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Series Editor: Viv Edwards

# **Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies Instances of Practice**

Edited by

Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell

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# Foreword

The editors of this volume bring together work from two fields of study, both relatively recent arrivals: Multimodality and New Literacy Studies. In the former 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 interact with each other. Likewise, those in the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS) have attempted to provide a language of description for viewing literacy as a social practice in its social environments. Again there is an intent to change many emphases of the past – especially in educational contexts of the most varied kinds – from literacy as a static skill and to describe instead the multiple literacy practices as they vary across cultures and contexts.

One key question addressed by the writers in this volume is how these approaches can ‘speak to each other’, in attempts to find correspondences and differences. All the authors here resist moves to polarize, looking instead for complementarities in theoretical aims and approach. For instance, in both approaches there is a worry about the stretching of the term *literacy* well beyond the NLS conception of *social practices of representation* to become a metaphor (and often much less than that) for any kind of skill or competence. One needs to ask whose interests are advanced and in what ways by the use of labels such as ‘palpatory literacy’ (skills in body massage), ‘emotional literacy’ (skills in affective massage?), ‘cultural literacy’ (skills in social massage??), and so on. Of course, one clear effect of such moves is that where ‘a literacy’ is identified, those with an interest in finding the corresponding illiterates are never far behind with their remedies. But even such uses where some aspects of literacy practices are involved – computer literacy, visual literacy – bring their own

problems, not least of them the blunting of analytic and theoretical sharpness and power. Where there is a label there is already an answer; and where there is an answer, any need for questions has stopped. More significantly perhaps, there is the question of 'complementarity'. This poses quite simply an as yet thorny question: where does the 'reach' of one theory stop – or, maybe better, begin to attenuate, 'fizzle out'. 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 signs 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. And at times that is necessary. In most cases it is better by far to say: but look, there are those whose work is concerned precisely with these issues, who have their tools, different tools. Your own tools become ever less useful, and *their* tools are so much more effective – whether those of sociology, of anthropology, or the varieties of ethnographic methods.

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 NLS 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. Indeed, the very definitions of what counts as literacy already frame social relationships of literacy and what people can do with it – as we see in increasingly narrow Government demands on curriculum and assessment. How these schooled literacies relate to those of everyday social life, with its multiple literacies across different cultural and institutional contexts, is a key question raised by NLS and for which, at present, schooled literacy advocates are not providing answers. Researchers in NLS, with their ever expanding vision of literacy in society, have developed research methods and concepts for addressing such questions. They talk of literacy events – the immediate visible activities associated with literacy – and of literacy practices – the more hidden, underlying conceptions of what those events



mean held by both participants and by observers and researchers. We can, then, talk of schooled literacy practice, or of academic literacy practise in the domain of education and, more broadly, of religious literacy practices or commercial literacy practices. NLS, then, is developing a language of description for addressing literacy in all its social variety.

But again the question arises of what are the limits and boundaries here and what does NLS not address that, for instance, a social semiotic theory of multimodality can better handle? Whose tools are better suited to different aspects of the broader task? The question of 'complementarity' addresses itself to that – not a matter of mere eclecticism, but of compatible competences. NLS and multimodality, in this sense, are well placed to explore each others' strengths and weakness, to develop a conversation that facilitates new growth and more powerful tools. It is that conversation into which the authors in this volume have entered.

This 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. For one thing, while both approaches look at broadly the same field, from each of the two positions the field has a distinctive look: one that tries to understand what people acting together are doing, the other tries to understand about the tools with which these same people do what they are doing. Each has defined its objects of study – practices, events, participants on the one hand, semiosis, modes and affordances, genres, signmakers and signs on the other. From each of these further questions follow, uncertainties open up. 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?

It is a time for going back to quite fundamental questions, asking old questions again, in the light of new givens and the new difficulties they bring. 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? The authors in this volume are attempting just such a task, starting from their own experience as practitioners and researchers,

trying to find ways of speaking across their fields, traditions and the data which they produce. They call on different methodologies – some more semiotic and some more ethnographic in style – reflective and close to the ground, able to see two things more precisely: the specific social, cultural and individual reasons for the uses of particular resources (why speech and gesture for this part of the task, and why writing and image for that?), and the significance of the work of those who make their representations, always in interactions with others.

In this, the book makes its contribution to a growing move, a part of an increasing awareness that the complexity and fluidity of the world – of which the world of representation is but a part – demands the joining of intellectual, theoretical resources, demands the fashioning of new tools from the old. As two people involved in just that kind of work, we welcome the contribution made by those whose work is represented here.

