Literacy in Community Settings

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A rich direction of research in literacy studies since the 1980s has been around literacy in community settings. The impetus for such work has been the challenges coming from literacy researchers to the notion of literacy as the same thing across all kinds of settings and under all kinds of conditions. A focus on literacy in community settings shows that reading and writing are taken up in different ways for particular purposes by different individuals and groups of people. Literacy, from this perspective, is seen as situated by distinct social practices, and not simply as a skill learned through formal schooling and detached from other social practices. This focus suggests that it is not helpful to think in terms of a single literacy when there is a remarkable diversity in the ways that people read and write for the performance of widely varying personal, social, and economic functions. This article traces how the focus on community has shifted in recent decades in literacy studies, from a focus on local communities and their particular literacy practices to communities-of-interest, where social groupings are not place-bound, to virtual communities where such communities are formed and maintained through online, media resources, and to 'more-than-human' communities, where agency is distributed across people and things in literacy activity.

Introduction

The idea of community has been an influential one in literacy studies, as well as in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis where reference has been to 'speech communities', 'discourse communities' and 'communities of practice'. The uses of community as a construct in literacy studies have drawn on anthropologists' use of community to refer to culturally boundaried groups and on sociologists' references to communities as a particular form of social organisation, based on small groups such as neighborhoods, small towns or spatially-bounded localities. In the ten years that have passed since the last edition of this encyclopedia, however, attention to literacy in community settings has shifted in focus, moving beyond these understandings of community and literacy, as outlined below.

Foundational studies of literacy in community settings

The impetus for a focus on literacy in community settings around fifty years ago was a result of the turn towards the study of reading and writing as situated social practices and away from the view of literacy as the same thing across all kinds of settings and under all kinds of conditions. A research focus on literacy in particular locations, as described below (in one village in northern Iran; in local communities in a southern town in the USA; and among one group of people in Liberia, Africa) showed that reading and writing can be taken up in varying ways by diverse groups of people engaged in different

activities, including, not least in culturally specific ways of raising children, along with consequences for schooling outcomes for these children.

Street's (1984) influential research in Iran helped to shape the idea of there being different kinds of literacy, and of there being real differences between what reading and writing were about in various contexts. While doing ethnographic research in North East Iran, in a fruit-growing village, Street identified a variety of literacy activities in the village at a time when people outside of the settlement viewed the inhabitants as "illiterate backward villagers". Street noted that the people in the village might well have failed tests for literacy, developed with schooling models in mind, were they to be run, but they were using reading and writing on a regular basis in situated and locally appropriate ways, in religious activities and in fruit marketing and sales activities, besides the literacy-learning of children that was going on in schools. The 'literacy bits' were situated in wider 'social goings on', Street suggested, and 'literacy tests' run by outsiders would not reflect that. He thought this might this be the case in other situations as well, and he concluded that the then dominant assumptions about literacy, both in development circles and in academia, were wrong in that they treated literacy as a unitary phenomenon rather than a socially variable one that took on different shapes and functions as part of different social practices.

Varying 'ways with words'

A further strong impetus for an interest in literacy in community settings came from Heath's (1983) research amongst local communities in North Carolina, USA. Heath questioned why Black students were failing in the recently desegregated schools, and she contrasted their language and literacy socialization in community settings with children of White mill-workers in a

neighboring community as well as with middle-class children in the same town. She found that reading and writing happened in all three contexts but that local communities had varying histories and different rules for socially interacting and sharing knowledge and opinions. In the Black local community which she called Trackton, Heath observed that opportunities for reading and writing centred around practical matters, such as going to the store, reading directions for a new item to adorn a bicycle, helping parents to read messages from school, and joining in the communal reading of letters from relatives who had moved up north, where reading was a collective event, with one person reading the letter aloud and family members discussing its meaning. This literacy event was characterized by a particular blend of text, talk, distribution of action and turn-taking in communication that was community-specific and consistent with patterns of shared child-raising which contrasted markedly with the other local communities in the study. Heath argued that the different ways that children learnt to use language, including written language, were dependent on the ways in which each community structured its family life, defined the roles that community members could assume and their concepts of childhood that guided child socialization. As regards the relationship between speech and text, she suggested that literacy events have social interactional rules which regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written, and define ways in which oral language reinforces, denies, extends or even sets aside the written material. These rules, she argued, vary across distinct cultures, local groupings, or speech communities. Heath contrasted these local 'ways with words' with expectations and rules for text-linked activities in the formal institutional setting of schools. She argued that the ways of meaning of socially positioned individuals were not the same across

communities and that middle-class children were advantaged by the closeness to school ways of their home and community ways with language and literacy.

