

Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy: approaches from New Literacy Studies

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What has come to be termed the 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1996) represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focussing not so much on literacy as a 'technology of the mind' (cf Goody, 1968, 1977) or as a set of skills, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space but also contested in relations of power. In this paper I will outline the main positions offered by NLS, consider their relationship to earlier anthropological interest in literacy and take account of recent critiques regarding 'the limits of the local' that have implications for both ethnographies of literacy and for anthropological interest in this field. I conclude with a brief account of the contiguous field of Multimodality and ask how these two fields relate to and offer a way of commenting upon the debates about 'media' in the EASA media anthropology network.

To address these issues ethnographically, literacy researchers have constructed a conceptual apparatus that both coins some new terms and gives new meanings to some old ones. My own work, for instance, begins with the notion of multiple literacies, makes a distinction between 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy (Street, 1984) and develops a distinction between literacy events and literacy practices (Street, 1988). The standard view in many fields, from schooling to development programmes, works from the assumption that literacy in itself - autonomously - will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. Introducing literacy to poor, 'illiterate' people, villages, urban youth etc. will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their 'illiteracy' in the first place. I refer to this as an 'autonomous' model of literacy. The model, I suggest, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have these benign effects. Research in NLS challenges this view and suggests that in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions.

The autonomous approach is simply imposing western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures or within a country those of one class or cultural group onto others. The alternative, ideological model of literacy, offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model - it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. It is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others (Gee 1990; Besnier & Street 1994). The argument about social literacies (Street 1995) suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that 'literacy' can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced afterwards.

How does the argument about literacy currently sit within the field of social anthropology? Although much of what I term 'New Literacy Studies' has, in fact, drawn upon ethnographic perspectives and on anthropological theory, in order to challenge the 'autonomous' model, nevertheless the most influential presentation of the model has probably been that of the social anthropologist Jack Goody. In a number of publications since the 1960s he has attempted to outline what he sees as the importance, 'potentialities' and 'consequences' of literacy. His views have been adopted by, amongst others, fellow anthropologists as the authoritative position on the subject, particularly where they themselves have devoted little explicit attention to the question of literacy. This implicit acceptance leads, I argue, to problems not only in the representations of literacy itself made by these anthropologists but also in their more general accounts of social change, religious thought and ideology in the societies they describe. It is, therefore, important for

anthropological work in general that the concepts underlying Goody's representation of literacy should be made explicit and their implications followed through.

Goody's work extends the scope of the autonomous model across grand sweeps of culture and history (Goody, 1968, 1977). He would explicitly replace the theory of a 'great divide' between 'primitive' and 'modern' culture, which had been employed in earlier anthropological theory and which is now discredited, with the distinction between 'literate' and 'non-literate'. He believes that this distinction is similar to, but more useful than, that traditionally made between 'logical' and 'pre-logical'. This, he claims, is because of the inherent qualities of the written word: writing makes the relationship between a word and its referent more general and abstract; it is less closely connected with the peculiarities of time and place than is the language of oral communication. Writing is 'closely connected to', 'fosters', or even 'enforces' the development of 'logic', the distinction of myth from history, the elaboration of bureaucracy, the shift from 'little communities' to complex cultures, the emergence of scientific thought and institutions, and even the growth of democratic political processes. Goody does, in fact, enter caveats against taking these views too literally and, in particular, claims that he is not arguing a determinist case. But the language, the texture of the argument, and the treatment of the ethnography tend to override such warnings and justify the claim that Goody does lay himself open to being interpreted in this way.

I argue that Goody overstates the significance that can be attributed to literacy in itself; understates the qualities of oral communication; sets up unhelpful and often untestable polarities between, for instance, the 'potentialities' of literacy and 'restricted' literacy; lends authority to a language for describing literacy practices that often contradicts his own stated disclaimers of the 'strong' or determinist case; and polarises the difference between oral and literate modes of communication in a way that gives insufficient credit to the reality of 'mixed' and interacting modes. Despite the density and complexity of social detail in Goody's descriptions of literacy practice, there is a peculiar lack of sociological imagination in his determination to attribute to literacy *per se* characteristics which are clearly those of the social order in which it is found.

