Roots of and Routes to a Concept of “Literacy”: Four Papers from A Problems Court Session

What is a Concept of Literacy?

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The following quotations reveal the multifaceted ways in which literacy is being thought about and discussed in public arenas and scholarly writing:

1. Literacy: There are no universal definitions and standards of literacy. . . . the most common definition--the ability to read and write at a specified age. . . . Low levels of literacy, and education in general, can impede the economic development of a country in the current rapidly changing, technology-driven world. (CIA, 1996)

2. Literacy, an essential aim of education in the modern world, is no autonomous, empty skill but depends upon literate culture. Like any other aspect of acculturation, literacy requires the early and continued transmission of specific information. (Hirsch, 1987, p. xvii)

3. There ended up being little room in such a curriculum--unless the inventive teacher created it--to explore the real stuff of literacy: conveying something meaningful, communicating information, creating narratives, shaping what we see and feel and believe into written language, listening to and reading stories, playing with the sounds of words. (Rose, 1989; p. 109)

4. In an age when most Americans get most of their information from television not textbooks, pictures not print, we need a wider definition of what it means to be literate. . . . Media Literacy, then, is an expanded information and communication skill that is responsive to the changing nature of information in our society. (Considine, 1995, p. i)

5. Every 8-year-old must be able to read; every 12-year-old must be able to log on to the Internet; every 18-year-old must be able to go to college; and every adult American must be able to keep on learning for a lifetime. (Clinton, 1996)

These few quotations reveal disparate notions of what literacy means; thus we cannot assume a common conceptual understanding of what it means to be or become literate.

Literacy is a concept that has a long and varied history. What people have meant by literacy and the value they place on it have changed over time. The terms literacy, literal, literally, literary, literate, literation, literati, and literature all have in common a meaning pertaining to
letters, which captures an early and to this day predominant meaning of literacy: knowledge of letters and the ability to read and write them.

Since this knowledge of letters is learned from someone, the concept literacy came to be associated with a condition respective to one’s education. Literacy and schooling were linked historically; along with the institutionalization of literacy came criteria for judging one’s state of literacy. But the criteria also change across time and culture, as reflected in changes in the measurement of literacy: from the ability to sign one’s name, to school attendance, to achievement tests, and so on. Furthermore, we can’t even assume that reading and writing always have been seen as necessary or valued components of education, even in our own western tradition. For example, in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (tran. 1937) Socrates rejects writing in favor of the spoken word because writing only has the appearance of wisdom, encourages forgetfulness, cannot answer questions or clarify itself, and can be misunderstood (Kaestle, 1991). With respect to reading, the eighteenth century had its own “literacy crisis,” although then the concern was too much rather than too little reading. These concerns were so great that some worried about the negative physical consequences of too much reading. Darton provides the following example (as cited in Kernan, 1990):

> Those who deplored [reading] did not simply condemn its effects on morals and politics; they feared it would damage public health. A 1795 tract listed the physical consequences of excessive reading: ‘Susceptibility to colds, headaches, weakening of the eyes, heat rashes, gout, arthritis, hemorrhoids, asthma, apoplexy, pulmonary disease, indigestion, blocking of the bowels, nervous disorder, migraines, epilepsy, hypochondria, and melancholy.’ (p. 130)

Similar contemporary concerns are echoed in discussions about watching too much TV and creating a generation of “couch potatoes.”

