

LOCAL LITERACIES

Reading and writing in one community

David Barton and Mary Hamilton



London and New York

1998

UNDERSTANDING LITERACY AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

Introduction

Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analysed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. This book is a study of what people do with literacy: of the social activities, of the thoughts and meanings behind the activities, and of the texts utilised in such activities. It is about how a particular group of people use reading and writing in their day-to-day lives. Of necessity, the book is particular; it sets out from individual people's lives and particular literacy events at a certain point in history. At the same time, it is also about the general nature of literacy and about the state of literacy in the world at the end of the twentieth century. This book explores contemporary uses and meanings of literacy in everyday life and the ways in which these are changing. It is based upon an ethnographic study which documents in detail literacy practices at one point in time and space: the time is the final decade of the twentieth century, the place is Lancaster, a town in the north-west of England. We look backwards at the history and cultural traditions on which these practices rest, as well as examining the constant change affecting people's contemporary practices.

The book draws upon and extends new views of literacy. It develops the field of literacy studies which has come into being in the past few years. Several studies have examined the literacy practices of individuals and groups, including people's uses and meanings of literacy and the value it holds for them; these studies have contributed to a theory of literacy as social practice and collective resource. We will refer to some of these studies later in this chapter but will keep more detailed discussion of much of the work until the third section of the book when integrating and extending ideas about the nature of literacy.

As described in the preface, we wish to contribute to this field in three distinct ways. Firstly we offer a description and an investigation of literacy in

LOCAL LITERACIES

one local community. Secondly, the book represents a contribution to the theoretical understanding of literacy, and more generally to the understanding of social practices and how people make sense of their lives through their everyday practices. In doing this we find that we provide an account which is often at odds with other public images of literacy such as media images, and we draw attention to vernacular literacies which are often hidden literacies. This leads to our final aim, which is to contribute critically to public discussions on literacy, education and the quality of local life.

This book is based upon an empirical study. Whether or not it is made explicit, all empirical studies start from many theoretical assumptions. All research has a theory underlying it. In approaching our study of literacy, we brought a clear set of propositions about literacy—a theoretical framework. This oriented us towards particular ways of working and particular approaches to data collection and analysis. The theory has been further refined and amplified as we have carried out the study, analysing and reflecting on the data. We wish to make this theory explicit. The main part of this first chapter is concerned with describing our theory of literacy. We also introduce other concepts we have made use of and explain some of the motivation for this research.

This theory of literacy we put forward implies a certain approach to research, demanding particular research methods and data. It is an ecological approach, where literacy is integral to its context; this is what Barton (1994) refers to as 'an ecology of written language' and Lemke (1995) has called an 'ecosocial' approach to human communities. The theory also provides a rationale for the structuring of the book: because literacy is situated socially, we need to devote the next two chapters to describing the context of the study. This means historical context as much as contemporary context. Chapter 2 provides some of the literacy history of the city and its institutions, with glimpses of literacy in Lancaster at the turn of the eighteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 is concerned with locating the study, as a contemporary study based in Lancaster, England in the 1990s. Lancaster is a distinct city with its own idiosyncrasies, and the 1990s are a particular point in history, not least in terms of the changing nature of literacy.

In terms of methodology, we carried out interviews, we observed activities and we collected documents. We refer to the study as an ethnography; it is an ethnography of a set of cultural practices, those concerned with literacy. It is an ethnography in that the study consists of detailed examination of a real situation, working, as Clifford Geertz puts it, 'by the light of local knowledge' (1983:167). A variety of methods are used and people's own perceptions are highlighted. This is a critical ethnography in the important sense that we are trying to reveal and question the traditional assumptions which frame literacy, to expose the ways in which it is ideologically constructed and embedded in power relationships (see Kincheloe and McLaren 1994). In so

UNDERSTANDING LITERACY AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

doing, the study contributes to a more critical debate and understanding of literacy practices, both in and out of education.

Our study is also a critical ethnography in that we are committed to uncovering and documenting everyday literacies which are often unrecognised in dominant discourses about literacy. In this way, our research has affinities with feminist methodologies and other research with marginalised groups (Harding 1987). Our research has, in Kincheloe and McLaren's terms (1994), a transformative, emancipatory aim. However, it is not directly action-oriented. Implications for education and cultural action can be drawn out of this study, but we have deliberately not set out from educational concerns or agendas for change. Other aspects of our research programme focus more directly on these action outcomes, as in Ivame and Hamilton (1990); Barton and Hamilton (1996). Our approach has been strongly shaped by the insistent voices of practitioners and adult students in community-based adult education who reject definitions of literacy in terms of skills, functions and levels which do not fit their experiences, nor their visions of the power of literacy in everyday life (see Mace 1992a).

This is an ethnography of a limited set of cultural practices, those concerned with literacy. Therefore, in traditional terms it may be more accurate to say that we utilise ethnographic methods or that we take an ethnographic approach, rather than to say that this is a full ethnography of the whole of people's lives (see Green and Bloome 1996). In Chapter 4 we describe the research methods and their rationale, raising issues about qualitative research methodology and the relations between researcher and researched.