I also argue that the use by social anthropologists in particular of the 'autonomous' model of literacy, notably in the Goody version of it, affects not only their representation of literacy practices in specific societies but also their descriptions of the processes of social change and the nature of religious and political ideology in those societies. Clammer's work on Fiji, for instance, assumes uncritically many of the tenets of the 'autonomous' model of

literacy and illustrates what this can lead to for the unwary anthropologist (1976). His unconscious adoption of the 'autonomous' model is revealed in his use of the concept of 'ritualised' literacy. This leads to representations of the uses of literacy in Fiji in terms which emphasise native simple-mindedness and lack of 'logic' at the expense of accounts of the real political and ideological significance of the response to colonisation. The model misleads us as to what literacy meant to the participants themselves in the social upheavals that were taking place at that time and in which it played a significant part. In anthropological terms, the 'autonomous' model of literacy entails 'intellectualist' assumptions about the nature of 'primitive' thought which have generally been rejected in the discipline. Although anthropologists have in other contexts helped to clarify to some extent the theoretical foundations for descriptions of non-European religion and belief, they have left largely untheorised their representation of the uses and consequences of literacy. This leads to adverse consequences for their general descriptions and analyses of social change and of unfamiliar belief systems. The 'autonomous' model of literacy, then, leads anthropologists like Clammer to descriptions which are in conflict with the explicit anthropological assumptions on which their studies otherwise claim to be based. Clammer's own later work in fact rejects these assumptions and represents an important example of the shift towards the 'ideological' model (1980). A re-analysis of some of the material on cargo cults in terms of the 'ideological' model of literacy rather than the 'autonomous' model is an important task awaiting anthropologists.

More recently anthropologists such as Maurice Bloch and Johnny Parry have indeed taken a more sophisticated view of the role of literacy in society.

Literacy Events and Literacy Practices

It follows from the analysis above that researchers in NLS employing an 'ideological' model of literacy would find it problematic to simply use the term 'literacy' as their unit or object of study. Literacy comes already loaded with ideological and policy pre-suppositions that make it hard to do ethnographic studies of the variety of literacies across contexts. So we have found it helpful to develop alternative terms. I have developed a working distinction between 'literacy events' and literacy practices' (Street, 1988) that I suggest is helpful for both research and in teaching situations. Barton (1994) notes that the term *literacy events* derived from the sociolinguistic idea of speech events. It was first used in relation to literacy by A.B. Anderson et. al. (1980) who defined it as an occasion during which a person 'attempts to comprehend

graphic signs' (1980, pp 59-65). Shirley Brice Heath, further characterised a 'literacy event' as 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' (Heath, 1982, p. 93). I have employed the phrase 'literacy practices' (Street, 1984, p. 1) as a means of focussing upon 'social practices and conceptions of reading and writing', although I later elaborated the term to take account both of 'events' in Heath's sense and of the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (Street, 1988). David Barton, in an Introduction to his edited volume on *Writing in the Community* (Barton & Ivanic, 1991, p.1) attempted to clarify these debates about literacy events and literacy practices and in a later collaborative study of everyday literacies in Lancaster, England, Barton and Hamilton begin their account with further refinements of the two phrases (1998, p. 6). Baynham (1995) entitled his book *Literacy Practices: investigating literacy in social contexts*. Similarly Prinsloo and Breier's volume on *The Social Uses of Literacy* (1996), which is a series of case studies of literacy in South Africa, used the concept of 'events' but then extended it to 'practices', describing the everyday uses and meanings of literacy amongst, for instance, urban taxi drivers, struggle activists in settlements, rural workers using diagrams to build carts and those involved in providing election materials for mainly non-literate voters. The concept of literacy practices in these and other contexts attempts to handle the events and the patterns of activity around literacy events but to *link* them to something broader of a cultural and social kind. More recently I have further elaborated the distinction with respect to work on literacies and multilingualism, in an important edited volume by Martin-Jones and Jones (2000). As part of that broadening, for instance I noted that we bring to a literacy event concepts, social models regarding what the nature of the event is and that make it work and give it meaning. Literacy practices, then, refer to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts. A key issue, at both a methodological and an empirical level, then, is how can we characterise the shift from observing literacy events to conceptualising literacy practices.

A wealth of 'ethnographies of literacy' has emerged deploying and developing these and other key concepts in a variety of international contexts, including the UK (Barton, D & Hamilton, M 1998); the USA (Collins, J 1995; Heath, 1983); South Africa (Prinsloo, M & Breier, M 1996); Iran (Street, 1986); India (Mukherjee and Vasanta, 2003); Mexico (Kalman, 1999); S. America (Aikman, 1999); and multiple 'development' contexts (Street, 2001). The strength and significance of the approach and the considerable literature it has generated is attested by a recent spate of critical accounts that have addressed some of the problems raised by it both in general theoretical terms and, more

specifically, for practice in educational contexts. I firstly summarise some of the theoretical critiques and then turn to the applications to policy and practice that they entail.