These two studies were supported by Scribner and Coles' (1981) ground-breaking research of literacy and cognition in the African state of Liberia, which found that cognitive skills associated with literacy varied dramatically in relation to the wider social practices of a culturally specific, religious or school-based kind, within which particular ways of reading and writing literacy were embedded. These studies together set the basis for later ethnographic research in the 1990s and later, which focused on literacy as situated social practice (also referred to as the 'New Literacy Studies'). This approach opposes the position which views literacy as merely a matter of general skills, as a unitary process, one where 'readers' and 'writers' are generalized subjects without any social location and who are more or less efficient processors of text and instead studies reading and writing as variable, situated practices. The approach has also provided resources for critiques of particular examples of 'school literacy' as producing a narrow and rigid definition of literacy, as severed from social dialogue, and as fostering a decontextualised approach to knowledge validated through text performances of a sometimes prescriptive and restrictive nature.

Local and vernacular

Amongst many subsequent studies, in their research amongst community members in a neighborhood in Lancaster, England, Barton and Hamilton (1998) found the notion of community to be useful in examining the realm of local social relations which mediates between the private sphere of family and household and the public sphere of impersonal, formal organizations (Barton and Hamilton 1998:15). They drew a distinction between dominant

(institutionalized) and vernacular (self-generated) literacies. Vernacular literacies were part of everyday activities such as mastering a martial art, paying the bills, organizing a musical event or finding out about local news. Literacy itself was not a focus of people's attention, but was used to get other things done. Nobody said, "Well done, you get an A for doing the reading here!" during everyday, vernacular literacy events. Prinsloo and Breier (1996), working with a team of researchers, followed a similar ethnographic approach and collected a range of studies of literacy practices in local communities in South Africa, including case studies of people attending voter education classes and voting in the first democratic national elections that ended apartheid as a system of government; of agricultural laborers on wine-making farms; of workers in an asbestos factory and at a school; on residents of urban and rural townships; of communal goat farmers in the Namaqualand semi-desert; of gangsters and social activists living in a shack settlement outside Cape Town; and of taxi-drivers in Cape Town, with and without schooling who had to deal with a range of reading and writing activities in their daily work. The research pointed to the importance of social networks and interpersonal relationships in these practices. People drew on these networks to help them with particular literacy requirements. Within these networks it was possible to identify people acting as mediators, mentors, brokers, sponsors and scribes for others. The focus in this research thus shifts from literacy as something people in poor or marginal communities haven't got, to the many different ways that people engage with literacy in a shared and distributed manner.

Dyson's (1993) numerous studies made a compatible argument based on her research of literacy in community settings. If the curriculum does not relate to students' lives outside of school, their education slides right off of them, she argued. She showed how children from a variety of social, cultural and

linguistic backgrounds, if allowed to by their teachers, drew deeply upon their out-of-school knowledge of non-academic social worlds to negotiate their entry into school literacy. Their family and peer relationships were social worlds that provided them with agency and meaningful symbols, and shaped their decisions about what to write, and with whom. With the help of a supportive teacher who helped them weave their own stories, interests and experiences into the school curriculum, they revealed the breadth of their language and sense-making repertoire.