Today we read about a different literacy crisis in America (Bennett, 1992; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In a critique of this crisis mentality, Berliner and Biddle (1995) note conflicting claims: the *New York Times* reported in September 1993 that half of adults in the United States lack reading and mathematics abilities; that same month the *Washington Post* claimed that the literacy of 90 million people in the United States is deficient. The 1996 *CIA World Factbook* claims that the literacy rate for the United States is 97% while *Parade Magazine* in January 1997 reports that there are 44 million Americans who can’t read and an ad for Fast Track Reading Program tells us that only 25% of our nation’s children are able to read proficiently, and so it goes. Why are we bombarded with so many conflicting figures and how do we make sense of these? We argue that empirical data and conflicting claims, such as these, are worthless in the absence of a clear and consistent concept of “literacy” and, therefore, the nature of this crisis remains unclear. One obstacle to clarity is that the concept seems to be expanding. As evidence we find terms such as: emergent literacy, cultural literacy, classical literacy, occupational literacy, new workplace literacy, critical literacy, math literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, multicultural literacy, even prose literacy and document literacy, to name a few. With this kind of expansion, it becomes unclear what literacy means or which of its possible meanings one is referring to. But getting clearer is exactly what educators need to do, given the social and political ramifications of this concept.
Metaphorical Perspectives of Literacy

Sylvia Scribner (1984/1988) proposes four metaphors that are helpful in tracking the evolution of the concept of literacy and in understanding the different, even conflicting, contemporary perspectives about literacy. The most commonly applied metaphor is literacy as adaptation. In this view literacy embodies whatever literate activities a society or culture values at a particular time. For example in western culture, early writing primarily served the purpose of storing and retrieving information that originated in speech and had been committed to memory--not for the expression of original ideas. Here the text served as a record of previous discussion, and literacy was a tool used to decode or encode a record. But one need not have engaged in the literate activity to access the information; one already knew the information or learned it in discussion. Later, religious texts came to be considered the embodiment of the message, and literate activity was associated with accurate decoding and memory of texts. Here the text contained THE message that any reader with skill could (and should!) decipher and come to know.

More recently, texts have come to be viewed as a stimulus for engagement and interpretation of a discourse that exceeds the physical boundary of the text. Interpretation, analysis, reflection in addition to decoding comprise literate activity. Mike Rose (1989) serves as an example when he describes critical literacy as “framing an argument or taking someone else’s argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying a theory to disparate phenomena, and so on” (p. 188).

Today some argue that a definition of “text” should include media other than printed material; that is, TV, movies, and other visual images are seen as “texts to be read.” If we accept the view of TV as a text to be decoded, interpreted, and analyzed, then we can begin to understand the expansion of the term literacy to embody “media literacy.” These changes in how people understand literacy reveal changes in how they understand “text” and the relationship between “reading” and text.

The metaphor of literacy as adaptation brings with it distinctions about levels of literate activity, and there are many, which become other elements that need to be understood. Asheim (1987) recognizes low and high literacy; Wormald (1977), pragmatic and cultural literacy. Richard Venezky (1990) distinguishes basic literacy from functional literacy from required literacy. Carl Kaestle and colleagues (Kaestle, 1985/1988, 1991; Stedman & Kaestle, 1991) describe levels of rudimentary, marginal, functional, and academic literacy, and label people as marginally literate or highly literate. Cipolla (1969) adds semi- and quasi-literate to the mix. Anthropologists talk of non-literate and preliterate societies, and so on. To develop a clear concept of literacy requires that we pay attention to how related concepts, such as text, levels of literacy, power, identity, and culture are understood.

Scribner’s second metaphor is literacy as power. Paulo Freire’s (1970a; 1970b; 1978; 1993) work is the best representation of this metaphor. He argues that literacy creates a critical consciousness through which a community can analyze its conditions of social existence and engage in effective action for social transformation. Another illustration of literacy as power can be found in attitudes and policies regarding literacy of women and minorities: Literacy for women has been discouraged; laws were passed in the south that forbade teaching slaves to read.
and write. Bremner gives as an example (as cited in McGill-Franzen, 1993) an Alabama Law in 1832 that stated “Any person who shall endeavor to teach a person of color to spell, read, or write, shall be fined five hundred dollars” (p. 29). What were these legislators afraid of? Here, literacy clearly is viewed as a means to attain power and therefore as something dangerous which should be denied slaves, women, and any others perceived as a threat to existing power relations. In this perspective, literacy is seen either as disruptive or corruptive to the status quo. Plato banished the poets and the Amish (Fishman, 1988) banish particular books, technology, and ways of reading for similar reasons.