These first four chapters provide information which creates the setting for the empirical study, covering theory, historical background, contemporary context and methodology. The second section of the book consists of four chapters each of which provides a detailed picture of the literacy life of an individual person. Harry Graham, the subject of Chapter 5, is a retired fire-fighter with strong views on education and who is trying to write his memoirs of the Second World War. Shirley Bowker, in Chapter 6, is concerned about her children's schooling and cares passionately about social issues. In Chapter 7, June Marsh, a part-time market worker, keeps detailed household accounts in order to survive financially and utilises a wide range of media. In Chapter 8, Cliff Holt is worried about his health but he enjoys betting and gets pleasure from writing.

The third section of the book consists of six chapters which explore particular themes about literacy and draw upon data from the full range of people we talked to and the observations we made. In these chapters we examine how literacy is a communal resource utilised by families, by community groups, and by individuals. Chapters 9 and 10 are concerned primarily with the range of reading and writing which goes on in the home, exploring first of all its diversity and then looking at patterns related to gender, numeracy practices and practices in a multilingual household. Chapter 11

LOCAL LITERACIES

addresses the relationship between everyday practices and learning, covering the informal learning of new literacies, as well as relationships between home learning and more formal learning of educational institutions. The next chapter, Chapter 12, examines the role of literacy in the many local organisations which people belong to, and how literate activity is one of the roots of local democratic participation.

Chapter 13 describes how people use reading and writing to make sense of the world and to become experts in particular domains. Chapter 14 brings together some of the threads of the earlier chapters and in it we identify a range of vernacular literacies, or local literacies, in people's everyday lives, exploring their definition and contemporary significance. An afterword, Chapter 15, reflects on how the findings from this local study can be related to literacy practices in other times and places. The Appendices contain further information and notes on some educational implications of the book. Throughout there are boxed Asides, mainly covering a variety of extra material which the reader may want to pause at or return to selectively at a later stage. This material includes detailed quotes from interviews and fieldwork observations, discussions of methodological points, and statistics which provide some national context for the findings of this local study.

A social theory of literacy: practices and events

We present below the theory we employed as a set of six propositions about the nature of literacy. We explain each one, making clear how it shapes our study. 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 from that in Barton (1994:34–52), 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 1993:12). 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

Aside 1.1 Literacy as social practice

- 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 become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.

individual; at the same time, practices are the social processes which 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 Bakhtin'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

LOCAL LITERACIES

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 can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts*. Our study is concerned with identifying the events and texts of everyday life and describing people's associated practices. Our prime interest here is 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, but we return to this term for further discussion. An example of an everyday literacy event, cooking a pie, is to be found in Aside 1.2.

Aside 1.2 Cooking literacy

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 handwritten on a piece of notepaper; 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 handwritten 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 popular ones 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

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 1990:23–7.)

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 our study is clarifying the domain being studied and teasing 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 become more

dominant, visible and influential than others. One can contrast dominant literacies and vernacular literacies; our study is 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 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 1994:152-4; see also Clark and Ivancic 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 data that a particular type of text, such as a 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, make communication possible, 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, we discuss 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. We return to these issues later in this chapter, as well as in Chapter 14 when identifying the range of vernacular literacies in the community.

LOCAL LITERACIES

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 is a central theme of later chapters in this book, which are devoted to how 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 five thousand years of literacy in the world, and the ways in which this shapes contemporary practices.

A person's practices can be located also 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 and people's 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.

Studies of community literacy

The starting-points for our study are three distinct studies of literacy carried out in the 1970s, those of Shirley Brice Heath; Brian Street; and Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole. In her well-known study Heath (1983) contrasted three Appalachian communities in the south-eastern United States in a study over several years which used ethnographic and sociolinguistic methods to provide detailed descriptions of people's uses of reading and writing in the home and the relationship of home practices to school practices. The sociolinguistic notion of literacy event is central to her work. Street (1984) studied Islamic villagers in Iran; he lived there as an anthropologist carrying out ethnographic fieldwork. He observed two literacies being used side by side in the community, one commercial and one not. He documents how the commercial literacy was taken up with the development of oil in the region, while the other more traditional literacy was not of value in that situation. Street utilises the idea of literacy practices and contributes the useful distinction between autonomous and ideological theories of literacy. Also developing the notion of literacy practices, Scribner and Cole (1981) studied literacy among the Vai of West Africa; these researchers used a battery of cross-cultural psychological tests, along with interviews and detailed observations of the community. Scribner and Cole contrast different literacies associated with three cultural traditions, Koranic, Western and indigenous, and they provide detailed descriptions of literacies which are learned informally and which exist outside the educational system.