'Community' is not what it was

The idea of community, as was mentioned in the introduction to this article, has shifted somewhat in recent decades. Heath revisited, in the 1990s, the neighborhoods comprised of communities of interlocking families that she had studied decades earlier. She found that these communities no longer existed. They had been torn apart by changing socio-economic conditions, including the closing of the textile mills that had provided the employment that sustained those communities. The changes happening here were part of a broader international shift where sites of work and production shifted to elsewhere in the world where production costs were lower and cheap, unregulated labor was more easily available, under the new trade and production conditions of what became known as 'globalization'. This included the market-oriented economic, social and political strategies associated with neoliberalism, that saw the offshoring of production sites, along with wealth, from Western countries and the winding down of funding for public health and educational provision in many other countries as well, together with growing social inequalities across the world. These heightened levels of socio-economic inequality and changing conditions for work and nurture, along with regional

conflicts between political and religious groupings, prompted heightened movements of groups of people across regions, in search of work and safety. As a result, people and literacy resources, along with languages and other semiotic resources, since the 1990s, have come to be more frequently seen as border-crossing phenomena than in the past, signaled by the visibility of migrations of groups of people and the increasingly multi-ethnic and multilingual nature of many urban communities in major centers around the world (Blommaert, 2014) . Under such conditions, researchers have come to focus more on this diversity where people more clearly do not share common social nor language backgrounds.

It has also become more apparent, because of these developments, that the setting of community as a key term in literacy research might have encouraged researchers to focus on boundaried identities, but not to look at lines of social differentiation within and also across such boundaries. Local neighborhoods are now more clearly seen as complex sites where members often have diverse backgrounds, sometimes speak different languages amongst one another and have other kinds of divergences. In addition, individual's engagements with 'virtual communities' through digital, on-line technologies and resources, where they can access literacy activities across space and time, alters the question of what counts as community literacy in contemporary times, as is outlined below.

Networks of association

These shifts, where people living in one place frequently don't share common places of origin, ethnicity, language and religion particularly in urban sites, have seen new forms of networks of association emerging, not tied to place and where the bond between people is that of common interests, values and

commitments, rather than the older forms of placed communities. These new groupings include professional and informal associations, youth groups, political and religious groupings and various other kinds of affiliations. These more fluid and less grounded communities have been most strongly shaped by the rapid expansion of personal computers, online communication, and, not least, the massive production and distribution of relatively affordable cellphones and the accompanying smartphone technology. Research into literacy and language activities in such more recent networks of shared interest have drawn on the earlier resources developed in the study of literacy and language as situated social practices and of 'social literacies' to study such networks of association and practice as *virtual communities*, as domains where literacy and semiotic practices take on particular shapes and styles associated with groups of people who, partially at least, share norms, values and knowledge about their common interests and engagements and share criteria as to what constitutes degrees of mastery and successful participation in such domains. Literacy most often goes online and becomes multimodal in these settings, where virtual communities use words, symbols, images, and other resources to make particular kinds of shared meanings. Such networks recruit different styles of language and ways with images, sounds and other semiotic resources, and each has its own distinctive vocabulary and other language and literacy resources for situating complex meanings. Locating community in people's lives under these changed and changing conditions requires attention to the nature and variety of the networked domains of social relations that individuals participate in, sometimes involving several different frameworks or networks of participation simultaneously, in the case of particular individuals. Research in literacy studies examines the complex networks of social

experience, materiality, meaning and technology that interactively produce literacy practices in specific instances under such conditions (Mills, 2016).

Spatial repertoires and new ideas of community

In the late 20th century, social scientists began to understand space as a qualitative context that situated different behaviors and contending actions (Massey, 2005) and such views might be seen as an elaboration on earlier views of community in literacy research. Such a perspective offers a conceptualization where both local and global are grounded and real, but dispersed within politics of connectivity that both construct places and connect them to other sites in a dynamic where spaces are both concrete and imagined, as well as differentiated and dispersed in their sources and productions. Language and literacy practices come to be seen through the lens of spatial repertoires, where webs of relations and practices both construct places but also connect them to other sites. For example, studies of children's writing shows a *recognition* of different norms across the different social contexts across which students operate. In their writings on Facebook, for example, students studied in a poor local neighborhood (Canagarajah, 2015) commonly used non-standard spelling and orthography and mixes of local language resources along with translocal standard language resources, abbreviations and icons, while in their classroom written work, students were less likely to mix codes and resources, suggesting that they had shifted to a different translocal norm, where standardized writing happens in a recognised status language (such as Standard English). Studies of literacy and people identified as transnational migrants similarly describe people who are simultaneously embedded in more than one setting, with characteristically high intensity of exchanges that often include new practices of transacting and

interacting, varying language and literacy practices, identities and relationships and activities that sometimes require cross-border travel and contacts on a sustainable basis, or translocal digital communications of various kinds. From this perspective, space, literacy and language are product of relations-between places and are dynamic (Lam and Warriner, 2012).

