most scholarly and at the adable and wise f insights available, this s a base line and an om which new studies cted.'

King's College London, UK

Literacies are situated. All uses of written language can be seen as located in particular times and places. Equally, all literate activity is indicative of broader social practices.

Situated Literacies is a rich and varied collection of key writings from leading international scholars in the field of literacy. Each contribution, written in a clear, accessible style, makes the link between literacies in specific contexts and broader social practices.

Detailed ethnographic studies of a wide variety of specific situations, all involving real texts and lived practices, are balanced with general claims about the nature of literacy. Contributors address a coherent set of issues:

- the visual and material aspects of literacy
- concepts of time and space in relation to literacy
- the functions of literacies in shaping and sustaining identities in communities of practice
- the relationship between texts and the practices associated with their use
- the role of discourse analysis in literacy studies

Together these studies, along with a foreword by Denny Taylor, make a timely and important contribution to understanding the ways in which literacy practices are part of broader social processes and suggest directions for the further development of literacy studies. *Situated Literacies* is essential reading for anyone involved in literacy education.

Contributors: David Barton, James Paul Gee, Mary Hamilton, Roz Ivanič, Kathryn Jones, Janet Maybin, Fiona Ormerod, Simon Pardoe, Kathy Pitt, Renata de Pourbaix, Karin Tusting, Anita Wilson.

David Barton, Mary Hamilton and **Roz Ivanič** are all based at Lancaster University. David Barton is the *Literacies* series editor and has previously collaborated with Mary Hamilton on *Local Literacies* (1998). Roz Ivanič is the co-author of *The Politics of Writing* (1997).

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Situated Literacies
Reading and Writing in Context

Edited by David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanič

Literacy Practices.

Situated Literacies

Reading and Writing in Context

1999

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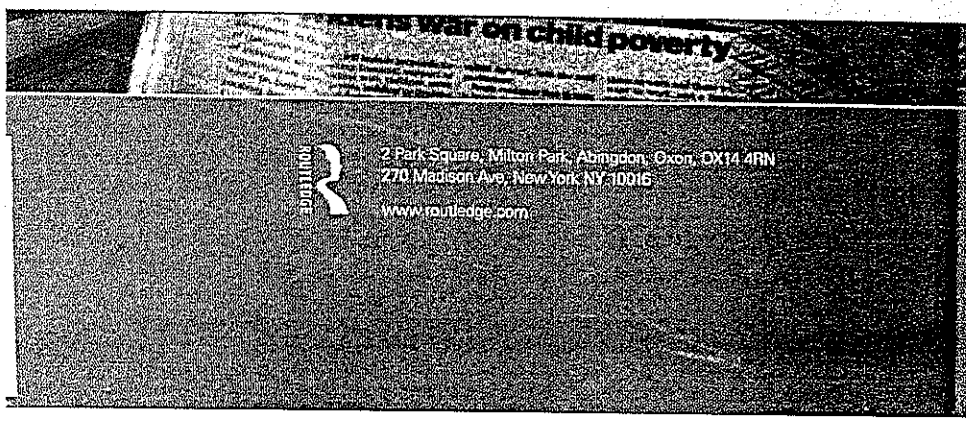