The third metaphor Scribner poses is literacy as grace. Puritans believed that reading the bible was inextricably tied to salvation. As a result, children were forced to learn to read and write as soon as possible, to facilitate their salvation in the advent of premature death. The notion of literacy as grace entails the idea that becoming literate means becoming a better person. The idea of education as a means to improve one’s soul is as old as Socrates’ *Apology* (tran. 1937) and as contemporary as Oakeshott (1972):

> Education is not learning to do this or that more proficiently; it is acquiring in some measure an understanding of a human condition in which the ‘fact of life’ is continuously illuminated by a ‘quality of life.’ It is learning how to be at once an autonomous and civilized subscriber to a human life. (p. 71)

One might even conceive of E. D. Hirsch’s notion of cultural literacy as a current example of literacy as grace, although a kind of academic and cultural grace that lacks the depth and humanity envisioned by either Oakeshott or Socrates. One must recognize, however, in all of these examples that the grace one achieves is not that of a hermit but rather that of a participant in a cultural community.

The fourth perspective Scribner offers, and the one she favors, is literacy as social participation, and it seems to combine elements of the other three. This point of view is represented by James Gee (1990). Literacy is more than just reading and writing; it is part of a larger discourse, which is a way of being and part of one’s identity. One learns a discourse by being enculturated into its social practices (which have been shaped historically) through scaffolding and social participation with people in the social community. Culturally, these literate activities vary and so does the concept of what it means to be literate (Scribner & Cole, 1981/1988). Andrea Fishman’s (1988) analysis of Amish literate practices serves as an example:

> Until I began moving in Old Order society, I knew that, like avocational literacies, various occupational literacies existed, and I knew I was illiterate when confronted by computer, engineering, or medical texts, but those seemed tangential to the one central literacy, the kind I believed I possessed. . . . As I got to know the Fishers, however, I learned there are different core literacies as well as different occupational ones. . . . It took Anna Fisher to teach me that literacy truly is a cultural practice, not a decontextualized, universal set of skills and abilities automatically transferable across contexts. (p. 3)

In this brief quotation, we suspect that Fishman has captured a widespread view about literacy. First that there are “multiple literacies.” Second that any conception of literacy is in
some sense human and historical, definable within a historically human context. Third that one’s identity as a person is tied in some fundamental ways to one’s conception of a “core literacy.”

Fishman presents a fourth assertion concerning literacy, one that again we suspect is widely held:

‘What literacy is’ is impossible to determine, for literacy is neither a monolithic condition nor a decontextualized set of discrete skills transferable across all contexts. Therefore, measuring Amish literacy against standards established by some other culture’s definition--even those of academia--would not only be ethnocentric but pointless. The degree of literacy attained by an Amish individual can only be meaningfully assessed when measured against Amish literacy standards, against what counts as literacy for the Amish themselves. (p. 133)

Just as how we conceive of “text” influences how we understand “literacy,” so does how we conceive of “culture.” Culture is a concept that is increasingly qualified and divided (e.g., gang culture, punk culture, culture of the workplace). When literate practices are seen as cultural practices then occupational and avocational literacies, as well as “core literacies,” become cultural contexts, and judgments from another “culture” become, in Fishman’s words, “ethnocentric” and “pointless.” Punk or rap “cultural literacy” cannot be judged according to literacy standards drawn only from literati.

There are intellectual, theoretical, and educational implications of continuing to multiply “literacies,” not all of them positive. The multiplication of literacies, especially within a school context, has the consequence of focusing attention on a narrow sets of specific skills and information, at the loss of acquiring a common set of critical, intellectual and moral dispositions, habits, character traits and attitudes. We can see this in connection with the push for “computer literacy.” The emphasis at all levels of schooling, including universities, is upon acquiring specific skills in using computer technology, skills that proponents of the alleged “literacy” claim are necessary for both individual and societal competence and competition in the market place. This emphasis follows a pervasive pattern in schools of focusing on “productive skills” instead of understanding. We need only look at what happens to the visual and performing arts in schools to find evidence of this. The idea that these arts are valuable aspects of education for all students is rarely even considered, and those areas become reserved only for students with the desire and talent to produce works of art or play a musical instrument.