Communities of people and things

While the concept of community and of literacy in community settings has been shown to be a changing one, with shifting ideas around place, solidarity and strategies for reading and writing, the most recent challenge, which will only be described here briefly, is that of the 'new materialists' question as to how the notion of community might be rethought in a more-than-human world and what that concern might do to our study of literacy. Rather than seeing 'nature' or the material world, on the one hand, and human activity, or the social world, on the other, as distinct from one another, these researchers stress their relationality and entanglement, so that where material phenomena were previously studied by scientists as ruled by immutable laws ('the laws of science') that were non-social by definition, 'new materialist' (and 'post-humanist') research attention moves to nature-culture phenomena that are the outcome of material-social practices, where agency is distributed across much more than just the people concerned. Concepts similar to 'community' become important from this perspective, such as 'network' and 'assemblages' to refer to the heterogenous bringing together of multiple interrelations of the human and non-human into relatively stable entities, variously identified as local ecologies, as examples of more-than-human sociality, as socio-material communities, and as communities of material-discursive entanglement. Intra-relations within such communities, it

should be pointed out, are not essentially about harmonious unity – they can include different entanglements, including predation, parasitism and competition, as well as cooperation and nurturing. Literacy researchers drawing on these conceptual resources have begun studying the interrelations of materials, people and technologies in particular kinds of literacy practices. As examples of a wider research direction, in brief here, Lindgren (2019) examines children's learning and development by paying attention to the relationships going on between children, materials and environments in preschool, and finds that children's early literacy development includes establishing relationships with books, pens, paints, clay, water and paper, along with other people and elements of the environment. She describes children as emergent in a relational field, where non-human forces are equally at play in constituting children's becomings. Leander and Burris (2020) focus on how people's lives are entwined with computers and computational systems. They present a world where technologies such as embedded algorithms in computer and smartphone software are active agents, recruiting and enrolling humans and where subjectivity and agency are not merely given in advance, but are relational achievements involving people and things. The materialist/posthumanist influence encourages particular attention to the specific technologies that track and shape humans in schools in Niesche and Gowlett's (2019) study, where forms of school organisation and technologies generate ideas about busyness and productivity, including teacher evaluation scorings that produce 'good teaching' (and 'bad teaching') and student assessment practices that produce divides between 'winners' and 'losers' in literacy learning.

Conclusion

In summary, ‘community’ in studies of literacy in community settings initially most strongly referred to the literacy practices of a culturally affiliated group of people or ‘local community’, sharing common bonds through face-to-face interaction in a common language, and shared values, practices and ways with reading and writing. Later understandings and revisitings to the ideas of community-based literacies have focused, firstly, on the way such local communities are also part of larger social ‘goings-on’ of a non-local kind, because of their regional and national linkages, along with literacy influences from beyond the local. Secondly, attention has shifted to various kinds of communities of a non-local or less-local kind, including communities-of-interest, where social groupings are not place-bound, but united in common interests and commitments of a political, religious, professional or social kind so that they form a discourse community sharing common literacy practices. Thirdly, and closely linked to the former, are virtual communities, where such linkages and networks are formed and maintained through digital media and Internet resources, and include popular cultural formations maintained through social media, gaming communities and political and religious networks, amongst others. Fourthly, attention has shifted to ‘more-than-social’ communities, where attention is to the material dimensions related to literacy practices, beyond a nature-culture divide that was taken for granted in earlier studies. These new theorizations of the idea of literacy in community settings take the idea of community in interesting and challenging directions. While the founding studies of literacy in community settings were tied to ‘place’ and to social inter-activity, ‘more-than-human’ activities are the most recent focus for studying literacy in community settings.

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