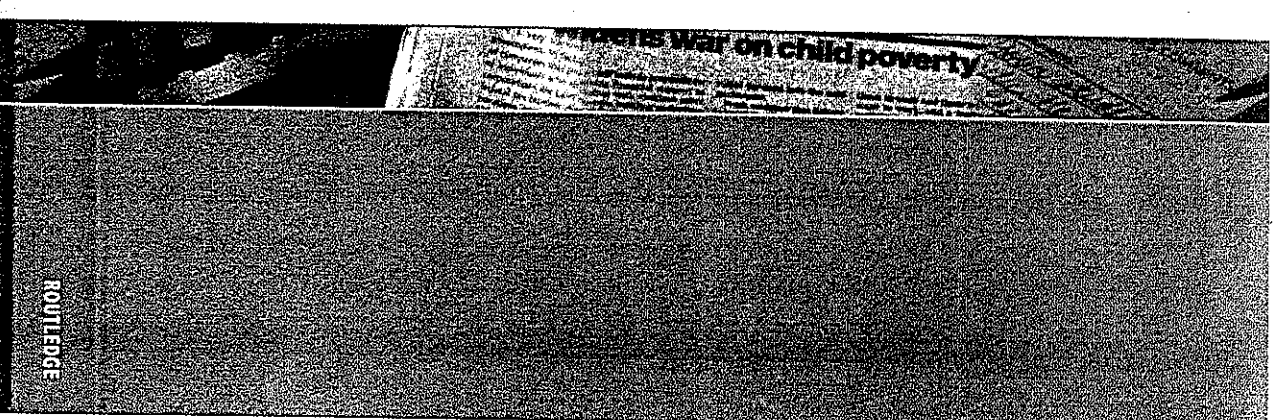

grown out of, and are part of, this continuing exploration and theorisation of the social and cultural aspects of people's literacy activities. In this chapter she draws together and discusses some emerging patterns in the researchers' documentation and analysis of literacy events and the social relationships, values, attitudes and feelings involved. She focuses in particular on the treatment of *context*, *intertextuality*, and *discourse*, which reveal the pivotal role of literacy practices in articulating the links between individual people's everyday experience, and broader social institutions and structures.

In the final chapter, 'New literacy studies at the interchange', Karin Tusting, Roz Ivanič and Anita Wilson discuss particular themes identified in earlier chapters which make links between the chapters and which suggest directions for the further development of literacy studies. Some of these are themes, such as *symmetry* or *time*, which were identified in particular chapters and which could be usefully pursued more broadly. Other themes, such as ways of theorising the relation of texts and practices, arise in many chapters; here the discussion is integrated and pointers are given for developing new analytical frameworks for future studies of situated literacies.

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1

LITERACY PRACTICES[1]

David Barton and Mary Hamilton

A social theory of literacy: practices and events

In this chapter we provide a framework in terms of a theory of literacy. It is a brief overview of a social theory of literacy. This can be seen as the starting-point or orienting theory, which the detailed studies in this book then expand upon, react to and develop. We define what is meant by literacy practices and literacy events and explain some of the tenets of a social theory of literacy. This is pursued in Barton and Hamilton (1998), where a further example of situated literacies not covered in this book can be found.

We present here the theory of literacy as social practice in the form of a set of six propositions about the nature of literacy, as in Figure 1.1. The starting-point of this approach is the assertion that *literacy is a social practice*, and the propositions are an elaboration of this. The discussion is a development on that in Barton (1994, pp. 34–52), where contemporary approaches to literacy are discussed within the framework of the metaphor of ecology. The notion of *literacy practices* offers a powerful way of conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape. When we talk about practices, then, this is not just the superficial choice of a word but the possibilities that this perspective offers for new theoretical understandings about literacy.

Our interest is in social practices in which literacy has a role; hence the basic unit of a social theory of literacy is that of *literacy practices*. Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However practices are not observable units of behaviour since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships (see Street 1993, p. 12). This includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy. These are processes internal to the individual; at the same time, practices are the social processes which

- *Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.*
- *There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.*
- *Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.*
- *Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.*
- *Literacy is historically situated.*
- *Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.*

Figure 1.1 Literacy as social practice

connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities. Practices are shaped by social rules which regulate the use and distribution of texts, prescribing who may produce and have access to them. They straddle the distinction between individual and social worlds, and literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals.

To avoid confusion, it is worth emphasising that this usage is different from situations where the word *practice* is used to mean learning to do something by repetition. It is also different from the way the term is used in recent international surveys of literacy, to refer to 'common or typical activities or tasks' (OECD/Statistics Canada 1996). The notion of practices as we have defined it above – cultural ways of utilising literacy – is a more abstract one that cannot wholly be contained in observable activities and tasks.