When literate practices are identified almost exclusively as productive skills or competencies, and the sum total of these “practices” becomes the concept “literacy,” then there is a clear danger that “literacy” becomes meaningless. A contemporary example of this is how practices associated with technological advancements are being conceived of as forms of literacy. No doubt the Gutenberg press had a major influence on the concept of literacy (Manguel, 1996). And we hear similar arguments connected to the development of computer technology. However, there is an interesting disanalogy worth exploring. The Gutenberg press made available to a vast audience writings that heretofore had been confined to an elite few. Yet no one suggested that a part of this expanding literacy included knowing how to operate a printing press, or how to bind books. Why is the invention of computer technology different in this respect? Should this be the case with computers--to demand that all students know how the
tool itself operates? Why should knowing how to operate a computer be deemed a form of “literacy”? Here is one of the consequences of multiplying literacies: If there is computer literacy, then why not welding literacy, sewing machine literacy, #2 pencil literacy? The concept of literacy has lost any normative, guiding force for teaching.

It is also critical to recognize (and here Fishman is right on the mark) that literacy is not simply about some rudimentary skill level of reading and writing, or simply about increased access to information. Literacy is about our stance toward the world, toward others and toward ourselves. The Gutenberg press did not just make it more efficient to print books and therefore increase access to them. It affected people’s views of themselves, others and the world around them through reading the printed word. Computers too are not just about increasing the efficiency of access to information. Relying on computer and telecommunications technology will change who we are. It is troubling that the value of this change (good or bad) seldom is being questioned (Birkerts, 1994; Stoll, 1995).

Contrary to Fishman’s (1988) assertion that “what literacy is” is impossible to determine” (p. 133), we argue that if literacy is intimately tied to peoples’ views of themselves, others, and the world around them; and if literacy is to have a normative and guiding force for teachers; then it is necessary to develop a clear and coherent concept of what literacy means. In developing such a concept we recognize that judgments about what counts as being and becoming literate are inevitable. Furthermore we recognize that judgments about literacy are contextual and value laden and are linked in some instances to historic and contemporary abuses of power, leading some to suggest that we should forego all judgments concerning what it means to be literate. A similar perspective can be found regarding making judgments of literary worth. We think Denby (1996) has captured a distinction oftentimes overlooked:

The left should stop misstating the issue of elitism; it should stop confusing the literary hierarchy and the social hierarchy. The two must be disentangled. As the late Irving Howe liked to say: To believe that some books and traditions are more worthy than others is not to endorse the inequality of American society. A literary judgment may represent class prejudice, but it is naive or dishonest to assume it represents nothing more than class prejudice. People who deny the power of aesthetic experience or the possibility of disinterested judgment may well have cynical and careerist reasons for doing so. (p. 461)

Although Denby is talking here specifically of literary judgment, the same point can be made concerning judgments about literacy. Fishman’s denial that we can define literacy is a refusal to make a judgment; a refusal grounded in the belief that all such judgments must actually be reflections of class, ethnic, or racial prejudice. A “relativistic” stance such as this leads to the same result as a “conservative” belief that only if we are in the possession of absolute, immutable and ahistorical standards can we make non-prejudiced judgments concerning what should count as literacy--in both the term literacy is rendered meaningless. The latter position leads to an inflexible and dogmatic concept of literacy. The former position leaves us without any normative concept of literacy. We believe one possible explanation for such a relativistic stance toward literacy is, as the Denby quotation suggests, a failure to make a distinction between a concept of literacy and the existence and maintenance of social injustices. However, if
literacies multiply, and if the stance taken toward this conceptual multiplication is that internal standards are the ONLY valid measure of literacy achieved, then only power and prejudice are left as guides for judging. And that seems a likely means to maintaining inequalities and injustices. Is this what we want to teach prospective teachers about literacy and education?