# Introduction

KATE PAHL AND JENNIFER ROWSELL

This book sits at the interface between the New Literacy Studies and multimodality. Since their conceptions over a decade ago, there has been an ideological lacunae, of greater or lesser proportions according to where researchers have been situated, between the New Literacy Studies and studies of multimodality. On one side, there is a growing body of work which sees literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984, 2000, 2005; Heath, 1983; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). On the other side, there is multimodality, which opens up meaning-making to a multiplicity of modes (visual linguistic, oral, gestural, etc.) and has been identified with the work of Gunther Kress (Kress, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). We decided to assemble this collection because it is time to merge a social practice account of literacy *with* a description of communicative systems. We need this collection to demonstrate the powerful possibilities of such a synthesis. People in the volume are at the forefront of research in literacy education. Although we are working across theoretical perspectives, we have a common understanding of literacy as a social practice with an eye to the impact of new communicational systems on how we make meaning. We recognize that to move forward, we need to mediate social practice with communicational networks to have an informed perspective on contemporary literacy education.

It is significant that Brian Street, whose work began by describing literacy as a social practice from his ethnographic fieldwork in Iran, should be writing with Gunther Kress, whose work identified the need to look at meaning making as multimodal. Street's fieldwork in Iran considered literacy in different contexts. Street identified a tendency for governments to reify literacy *as a set of skills* which he described as autonomous, and through his seminal research, he showed that literacy is in fact culturally and ideologically situated (Street, 1984, 1993). On the whole, the New Literacy Studies has been associated with: the ethnographic work of Heath (1983) who compared language and literacy practices in three rural communities in the US Carolinas; Barton and Hamilton (1998) who studied one community's literacy practices in the UK; and Gee (1996) whose work has looked at situated meanings in language

and education. Gunther Kress opened up meaning making by foregrounding the interest of the literacy learner and their singular use of multiple modalities (i.e. not just linguistic but also visual, gestural, three-dimensional, etc.). Kress's work has sparked a proliferation of other work on multimodality in children and youth's meaning making (Kenner, 2004; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Pahl, 1999, 2001, 2002). The work of Kress has been developed in a number of key texts including *Before Writing* (1997) and *Reading Images* with van Leeuwen (1996), in which the original systems of language were opened up to other media.

*Travel Notes From the New Literacy Studies* has been written at a moment in time in the continuing development of work in the fields of the New Literacy Studies, multimodal literacy, multiliteracies, and critical literacy. It presents instances of practice as case studies, which freeze moments in time, and open them up for analysis. This work carefully and painstakingly traces the flows of meaning across sites. For example, across the Internet from Web space to classroom, or across domains, from corporations to educational domains. This book harnesses itself to ethnography, the study of meanings in contexts over time, to the study of literacy practices in a multimodal context. Ethnographic methods enable researchers to trace practices in texts. It is not enough to analyse texts as single, isolated entities since such a system does not account for the problematic of meaning and the embodied meanings that lie within texts, which instantiate facets of an author's identity in practice.

To access the underlying meanings of literacy practices, we need to not only account for the materiality of texts, that is, the way they look, sound and feel, but also have an understanding of who made the text, why, where and when. Rowsell in her work looking at publishing practices, traced the way meanings crossed from corporate settings and could be discerned within published texts as traces of that process, and then filtered into school literacy practices (Rowsell, 2000). Pahl watched children in homes and her study recognized how habitus was inscribed into social practices and then sedimented within texts (Pahl, 2002). What we, as editors, value is the bringing together of the ethnographic with a focus on literacy as a social practice and multimodality with its emphasis on the variety of communicative practices. In other words, *we see identity and social practice in the materiality of texts.*

## Where We Are Now ...

Scholars in this collection build on the work of both Street (1984) and Kress (1997), so that their studies are constructed around an engagement

with social practices and with texts. They lie in a tradition of more recent work coming from the New Literacy Studies including Leander and Sheehy's (2004) collection, *Spatializing Literacy Research and Practice*. Also noteworthy is the work of Larson and Marsh, in theorizing the New Literacy Studies in relation to education (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Detailed ethnographic studies of communities, homes and schools in multilingual settings are drawn together in a collection of articles edited by Martin-Jones and Jones (2000).

This collection revealed the true value of the ethnographic eye which combined with a focus on literacy events and practices provides a fresh consideration of what we can learn from multilingual communities. The New Literacy Studies has gone forward. It has begun to problematize its own concepts. For example, concepts like 'situated literacies' can no longer be taken for granted. While Barton *et al.*'s (2000) seminal collection *Situated Literacies* developed a nuanced consideration of context, this was then rendered problematic by the work of, for example, Wilson, (2000, 2004) in her study of prison literacies and her use of third space theory. Research on on-line communities, such as Davies' (this volume), shows how space can be created by literacy. Janks and Comber make a material difference to the way space is organized at Ridley Grove Public School by growing a huge garden that not only feeds children at the school, but also teaches them about building community. This process takes us to the idea of space informed by context (Leander & Sheehy, 2004).