Turning to another basic concept, *literacy events* are activities where literacy has a role. Usually there is a written text, or texts, central to the activity and there may be talk around the text. Events are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them. The notion of events stresses the situated nature of literacy, that it always exists in a social context. It is parallel to ideas developed in sociolinguistics and also, as Jay Lemke has pointed out, to Bahktin's assertion that the starting point for the

analysis of spoken language should be 'the social event of verbal interaction', rather than the formal linguistic properties of texts in isolation (Lemke 1995).

Many literacy events in life are regular, repeated activities, and these can often be a useful starting-point for research into literacy. Some events are linked into routine sequences and these may be part of the formal procedures and expectations of social institutions like work-places, schools and welfare agencies. Some events are structured by the more informal expectations and pressures of the home or peer group. Texts are a crucial part of literacy events and the study of literacy is partly a study of texts and how they are produced and used. These three components, practices, events and texts, provide the first proposition of a social theory of literacy, that: *literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts.* The local literacies study was concerned with identifying the events and texts of everyday life and describing people's associated practices. Our prime interest there was to analyse events in order to learn about practices. As with the definition of practices, we take a straightforward view of events at this point, as being activities which involve written texts; discussion throughout this book returns to the definitions of these terms. An example of an everyday literacy event, taken from the local literacies study, is that of cooking a pudding; it is described in Figure 1.2.

This work complements other studies, primarily in Linguistics, which focus on the analysis of texts. The study of everyday literacy practices points attention to the texts of everyday life, the texts of personal life; these are distinct from other texts which are more usually studied such as educational texts, mass media texts and other published texts. Work in the field of literacy studies adds the perspective of practices to studies of texts, encompassing what people do with texts and what these activities mean to them. In our own work, practices remain central and we are led to examine how texts fit into the practices of people's lives, rather than the other way round. Nevertheless, we see the full study of written language, as exemplified in the chapters in this book, as being the analysis of both texts and practices.

Once one begins to think in terms of literacy events there are certain things about the nature of reading and writing which become apparent. For instance, in many literacy events there is a mixture of written and spoken language. Many studies of literacy practices have print literacy and written texts as their starting point but it is clear that in literacy events people use written language in an integrated way as part of a range of semiotic systems; these semiotic systems include mathematical systems, musical notation, maps and other non-text based images. The cookery text has numeracy mixed with print literacy and the recipes come from books, magazines, television and orally from friends and relatives. By identifying

When baking a lemon pie in her kitchen, Rita follows a recipe. She uses it to check the amounts of the ingredients. She estimates the approximate amounts, using teacups and spoons chosen specially for this purpose. The recipe is hand written on a piece of note-paper; it was written out from a book by a friend more than ten years ago. The first time she read the recipe carefully at each stage, but now she only looks at it once or twice. The piece of paper is marked and greasy by having been near the cooking surface on many occasions. It is kept in an envelope with other hand-written recipes and ones cut out of magazines and newspapers. The envelope and some cookery books are on a shelf in the kitchen. The books range in age and condition and include some by Robert Carrier. Sometimes she sits and reads them for pleasure.

Rita does not always go through the same set of activities in making the pie. Sometimes she makes double the amount described in the recipe if more people will be eating it. Sometimes she cooks the pie with her daughter Hayley helping her where necessary. Sometimes she enjoys cooking it, at other times it is more of a chore, when time is limited or she has other things she would rather do. Rita has passed the recipe on to several friends who have enjoyed the pie.

Rita does not always follow recipes exactly, but will add herbs and spices to taste; sometimes she makes up recipes; at one point she describes making a vegetable and pasta dish similar to one she had had as a take-away meal. She exchanges recipes with other people, although she does not lend her books.

Figure 1.2 Cooking literacy

literacy as one of a range of communicative resources available to members of a community, we can examine some of the ways in which it is located in relation to other mass media and new technologies. This is especially pertinent at a time of rapidly changing technologies.