A way out of this dilemma we believe is to recognize a second distinction between a concept of literacy and instantiations of literate practice. We think much confusion comes from not making this distinction--Fishman included. As a way to clarify the distinction we are proposing, consider “cooking” as an analogous concept. Core elements for a concept of cooking would include: the preparation of food, the use of heat, and the use of a variety of tools, to name a few. The core elements allow us to distinguish cooking from “building” or “farming,” which are concepts that contain a distinct set of core elements. It is these core elements that allow us to judge what is and is not “cooking.” The existence of these core elements, however, does not rule out a variety of cooking practices. For example, the kinds of foods prepared, the ways of heating, and the tools used vary widely across cultures. It ought to be possible and even desirable to conceive of literacy in a similar way; that is identify its core elements, yet allow for variations in the ways in which these core elements become realized in practice. We should not claim that only certain literate practices are valued irrespective of cultural and historical context. (This is where we get into trouble comparing across cultures.) But we also should not make the claim that all practices are literate practices--although value is determined by a social group, a culture. And finally we should not claim that there are no elements to a concept of literacy that would be central, core, and therefore in essence universal. It is important for literacy educators to explore these issues and develop a concept of literacy that holds some meaning.

References


Media Literacy: The Practice of Reading Popular Culture

Donna Alvermann

At least three of Scribner’s (1984/1988) metaphorical perspectives on literacy, in general, lend themselves to a discussion of media literacy, or what I am calling (after Barthes, 1972) the practice of “reading” popular culture. The metaphors—literacy as adaptation, literacy as social participation, and literacy as power—apply equally well to media literacy practices. The ability to read a wide range of textual forms in media, such as television, video, popular fiction, magazines, newspapers, popular music, and computer games, is an adaptation of what has historically been deemed necessary and sufficient for functioning in a literate society. In today’s highly technical world, being literate entails knowing how to access information from a variety of print and nonprint texts and making judgments as to its accuracy and worth. Along these lines, Carmen Luke (1997), an Australian educator who has written at length on media literacy and cultural studies, describes the adaptive skills necessary for reading texts from popular culture as being primarily concerned with making students critical consumers of media messages.

Another of Scribner’s (1984/1988) metaphors—literacy as social participation—argues for a perspective on reading various textual forms of popular culture that takes into account our ways of being in the world. These ways of being, or what the sociolinguist James Gee (1996) refers to as Discourses with a capital D to distinguish them from regular conversations, are our identity kits. They allow us to recognize and be recognized by others as having certain distinguishing characteristics. Each of us is simultaneously a member of several different Discourses; for example, as authors of these papers we are at the same time teachers, researchers, parents, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, and so on. By donning our different identity kits as the occasion merits, we demonstrate that we have been enculturated into “doing” certain social practices, including, but not limited to, reading popular culture.

Viewing identity as a process rather than a category enables us to imagine possibilities for escaping the humanist structures in which we constantly struggle with our own and others’ inclinations to engage in binary thought processes. McClaren (1995), in quoting from Homi Bhabha, points out that identity formation (whether of gender, culture, or some other socially constructed category) can never be fixed:

Identity formation needs to occur in what Homi Bhabha calls the ‘third space of translation.’ Translation requires that identities . . . be seen as decentered structures that are constituted only in relation to otherness. . . . Otherness always intervenes to prevent the subject from ‘fixing’ itself in a closed system of meaning. . . . (p. 109)

Poststructural theories of identity suggest that there is no core, essential self—a self with a fixed gender, race, social class, and so on—that remains the same throughout time. Rather, identity is produced within relationships and therefore shifts and reforms as we construct ourselves and are constructed in relation to all the different others in our lives (Butler, 1992). It is this shifting and reforming in relation to others that makes it possible to describe media literacy as social participation. Using this metaphor refutes the familiar notion of reading as an
isolated encounter between a single reader and the text he or she is attempting to understand. As British lecturers David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green (1994) have so aptly stated, making sense of the media entails understanding how “individual and collective identities are defined and negotiated . . . [and how] in establishing our own tastes and preferences [vis-a-vis the media], we are simultaneously defining the meanings of our own social lives and positions” (p. 38) in relation to others. For it is this process that allows each of us to interpret media images and information on the basis of what we know and want to know.