'The Limits of the Local'

Brandt & Clinton, K (2002) have recently commented on 'the limits of the local' apparent in many NLS studies. They argue that NLS ought to be more prepared to take account of the relatively 'autonomous' features of literacy without succumbing to the autonomous model with its well documented flaws: this would involve, for instance, recognising the extent to which literacy does often come to 'local' situations from outside and brings with it both skills and meanings that are larger than the emic perspective favoured by NLS can always detect. Whilst acknowledging the value of the social practice approach, they:

wonder if the new paradigm sometimes veers too far in a reactive direction, exaggerating the power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes. Literacy practices are not typically invented by their practitioners. Nor are they independently chosen or sustained by them. Literacy in use more often than not serves multiple interests, incorporating individual agents and their locales into larger enterprises that play out away from the immediate scene. (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 1)

They also point out the important and powerful role of consolidating technologies that can destabilize the functions, uses, values and meanings of literacy anywhere. These technologies generally come from outside of the local context: there is more going on locally, then, than just local practices. Whilst the field has learned much from the recent turn to "local literacies", they fear that 'something [might] be lost when we ascribe to local contexts responses to pressures that originate in distant decisions, especially when seemingly local appropriations of literacy may in fact be culminations of literate designs originating elsewhere?'

I would agree with most of Brandt & Clinton's characterisation here of the relationship between the local and the 'distant' and indeed it is the focus on this relationship, rather than on one or other of the sites, that characterises the best of NLS. Brandt & Clinton's account here provides a helpful way of characterising the local/ global debate in which literacy

practices play a central role. But, I would want to distinguish between agreeing with their caveat about overemphasising ‘the local’ and labelling the ‘distant’ as more ‘autonomous’. The ‘distant’ literacies to which Brandt refers are also always ideological and to term them autonomous might be to concede too much to their neutralist claims.

Brandt & Clinton’s concern with the overemphasis on the local in some NLS accounts; their recognition that for many people the literacies they engage with come from elsewhere and are not self-invented; and that there is more going on in a local literacy than ‘just local practice’, are all important caveats to deter NLS from over-emphasising or romanticising the local, as it has been accused of doing (cf response by Street to McCabe, 1995 in Prinsloo & Breier 1996). But this important debate can be continued without resorting to terming ‘distant’ literacies as ‘autonomous’ – as Brandt & Clinton imply in their attempt ‘to address certain “autonomous” aspects of literacy without appealing to the “autonomous model” of literacy. The features of distant literacies are actually no more autonomous than those of local literacies, or indeed than any literacy practices: their distantness, their relative power over local literacies and their ‘non-invented’ character as far as local users are concerned, do not make them ‘autonomous’, only ‘distant’, or ‘new’ or hegemonic. To study such processes we need a framework and conceptual tools that can characterise the relation between local and ‘distant’: The question raised in the early NLS work concerning how we can characterise the shift from observing literacy events to conceptualising literacy practices does, I think, provide both a methodological and empirical way of dealing with this relation and thereby taking account of Brandt and Clinton’s concern with the ‘limits of the local’.

NLS practitioners might also take issue with the apparent suggestion that distant literacies come to local contexts with their force and meaning intact. As Kulick & Stroud indicated a decade ago in their study of new literacy practices brought by missionaries to New Guinea, local peoples more often ‘take hold’ of these new practices and adapt them to local circumstances (1993). The result of local-global encounters around literacy is always a new hybrid rather than a single essentialised version of either. It is these hybrid literacy practices that NLS focuses upon rather than either romanticising the local or conceding the dominant privileging of the supposed ‘global’. As we shall see when we discuss practical applications of NLS across educational contexts, it is the recognition of this hybridity that

lies at the heart of an NLS approach to literacy acquisition regarding the relationship between local literacy practices and those of the school.

Collins and Blot (2002) are similarly concerned that, whilst NLS has generated a powerful series of ethnographies of literacy, there is a danger of simply piling up more descriptions of local literacies without addressing general questions of both theory and practice. In exploring why dominant stereotypes regarding literacy are so flawed, such as the notions of a great divide between oral and literate, and the now challenged assumptions of the autonomous model, they invoke NLS but then want to take account of its limitations and to extend beyond them:

‘Such understanding also has a more general intellectual value for it forces us to explore why historical and ethnographic cases are necessary but insufficient for rethinking inherited viewpoints ... although ethnographic scholarship has demonstrated the pluralities of literacies, their context-boundness, it still has also to account for general tendencies that hold across diverse case studies’. (p. 7-8).