Looking at different literacy events it is clear that literacy is not the same in all contexts; rather, there are different *literacies*. The notion of different literacies has several senses: for example, practices which involve different media or symbolic systems, such as a film or computer, can be regarded as different literacies, as in *film literacy* and *computer literacy*. Another sense is that practices in different cultures and languages can be regarded as different literacies. While accepting these senses of the term, the main way in which we use the notion here is to say that literacies are coherent

configurations of literacy practices; often these sets of practices are identifiable and named, as in *academic literacy* or *work-place literacy* and they are associated with particular aspects of cultural life.

This means that, within a given culture, *there are different literacies associated with different domains of life*. Contemporary life can be analysed in a simple way into domains of activity, such as home, school, work-place. It is a useful starting-point to examine the distinct practices in these domains, and then to compare, for example, home and school, or school and work-place. We begin with the home domain and everyday life. The home is often identified as a primary domain in people's literacy lives, for example by James Gee (1990), and central to people's developing sense of social identity. Work is another identifiable domain, where relationships and resources are often structured quite differently from in the home. We might expect the practices associated with cooking, for example, to be quite different in the home and in the work-place – supported, learned and carried out in different ways. The division of labour is different in institutional kitchens, the scale of the operations, the clothing people wear when cooking, the health and safety precautions they are required to take, and so on. Such practices contribute to the idea that people participate in distinct *discourse communities*, in different domains of life. These communities are groups of people held together by their characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting and using written language. (See discussion in Swales 1990, pp. 23–7.)

Domains, and the discourse communities associated with them, are not clear-cut, however: there are questions of the permeability of boundaries, of leakages and movement between boundaries, and of overlap between domains. Home and community, for instance, are often treated as being the same domain; nevertheless they are distinct in many ways, including the dimension of public and private behaviour. An important part of the local literacies study was to clarify the domain being studied and to tease apart notions of home, household, neighbourhood and community. Another aspect is the extent to which this domain is a distinct one with its own practices, and the extent to which the practices that exist in the home originate there, or home practices are exported to other domains. In particular, the private home context appears to be infiltrated by practices from many different public domains.

Domains are structured, patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned. Activities within these domains are not accidental or randomly varying: there are particular configurations of literacy practices and there are regular ways in which people act in many literacy events in particular contexts. Various institutions support and structure activities in particular domains of life. These include family, religion and education, which are all social institutions. Some of these institutions are more formally structured than others, with explicit rules for procedures, documentation

and legal penalties for infringement, whilst others are regulated by the pressure of social conventions and attitudes. Particular literacies have been created by and are structured and sustained by these institutions. Part of this study aims to highlight the ways in which institutions support particular literacy practices.

Socially powerful institutions, such as education, tend to support dominant literacy practices. These dominant practices can be seen as part of whole discourse formations, institutionalised configurations of power and knowledge which are embodied in social relationships. Other vernacular literacies which exist in people's everyday lives are less visible and less supported. This means that *literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.* One can contrast dominant literacies and vernacular literacies; many of the studies in this book are concerned more with documenting the vernacular literacies which exist, and with exploring their relationship to more dominant literacies.

People are active in what they do and *literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.* Whilst some reading and writing is carried out as an end in itself, typically literacy is a means to some other end. Any study of literacy practices must therefore situate reading and writing activities in these broader contexts and motivations for use. In the cooking example, for instance, the aim is to bake a lemon pie, and the reading of a recipe is incidental to this aim. The recipe is incorporated into a broader set of domestic social practices associated with providing food and caring for children, and it reflects broader social relationships and gendered divisions of labour.