A point worth bearing in mind about the practice of media literacy is that from a social constructivist point of view, meaning does not lie in things (e.g., TV commercials, newspapers ads, Madonna, or events such as Princess Di’s funeral). Nor does it lie with the author, producer, sculptor, or TV commentator; that is, meaning cannot be reduced to the intentions of its originator for the very reason that language is a social phenomenon and requires shared understandings. These shared understandings are produced within language or whatever language-like system we choose to use in representing the concepts that we want to communicate. Thinking of media literacy from a social constructionist perspective, then, frees us from the more traditional view that young people are the dupes of popular culture in all its many textual forms. Rather than spending time and effort on inoculating students against the influence of the media, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) argue that we should be raising “broad questions about how young people read and use popular cultural texts, about how we might gain access to these processes, and how we might conceptualize them” (p. 18).

Finally, Scribner’s (1984/1988) metaphor, literacy as power, is useful in thinking about the research studies we would need to do if we were to address the broad questions Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) would have us ask about young people’s interpretation and use of popular cultural texts. That power relations are bound up in knowledge production, particularly in terms of media audiences, is a given. However, in cyberspace where gender identities are often intentionally masked as a means of blurring boundaries between the powerful and the not-so-powerful, it is possible to study a world where gender, race, social class, and a host of other identity markers cannot be read off the surface of our texts (Lumby, 1997). With such markers concealed, there are powerful lessons to be learned about how differences are “read” and acted upon. It is conceivable, even, that by reinventing traditional forms of knowledge and power through media literacy studies, we might eventually find answers leading to a more democratic and socially just world.

References


Defining Literacy: A Caution from a Critical Conscience

Cheri Foster Triplett

No doubt, my own opportunities to access literacy as a white middle-class female have helped me create the critical conscience through which I analyze the social/political implications of this literacy discussion. In the endeavor to discuss what literacy is, the discourse itself is linked to the power language that I'm seeking to deconstruct. As literacy educators, we seek to multiply our literacy constructions or narrow our definitions and thus participate in the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language (Bakhtin, 1981). Perhaps in our attempt to define and conceptualize the term "literacy," we've fallen victim to our perceived authority on the issue. As we seek to define literacy, we draw lines and create boundaries. We name who is literate and who is illiterate. Our definitions have powerful assumptions, implications, and consequences that are often social and political in nature.

Unlike Fishman (1988), I am not suggesting that we cannot say what literacy is. I am suggesting that we (a certain privileged group in society) have been saying what literacy is and is not for centuries. Furthermore, these dominant conceptualizations of literacy, tied irrevocably to literacy practice, have been used as a means of social and political domination--literacy as power (Scribner, 1984/1988).

A critical look at history reveals a literacy of elitism. In many western countries, opportunities to read and write were slowly relinquished to the masses through schooling. Western governments valued literacy for the purpose of transmitting religion, citizenship, and other cultural responsibilities (Christie, 1990). In the United States, "Americanization" was the goal of compulsory education in order to assimilate the immigrant population into the language and culture (Lave, 1996). In his critical look at Brazilian and Third World history, Freire (1970) explains that the dominant groups in society sought to communicate for the purpose of "exercising a domesticating influence" (p.112). He argues that language "cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another . . ." (p.70). Freire describes literacy and thought as interdependent; our human participation in language and literacy differentiates us from animals and forms our abilities to think critically.