Likewise, in a multilingual context, literacy practices become more complex and riven by local and global crossings. Recent work by Kenner (2004) and Gregory *et al.* (2004), have begun to develop a theoretical lens to look at multilingual literacy practices in homes and communities. In Kenner's case, she has used Kress's work on multimodality to consider multilingual writing systems in homes (Kenner, 2004). The field has begun to open up and become richly exciting, moving alongside immense global and technological changes. This is the era of the techno/actual street as both real and imagined – children occupy a techno-local/global streetscape as they surf the Internet and create on-line communities and weblogs (Knobel & Lankshear, this volume; Davies, this volume).

## **The New Literacy Studies**

New Literacy Studies represents a tradition of considering the nature of literacy not as a neutral set of skills that we acquire, in school or in other learning contexts, but instead as how people use literacy in different contexts for different purposes. What this implies is a belief that literacy

functions in all contexts in different ways guided by different discursive practices. Initially, the strength of the New Literacy Studies was that it privileged the local. Whether in Lancaster, as in Barton and Hamilton's (1998) *Local Literacies*, or the Carolinas, as in Heath's (1983) *Ways with Words*, or within a specific community, like prisons, as in Wilson's (2000) work on prison literacies, ethnographers of literacy practices paid close attention to local emic meanings (Street & Baker, this volume).

In this volume, Street and Baker call upon the notion of *literacy practices* (Street, 1984, 2000) and transfer its underlying principles onto numeracy and practices used in making meaning with numbers. Consideration of the relation between literacy events and literacy practices provides a useful basis from which to engage in field research on literacy as a social practice (Street & Baker, this volume). At an epistemological level, literacy as a social practice is used in all of the studies in the volume, as a language of description to look at meaning making. Some studies look at literacy or numeracy events, (e.g. Street & Baker, this volume; Kell, this volume; Stein & Slonimsky, this volume) whilst some look more at literacy practices across domains (e.g. Rowsell, this volume; Nichols, this volume; Knobel & Lankshear, this volume). The concept of patterned practices adds texture and depth to an understanding of literacy as a social practice and ethnography works well to elucidate such a concept. Literacy events and literacy practices provide us with a common language to use in field studies.

One of the theoretical concerns of the New Literacy Studies has been the recognition that literacy in local contexts sometimes comes from the outside (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). For example, Marsh describes how globalized practices such as Disney advertising impinges on local contexts in the form of advertising, and children are placed simultaneously in local and global spaces as they go shopping and travel on buses (Marsh, this volume). We are excited by the potential of tracing global practices within local contexts, such as Nichols' compelling account of what the concept of De Bono's thinking caps, taken from the global domain of the Internet, looks like as observed in a classroom (Nichols, this volume).

The New Literacy Studies has flourished in providing the field with rich instances of practices in different domains. Recently, the field has turned more to analysing the global, following the work of Appadurai and Bauman in focusing on global practices (Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 2000). It is fitting therefore that Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton conclude the book. They began the process of examining the New Literacy Studies with a new eye, considering how globalization can be fitted within the paradigm of the New Literacy Studies in their influential

article, 'The Limits of the Local' (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). Their article argues that it is impossible to describe local literacies without attention to global contexts. Furthermore, they argue that literacy can be seen as a 'thing-like' object in some cases, where it resides in a reified form. One of the most powerful observations is that literacy practices depend on technologies, which can be transformed locally but are nonetheless tied to global communication systems. As they note,

... if reading and writing are means by which people reach – and are reached by – other contexts, then more is going on locally than just local practice.

(Brandt & Clinton, 2002: 338)

In other words, when people use literacy in their everyday life, for example, they write a letter ordering building materials, or fill in a form, this practice is in itself shaped by global as well as local context. Brandt and Clinton urge us to be sensitized to the global as well as the local when analysing literacy events and practices.

This brings us to the purpose of the book that we have edited. We, as authors, want to identify the interface between the local and the global to thoroughly account for literacy practice. We need the ethnographic lens to do so, and equally, we need to bring in multimodality. Ethnography provides the contexts and the tracing process we need to understand texts. Multimodality brings in textual dimensions which are material and which are increasingly shaped by exterior, global forms. In Stein and Slonimsky's work (this volume) this synthesis is achieved through an ethnographic analysis of children's oral and written texts in home contexts with a multimodal perspective.

Researchers in this field need to appreciate the relationship between local and global, they need to account for multimodality, they need a methodology like ethnography, which looks at meanings, and only then can they consider phenomena like crossings. Brandt and Clinton have given us a theoretical lens to look at crossings from local to global sites. We have begun to identify ways of doing this. For example, Street takes the concept of disembedding and embedding mechanisms from Giddens to describe texts moving from local to global contexts, a theoretical lens Kell uses in this volume to describe the movement of particular meanings across sites and across modes (Street, 2003). Similarly, in this volume, Nichols uses the theoretical lens of Actor Network Theory to trace particular concepts across sites. Likewise, Rowsell uses Gee's concept of Discourses to account for their materialization in different sites (Rowsell, this volume). In these accounts, scholars from the New