They argue, then, for ‘a way out of the universalist/ particularist impasse’ which had troubled Brandt as we saw above, ‘by attending closely to issues of text, power and identity’. These are issues that are at the heart of current developments in NLS, from Bartlett and Holland’s concern with identities in practice (see below), to Street’s attention to literacy and power in the ideological model and Maybin’s refinement of Bakhtin’s ‘intertextuality’ with respect to literacy practices. Writing in *Situated Literacies* (2000), Maybin, also links NLS to wider strands of social-critical work, offering a way of linking Foucauldian notions of Discourse, Bakhtinian notions of intertextuality and work in Critical Discourse Analysis with the recognition from NLS of ‘the articulation of different discourses [as] centrally and dynamically interwoven in people’s everyday literacy activities’. Gee (2000), in the same *Situated Literacies* volume, also located the ‘situated’ approach to literacies in relation to broader movements towards a ‘social turn’ which he saw as a challenge to behaviourism and individualism – a challenge which NLS has also pursued. Janks (2000), located in S. Africa, likewise links literacy studies to broader social theory, invoking the concepts of ‘Domination, Access, Diversity and Design’ as a means of synthesising the various strands of critical literacy education.’ Freebody, writing from Australia but like Janks taking a broad theoretical and international view, likewise writes of

the relationship between New Literacy Studies and ‘critical literacy’, an approach to the acquisition and use of reading and writing in educational contexts that takes account of relations of power and domination (Freebdoy, forthcoming).

Bartlett & Holland likewise link NLS to broader social theory. They propose an expanded conception of the space of literacy practices, drawing upon innovations in the cultural school of psychology, sociocultural history and social practice theory. In locating literacy theory within these broader debates in social theory, they build, especially, on the concern of Bourdieu to characterise the relationship between social structures (history brought to the present in institutions) and ‘habitus’ (history brought to the present in person) and suggest ways in which NLS can adapt this approach:

Bourdieu’s theory suggests that we can analyze literacy events with an eye to the ways in which historical and social forces have shaped a person’s linguistic habitus and thus impinges upon that person’s actions in the moment’ (p. 6).

However, they argue that ‘Bourdieu’s theory is itself ‘limited by his tendency to underplay the importance of culturally produced narratives, images and other artefacts in modifying habitus’. It is here that they suggest ways of extending both Bourdieu and literacy studies by putting them together with other key concepts in their work:

We propose to strengthen a practice theoretical approach to literacy studies by specifying the space of literacy practice, examining in particular the locally operant figured world of literacy, identities in practice, and artefacts (p. 6).

Applying their concept of ‘figured worlds’ – ‘a socially produced and culturally constructed realm of interpretation’ – to literacy practices, they suggest that ‘a figured world of literacy might include “functional illiterates”, “good readers” and “illiterates” any of which might be ‘invoked, animated, contested and enacted through artefacts, activities and identities in practice’ (p. 6). In the world of schooled literacy in particular, scholars have noted the tendency to invoke and deploy such figurings and identities to characterise children and their attainment – Holland and Bartlett enable us to see such characterisations as themselves part of what we should be taking into account when we try to understand literacy practices in context: we should be wary of taking them at face value, a scepticism

that will prove useful as we move towards applying social literacy theory to policy and education in general and schooling in particular.

Reder and Davila offer another perspective on the debate currently troubling literacy researchers, concerning the limits of the local'. Drawing upon Actor Network Theory, they invoke the concept of irreversibility, which concerns the extent to which an actant-network, at a given point in its development, is able to return to an earlier state in which alternative possibilities for future network development exist. 'An important feature of irreversibility', they suggest and one which is applicable beyond ANT and directly relevant to the issues that interest anthropologists interested in literacy and media,

'is to consider is its variable and continuous quality. This may provide some important new theoretical machinery for representing the remote influences of literacy (i.e., of inscriptions) within social networks. We suggest that the contexts inscribed by written materials in relatively irreversible states of actant networks will endow literacy with the appearance of having a relatively fixed ("autonomous") influence on social practices, whereas in more reversible network states, the inscriptions will endow literacy with influence that appears less "autonomous." In other words, when social groupings are in a state of flux (i.e., power players still forming alliances and meanings still have loose definitions) there is more focus on the players and their not-disinterested involvement is more readily apparent. When stable states of networks become institutionalized, the static (irreversible) relations of power seem "natural" and the influence of the tools of the powerful (e.g., literacy) *seem* to be inherent in the tools themselves. In this way, the powerful influence of the people who control literacy is misassigned to literacy itself, thereby endowing literacy with an *apparently* ~ "autonomous influence." This may provide a step towards resolving the issues noted earlier about characterizing the nature of distant literacy influences on local interactions. ;,

This insight may provide a fruitful way in to the more general questions regarding media that have interested anthropologists in the AnthMedia network – might similar attributions of 'autonomy' and of 'distance' being made to other dimensions of media than literacy? Before we can address that question, we need to clarify our terminology, to consider where literacy and media lie in our conceptual and semantic maps. One way of doing so is through the recent work on Multimodality.

