



A Social Theory of Literacy

Barton, D. & Mary Hamilton. *Local Literacies*. (1998). Routledge.



Defining Literacy

- Literacy is social, located in the interaction between people.
- Vernacular literacies that are often hidden literacies.
- An ecology of written language: literacy is integral to its context.
- Critical ethnography of literacies: revealing literacies that are often unrecognized in dominant discourses about literacy.
- Theory of literacy as social practice.

Literacy Practices

- The link between reading and writing activities and social structures where they are embedded.
- General cultural ways of using written language that people use in their lives.
- What people do with literacy.
- Not all observable: values, attitudes, feelings toward literacy and its uses.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and part of broader social goals and cultural practices.

Literacy Events

- Activities where literacy has a role.
- Usually there is a written text(s) and people talk around it.
- Observable episodes that arise from practices and are shaped by them.
- Literacy events can be regular, repeated activities; can be routine and part of the formal procedures; can be informally structured.

Social Theory of Literacy

- “Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.”
- Research involves studying texts, what people do with texts, what these activities mean to them.
- How does *texts* fit into the practices of people’s lives?

Literacy Events: Nature of Reading and Writing

- The mixture of reading and spoken word.
- Written language used in an integrated way as part of semiotic system: mathematical, musical, maps, etc.
- Multiple literacies: film, computer, academic, work-place literacies,
- Within a given culture: different literacies associated with different domains of life.

Different Literacies in Different Domains of Life

- Domains are structure, patterned contexts but not clear-cut;
- Contemporary life: home, school, work-place; *institutions* support and structure;
- Home - primary domain in people's literacy lives, central to their development of a sense of social identity.
- Work-place - a community held together by characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting, using written language.

Education: Powerful Institution

- Tend to support dominant literacy practices that contribute to whole discourse formations;
- Other vernacular literacies are less visible and less supported;
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships - some literacies become more dominant, visible, influential.

Reconceptualizing Literacy

- Beyond tradition: To enhance spoken language, make communication possible, solve a practical problem, or aid in memory - used in different ways by different people;
- Micro level: particular literacy events that enhance the roles and practices of individuals;
- Macro level: whole communities using literacy - not just an individual attribute

Historical Approach

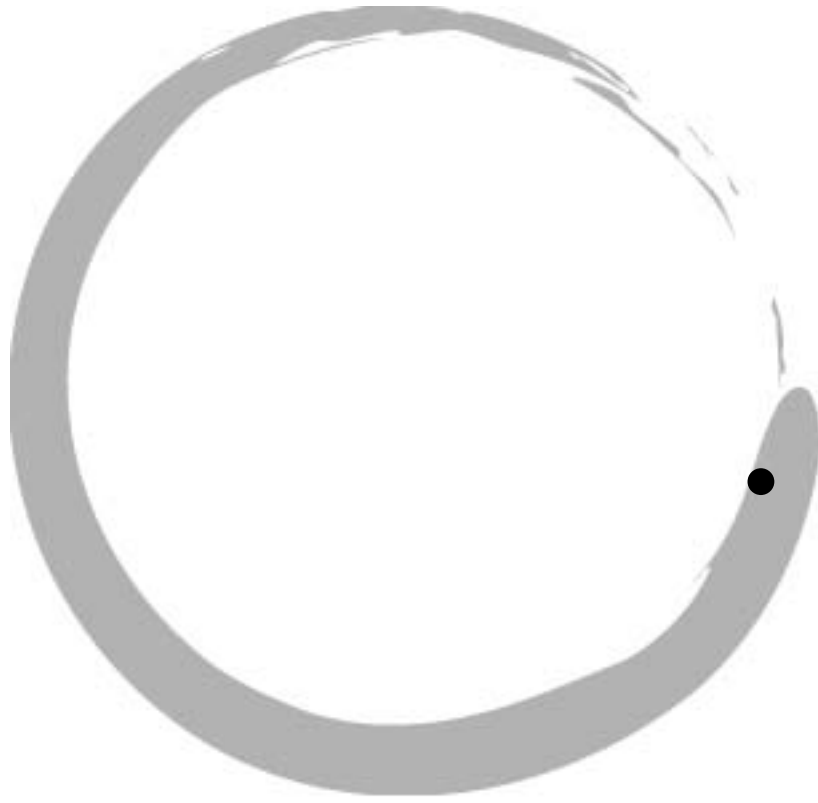
- Literacy is historically-situated: practices change as people do.
- People use literacy to make changes in their lives; literacy changes people; people are in a world of constantly changing literacy practices.
- A person's literacy practices are located in their own history of literacy.

Literacy Practices and Education

- Studies of community literacy:
- Brice-Heath: Ways With Words - 3 Appalachian families, their reading and writing practices at home and in relation to school;
- Street: Iranian uses of literacy - autonomous (hierarchical) and ideological (social, instrumental) theories, one used for commercial became more valued over traditional;
- Scribner/Cole: 3 different cultural literacies among the Vai, learned informally.

Challenges in Literacy in Education

- Issues of “social regulations of texts” - who has access to resources and who can produce them.
- A social view of literacy extends the notion of literacy by including other facets of the cultural practices of literacy.
- Examine the transformative nature of literacy.



• THE END