This notion that thought and language are interdependent suggests a critical question about our literacy histories. If a dominant group seeks to control literacy, isn't that group likewise seeking to control thought? This question raises a plethora of other questions related to our literacy definitions and practices--past, present and future. This relationship between thought, language and power may seem Foucauldian and unnecessarily philosophical to some literacy educators. Perhaps a consideration of how our current literacy notions translate into pedagogical practice will help to amplify this relationship between language and power.

Delpit (1988) states:

I have come to understand that power plays a critical role in our society and in our educational system. The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as
the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential. Indeed, in the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self. It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged. When one 'we' gets to determine standards for all 'wes,' then some 'wes' are in trouble!" (p. xv)

If the purpose of schooling continues to be cultural transmission, we must consider whose culture is being transmitted. Lave (1996) explains that "it is the transmitter's point of view that is implicitly privileged" (p.154) in this transmission view of schooling.

Transmission of literacy in our schools certainly values the literacy practices of the mainstream, white, middle class. Culturally diverse students may come to school five years behind in these valued mainstream literacy practices. The consequences for these culturally diverse students are often placement in remediation programs (Delpit, 1988). Lave (1996) suggests that this assimilation/transmission cycle of schooling actually perpetuates the social class divisions in our country. Heath (1991) explains that literacy is for communication in the groups to which we belong and that nonmainstream students participate in many literate acts in their homes and communities. However, these literate acts are not valued in schools. She argues that the literacy behaviors of the mainstream, white, middle class, which have long dominated our education system, may no longer be adequate in today's diverse society.

As our society continues to diversify, it is necessary to consider the future of literacy. Our tools of communication are likewise diversifying and we are faced with technological literacies. As we consider our past and present privileged practices of literacy, it becomes necessary to ask who has access to our technologies of reproduction (Hodder, 1994). Are our latest communication/literacy tools accessible to the masses? I ask this question as I sit in my middle-class home word processing on my new Macintosh Power PC.

References


In the opening paper of this Problems Court, Trathen and Dale explore Scribner's (1984/1988) four metaphors of literacy. The metaphor of social participation, Scribner's favorite, is the newest, and from our perspective, the most powerful. While traditional views of literacy have always been related to reading and writing skill, theorists recently have begun to argue that what makes one literate is the ability to participate in social practice. Gee (1990), for example, argues "any authentic definition [of literacy] quickly leads us away from reading and writing (literacy as traditionally construed) and even away from language, and towards social relationships and social practices" (p. 137). Historically, reading and writing have changed social relationships, as well as the shared cognition of social groups. In this paper we will provide some speculation on the nature of these changes.

In order to explore the concept of literacy as social participation, it is necessary to think more precisely about the nature of the social groups that require literate activity. Rogoff (e.g., 1994) and Lave and Wenger (e.g., 1991) provide the concept of "community of practice" (CoP) as a way of defining how learning occurs in social settings. This concept is powerful in the way it focuses on learning and other cognitive activity as a function of participation in the community. Five criteria define the CoP. First, a CoP has a set of public goals that are co-constructed and agreed to by its members. Next, a CoP possesses an array of tools, which enable a high degree of communication among members. Third, a CoP is comprised of a wide range of expertise in its membership, ranging from novice to expert; a novice is inducted into the community and becomes more expert through both formal and informal apprenticeships. Fourth, the co-construction of goals, high levels of communication, and induction of new members sustain the CoP. Finally, a CoP is held together by its discourse. An examination of its discourse will reveal its membership (community), and how the discourse functions in meaning making (epistemology), persuading (rhetoric), and constructing power relationships (ideology). In summary, a CoP is a network of individuals webbed together through a common language, set of tools, and public goals.

One of the emerging assumptions of the CoP concept is that the CoP itself must be viewed as a learning system, and that literacy must be defined in terms of both the individual activity (the traditional view) and of the collective activity of the CoP. Literacy activity on the part of the individual is always within the context of the community, and communities, just like individual learners, can be viewed as more or less literate. In other words, the focus is on literacy "outside" the head.