Multimodality

In a paper jointly written by Gunther Kress and I, we attempted to work through some of the issues of overlap and of difference between the fields of Multimodality (cf Kress, 2002; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001) and of New Literacy Studies. We wrote:

In the field of MultiModality there has been an attempt to redress the emphasis on writing and speech as the central, salient modes of representation, in favour of a recognition of how other modes – visual, gestural, kinaesthetic, three-dimensional – play their role in key communicative practices. So one major emphasis in work on multimodality is to develop a “language of description” for these modes, that enables us to see their characteristic forms, their affordances and the distinctive ways in which they interacting with each other. ...

A social semiotic theory (of multimodality) is interested in sign-makers, sign-making and signs; In being interested in signs it is interested precisely in what signs ‘are made of’, the affordances, the materiality and the provenance of modes and sign in that mode. In being interested in sign-makers and in sign-making necessarily it is interested in the social place, the history and formation of the sign-makers, and in the social environments in which they make their signs. A social semiotic theory of multimodality can attempt to expand its domain to include the features of the sign-maker and of the environment of sign-making; it would do so by treating all of the world as signs – the practices, the characteristics of social organization, and so on.

A theory of literacy as social practice addresses similar questions but with, perhaps, a focus upon a narrower range of semiosis – the uses of reading and writing, although always in association with other modes, such as speech or visual representation. What New Literacy Studies has added to traditional approaches has been the recognition that reading and writing vary across cultural time and space – the meanings associated with them vary for participants and are rooted in social relationships, including crucially relationships of power.

This discussion is timely and necessary precisely because burning issues in representation and communication have proliferated along with the profound changes in the social, cultural, economic and technological world, issues for which there are as yet no answers. In that context the need is to open up questions; and bringing the compatible and complementary approaches of NLS and Multimodality to bear, offers one means of getting further - questions such as What *is* a mode, how do modes interact, how can we best describe the relationship between events and practices, how do we avoid becoming the agents producing the new constraints of newly described and imposed grammars? What are the cultural technologies which are at issue here – the technologies of dissemination of meanings (the media), those of representation of meanings (the modes), and those of production of messages (print and paper; digitality and electronics)? How do they interact, what becomes possible for whom, where is power likely to shift, who is likely to gain and who is likely to lose, and what is our role as academics in all that?

An example of how these fields can be brought together in active research can be found in the work of Kate Pahl. Pahl (2002a and b) has built upon Holland and Bartlett’s

use of habitus in relation to figured worlds in order to help her describe the multi modal practices of young children at home in her research on London families. Drawing also upon Kress for multi modality and Street for literacy practices, she describes the ways in which young children take from and adapt family narratives as they do drawings, create three dimensional objects and write graffiti on walls. The work of figuring these family worlds is done through a combination of oral, visual and written artefacts through which over time key themes – such as a family’s connection with the railways in India or with a farm in Wales - become sedimented and persistent. Through these narratives, embedded in material and linguistic form, the identity of family members is constructed and adapted over time. There is a pedagogic message here regarding how schools might recognise and build upon such home practices, but there is also an important theoretical contribution to NLS: namely that Pahl shows how any account of literacy practices needs to be contextualised within other communicative modes. Also, like Bartlett & Holland and Collins, she develops a sophisticated analysis of how such practices relate to concepts of textuality, figured worlds, identity and power. How these discussions and the concepts with which they engage relate to those evident in the anthropological discussions of media presents a key point of entry into this field and a focus for the e-seminar we are currently embarking on.

Conclusion

The effects of these critical engagements with social theory, with policy and with broader semiosis evident in the work in Multimodality has been that the field of New Literacy Studies is now going through a productive period of intense debate that firstly establishes and consolidates many of the earlier insights and empirical work and secondly builds a more robust and perhaps less insular field of study. A major contribution arising from the work cited here has been the attempt to appeal beyond the specific interests of ethnographers interested in ‘local literacies’ in order to engage with broader themes of globalisation and multimodality. It is at this interface that I anticipate anthropology colleagues becoming interested again in the literacy debate, not in terms of the older ‘great divide’ and ‘rationality’ concerns through which they may have encountered it in earlier anthropological texts, but in the contemporary concerns with social theory regarding textuality, figured worlds, identity and power.

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