Classic studies of literacies in the home, such as those by Heath (1983) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), have offered classifications of the functions and uses of literacy for individuals. This approach can be revealing in providing an overview of the range of literacy practices in a community and, in doing so, links back to Richard Hoggart's classic work from 1957, *The Uses of Literacy.* In practice, however, it is often difficult to identify discrete functions, what is counted as a function is inconsistent, and they overlap a great deal (as discussed in Barton 1994, pp. 152–4; see also Clark and Ivanič 1997, Chapter 5). In the current study we move beyond this approach, to examine how literacy activities are supported, sustained, learned and impeded in people's lives and relationships, and the social meanings they have. It is very clear from our local literacies work that a particular type of text, such as diary or letter, cannot be used as a basis for assigning functions, as reading or writing any vernacular text can serve many functions; people appropriate texts for their own ends. Just as a text does not have autonomous meanings which are independent of its social context of use, a text also does not have a set of functions independent of the social meanings with which it is imbued.

A first step in reconceptualising literacy is to accept the multiple functions literacy may serve in a given activity, where it can replace spoken language, enable communication, solve a practical problem or act as a memory aid – in some cases, all at the same time. It is also possible to explore the further work which literacy can do in an activity, and the social meanings it takes on. For instance, there are ways in which literacy acts as *evidence,* as *display,* as *threat,* and as *ritual.* Texts can have multiple roles in an activity and literacy can act in different ways for the different participants in a literacy event; people can be incorporated into the literacy practices of others without reading or writing a single word. The acts of reading and writing are not the only ways in which texts are assigned meaning (as in Barton and Hamilton 1998, Chapter 14).

It is important to shift from a conception of literacy located in individuals to examine ways in which people in groups utilise literacy. In this way literacy becomes a community resource, realised in social relationships rather than a property of individuals. This is true at various levels; at the detailed micro level it can refer to the fact that in particular literacy events there are often several participants taking on different roles and creating something more than their individual practices. At a broader macro level it can mean the ways in which whole communities use literacy. There are social rules about who can produce and use particular literacies and we wish to examine this social regulation of texts. Shifting away from literacy as an individual attribute is one of the most important implications of a practice account of literacy, and one of the ways in which it differs most from more traditional accounts. The ways in which literacy acts as a resource for different sorts of groups are a central theme of Barton and Hamilton (1998), which describes some of the ways in which families, local communities and organisations regulate and are regulated by literacy practices.

Literacy practices are culturally constructed, and, like all cultural phenomena, they have their roots in the past. To understand contemporary literacy it is necessary to document the ways in which *literacy is historically situated:* literacy practices are as fluid, dynamic and changing as the lives and societies of which they are a part. We need a historical approach for an understanding of the ideology, culture and traditions on which current practices are based. The influences of one hundred years of compulsory schooling in Britain, or several centuries of organised religion, can be identified in the same way as influences from the past decade can be identified. These influences are located partly in the literacy practices themselves, complemented by family memories which go back to the beginning of the century and earlier. There is also a broader context of a cultural history of three thousand years of literacy in the world, and the ways in which this shapes contemporary practices.

A person's practices can also be located in their own history of literacy. In order to understand this we need to take a life history approach, observing

the history within a person's life. There are several dimensions to this: people use literacy to make changes in their lives; literacy changes people and people find themselves in the contemporary world of changing literacy practices. The literacy practices an individual engages with change across their lifetime, as a result of changing demands, available resources, as well as the possibilities and their interests.

Related to the constructed nature of literacy, any theory of literacy implies a theory of learning. *Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making* as well as formal education and training. This learning takes place in particular social contexts and part of this learning is the internalisation of social processes. It is therefore important to understand the nature of informal and vernacular learning strategies and the nature of situated cognition, linking with the work of researchers influenced by Lev Vygotsky, such as Sylvia Scribner, Jean Lave and colleagues (Scribner 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991). For this it is necessary to draw upon people's insights into how they learn, their theories about literacy and education, the vernacular strategies they use to learn new literacies. We start out from the position that people's understanding of literacy is an important aspect of their learning, and that people's theories guide their actions. It is here that a study of literacy practices has its most immediate links with education.

Note

1 This chapter is adapted from pages 6–13 of D. Barton and M. Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*, Routledge, 1998, with permission of the publishers.

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