barton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Writing in the community* (pp. 1-13). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Barton, D. (1994). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. London: Routledge.
- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (2000). Literacy practices. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 180–196). London: Routledge.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanic, R. (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.
- Basso, K. (1974). The ethnography of writing. In R. Bauman & J. Sherzer (Eds.), *Explorations in the ethnography of speaking* (pp. 425–432). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cazden, C. B. (1981). Four comments. In D. H. Hymes (Ed.), *Ethnographic monitoring of children's acquisition of reading/language arts skills in and out of the classroom*. Final report for the National Institute of Education, Philadelphia.
- Cazden, C. B., John, V. P., & Hymes, D. (Eds.). (1972). *Functions of language in the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clark, R., & Ivanic, R. (1997). *The politics of writing*. London: Routledge.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1984). *The making of a reader*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Cole, M. (1995). The supra-individual envelope of development: Activity and practice, situation and context. In J. J. Goodnow, P. J. Miller, & F. Kessel (Eds.), *Cultural practices as contexts for development* (pp. 105–118). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cole, M., Engeström, Y., & Vasquez, O. (1997). Introduction. In M. Cole, Y. Engeström, & O. Vasquez (Eds.), *Mind, culture, and activity: Seminal papers from the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition* (pp. 1–21). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cook-Gumperz, J. (1986). Literacy and schooling: An unchanging equation? In J. Cook-Gumperz (Ed.), *The social construction of literacy* (pp. 16–44). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Eisenhart, M. (in press). Changing conceptions of culture and ethnographic methodology: Recent thematic shifts and their implications for research on teaching. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *The handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- Engeström, Y. (1998, April). *Distinguishing individual action and collective activity in the study of organizational literacy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego.
- Engeström, Y., Miettinen, R., & Punamäki, R-L. (Eds.). (1999). *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. New York: Longman.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Seabury Press.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: Falmer.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). New people in new worlds: Networks, the new capitalism and schools. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures* (pp. 43–68). London: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P., Hull, G., & Lankshear, C. (1996). *The new work order: Behind the language of the new capitalism*. Boulder: Westview.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gilmore, P. (1983). Spelling “Mississippi”: Recontextualizing a literacy event. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 14(4), 235–256.
- Gilmore, P., & Glatthorn, A. A. (Eds.). (1982). *Children in and out of school: Ethnography and education*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Heath, S. B. (1981). Ethnography in education. In D. Hymes (Ed.), *Ethnographic monitoring of children’s acquisition of reading/language arts skills in and out of the classroom* (pp. 33–55). Final report for the National Institute of Education, Philadelphia.
- Heath, S. B. (1982). Protean shapes in literacy events: Ever-shifting oral and literate traditions. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Spoken and written language: Exploring orality and literacy* (pp. 91–118). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1986). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school. In B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), *Language socialization across cultures* (pp. 97–115). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Heller, C. E. (1997). *Until we are strong together: Women writers in the Tenderloin*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hornberger, N. H. (1995). Ethnography in linguistic perspective: Understanding school processes. *Language and Education*, 9(4), 233–248.
- Hornberger, N. H. (2001). Afterword: Multilingual literacies, literacy practices and the continua of biliteracy. In K. Jones & M. Martin-Jones (Eds.), *Multilingual literacies: Reading and writing different worlds* (pp. 353–367). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hymes, D. (1964). Introduction: Toward ethnographies of communication. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *The ethnography of communication* (pp. 1–34). Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
- Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations of sociolinguistics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hymes, D., (1981). *Ethnographic monitoring of children’s acquisition of reading/language arts skills in and out of the classroom*. Final report for the National Institute of Education, Philadelphia.
- Jacobs, E., & Jordan, C. (Eds.). (1993). *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (1997). Critical literacy and active citizenship. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practice* (pp. 95–124). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.

- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997). Critical literacy and the question of normativity: An introduction. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practice* (pp. 1-18). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Maybin, J. (2000). The New Literacy Studies: Context, intertextuality and discourse. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 197-209). London: Routledge.
- Miettinen, R. (1999). Transcending traditional school learning: Teachers' work and networks of learning. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory* (pp. 325-344). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92.
- Prinsloo, M., & Breier, M. (1996). *The social uses of literacy: Theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*. Bertsham, South Africa: SACHED Books.
- Rockhill, K. (1993). Gender, language and the politics of literacy. In B. V. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy* (pp. 156-175). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Scribner, S. (1997). Mind in action: Some characteristics of practical thought. In E. Tobach, R. J. Falmagne, M. B. Parlee, L. M. W. Martin, & A. S. Kapelman (Eds.), *Mind and social practice: Selected writings of Sylvia Scribner* (pp. 296-307). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shuman, A. (1986). *Storytelling rights: The uses of oral and written texts among urban adolescents*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1993a). (Ed.). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1993b). The new literacy studies: Guest editorial. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 16(2), 81-97.
- Street, B. V. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*. London: Longman.
- Street, B. V. (1996). Preface. In M. Prinsloo & M. Breier (Eds.), *The social uses of literacy: Theory and practice in contemporary South Africa* (pp. 1-9). Bertsham, South Africa: SACHED Books.
- Street, B. V. (2001). Literacy 'events' and literacy 'practices': Theory and practice in the 'New Literacy Studies.' In K. Jones & M. Martin-Jones (Eds.), *Multilingual literacies: Comparative perspectives on research and practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Street, J. C., & Street, B. V. (1991). The schooling of literacy. In D. Barton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Writing in the community* (pp. 106-131). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Szwed, J. F. (1981). The ethnography of literacy. In M. F. Whiteman (Ed.), *Writing:*

The nature, development, and teaching of written communication, part 1 (pp. 13-23). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Taylor, D., & Dorsey-Gaines, C. (1988). *Growing up literate: Learning from inner-city families*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Weinstein-Shr, G. (1993). Literacy and social process: A community in transition. In B. V. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy* (pp. 272-293). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Yin-ye Ko, D. (1989). *Toward a social history of women in seventeenth century China*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.