From this perspective, literacy is a package containing several elements. One element revolves around tool usage. Members of a CoP know how, when and why to use tools that are appropriate for meeting the goals of the community. A second element is the cognitive activity that underlies tool use. Third, tool use and cognitive activity co-occur during goal directed social activity inherent in the CoP. Fourth, cognitive activity is a function of the Discourse (Gee, 1990) of the CoP; that is, language is the vehicle for thinking in the community. Finally, participation
through language use forms the attitudes and beliefs that are the basis for personal identity with the CoP. As an example, participating in the community of medical doctors requires the use professional tools, such as reference materials like the *Physicians’ Desk Reference*. This requires a particular skill in knowing how to use the tool itself (i.e., reading). In addition, it engages the doctor in a particular way of thinking and language use: To be a doctor, you must both think and talk like one. Skill use, ways of thinking, and language use are embedded in the practices of the medical community. One develops the identity of a doctor by engaging in these practices. Becoming literate in the Discourse of the CoP (Gee, 1990), then, means that in order to move into full participation in the CoP, one must acquire tool use skills, ways of thinking, language, attitudes and beliefs of expert members of the community.

A question that now arises is what kind of activity counts as "literate"? One way to address this question is to make a distinction between "low road" and "high road" learning (Salomon & Perkins, 1989; 1998). From our point of view, it is high road learning that requires literacy. Low road learning involves relatively "mindless," automatic learning, characterized by a relatively low level of awareness about the learning processes involved. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of "spontaneous concepts" also captures this idea; knowledge "acquired" in low road learning is highly contextualized in everyday activity with little need for reflection on the part of the learner or learning system. This simplifies the learning task by providing context for understanding and remembering significant concepts. However, this also limits the transferability of knowledge; since little reflection is involved, the use of knowledge acquired or constructed in low road learning is often not available in novel contexts.

In contrast, knowledge from high road learning is characterized by its transferability. Mindful management of the learning process, conscious abstraction of principles, and explicit formulation of rule governed systems define high road learning. Vygotsky (1978) juxtaposes "scientific concepts" to the spontaneous concepts of low road learning. The power of high road learning lies in its abstract quality, which allows making connections from one situation to another. High road learning tends to be abstract and verbal; however, these qualities are also a weakness, since knowledge on the high road is often disconnected from contexts that make it meaningful and memorable in the first place.

We speculate that the evolution of communities of practice was based on a shift toward practices that required high road learning. For example, early healing practices often involved traditions where knowledge was codified and passed along through rituals. As communities could "afford" to concentrate fully on developing "systems" of healing, more and more complex understandings about medicine were developed. In order to organize these concepts into knowledge systems, another kind of "tool" was needed. Print, and its associated skills, thinking and social practices emerged. Literacy was never a means unto itself. Rather, it served the purpose of allowing one to engage in high road learning, and allowed CoPs to develop, communicate and save complex concepts. Hence, more advanced CoPs privileged reading and writing in order to engage in its Discourse. But reading and writing are only tools that mediate a deeper level of thought and different kinds of social activity. It's the package of skill in tool use, high road learning and thinking, and social participation that defines literacy, and creates what Gee (1990) calls a "social identity kit."
As cultures evolved, additional tools for engaging in high road learning and developing complex concepts emerged: mathematics, scientific inquiry and most recently computers and telecommunications. New ways of participating in culture have led to different literate practices. By looking at the practices we can track the evolution of literacy historically. We can also compare literacy practices of different cultures. These comparisons provide different instantiations of literacy, but we maintain there is an underlying set of core elements that constitute literacy: skill in tool use, cognitive activity, and language use embedded in meaningful, goal directed social activity. All of these elements form one's identity in a community. We believe that looking at literacy from this perspective will help educators bring clarity to their conceptual understanding and instruction.

References