The two terms which are the starting-point for the present work, literacy practices and literacy events, come from these earlier studies. In their separate ways these studies also show the value of detailed investigations of particular communities. Each of the studies is located in a different intellectual tradition with a distinct methodology: Heath's is primarily in sociolinguistics and education; Street comes from social anthropology and Scribner and Cole from cross-cultural psychology. The two terms, literacy practices and literacy events, therefore also come from different intellectual traditions. There may be some tension in combining them, and there is no reason to expect them to

fit together in a neat and easy manner. To us events are empirical and observable; practices are more abstract and are inferred from events and from other cultural information.

Since these original studies, there have been several detailed studies in different parts of the world including Niko Besnier's study of Pacific islanders (1993) and Daniel Wagner's study of Arabic speakers in Morocco (1993). In the United States, studies have usually been of minority communities as in Moss (1994), often with a specific educational focus, as in Stephen Reder's work with Inuit, Hmong and Hispanic communities in the Pacific North-West (1987; 1994). In Britain, ethnographic research has primarily been on the uses of literacy in minority bilingual communities, including studies by Mukul Saxena (1991); Arvind Bhatt, David Barton, Marilyn Martin-Jones and Mukul Saxena (1996), Michael Baynham (1993) and Eve Gregory (1996). There is also a recent study of writing by participants in the Mass Observation Archive (Bloome, Sheridan and Street 1993). A study of community literacy in Australia is found in Breen *et al.* (1994). Several contemporary studies from South Africa are reported in Prinsloo and Breier (1996). Other research has been on the influence of specific social institutions, such as two studies of religious groups: Andrea Fishman's study of writing among the Amish of Pennsylvania (1988, 1991) and Cushla Kapitzke's study of Seventh-day Adventists in Northern Australia (1995). In addition, further studies of specific aspects of community uses of literacy are reported in Barton and Ivanic (1991), Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic (1994), Street (1993), Dubin and Kuhlman (1992).

These studies have in common the fact that they have focused primarily on the literacy practices of adults in their homes and communities, rather than investigating literacy in relation to children and their schools. Some ethnographic studies have been concerned primarily with children and their literacies at home and at school, such as Solsken (1993) and those reported in Schieffelin and Gilmore (1986). In addition, Luis Moll's work with Hispanics in the southern United States links up community practices and school practices (1994), contributing the notion of the 'funds of knowledge' which families and communities can draw upon. There have been further studies of literacy within families, focusing on parents and children, most notably those associated with Denny Taylor (Taylor 1983; 1996; 1997; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988). Studies of children's non-formal literacies in and out of school include work by Miriam Camitta (1993), Gemma Moss (1996) and Janet Maybin (1997). Studies of other domains, such as the work-place (Gowen 1992; Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1997), and ones which focus on particular aspects of life, or with particular historical periods, will be brought into the discussion where necessary. Together these studies provide a way of locating our work and a map of the field to which the current study contributes.

Theorising local social relations

The concept of community

Although most of the above studies are called studies of communities, there has been little discussion of this term in the literature on literacy (but see Heath 1995). The first point to make is that the term usually has positive connotations. As Raymond Williams puts it in a discussion of the word **community**, 'unlike all other terms of social organisation (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably' (1976:76). As a word which can have both positive and negative connotations we might add the term *family*. Williams was writing in 1976; since then the favourable connotations of the word community have been used by the British government, trying to name the much disliked poll tax the community charge, and with notions of community care and, in one of the rare uses of the term community in our data, that of a community policeman. We return to this later.

The original title of our research project was *Literacy in the Community*, using the word community in a general unanalysed sense. We are aware of the variety of meanings of the word community, its general positive connotations, the fact that the term implies homogeneity, and the problems of defining community boundaries. Despite these complexities it provides a useful starting-point. We initially defined our community in two ways: firstly in geographical terms, as a small town and as a neighbourhood within that town; and secondly in social class terms, as a working-class community. Soon we became aware of the complexity of the term as we contrasted community with family and with neighbourhood, and as we uncovered many *communities of interest* which cross geographical boundaries. In carrying out the research it was in fact useful not to have a precise definition of community at the beginning. Ideas on this developed during the study. We return to definitions of community in Chapter 14 and also contrast the term community with family, household and neighbourhood.

Community literacy is often taken to mean the literacy practices of minority communities, and most of the studies of literacy practices in Britain and North America have been of minority communities. Whilst the literacy practices of minority communities are of importance in themselves, community does not necessarily mean minority community. Often a contrast is made or implied with mainstream literacies. In these studies mainstream literacies, or the literacies of the researchers' own cultures and discourse communities, are often assumed and taken for granted; they are not seen as objects needing to be researched. Nor is the notion of mainstream defined clearly. Our study is of a mainly white working-class community, and it is our assumption that all social groups are part of communities.

The notion of community is enduring, and it remains useful for dealing with what Crow and Allan (1994) refer to as the realm of 'local social relations' which mediates between the private sphere of family and household

and the public sphere of impersonal, formal organisations. Many of the literacy practices we describe in this book occur in this context of local social relations, and there is a constant movement of focus back and forth between private households, local community and the institutions of the wider public sphere, such as school and work-place. We want to explore these relationships.

Networks and roles

To describe how people relate within social groups we have drawn on the concept of **networks**. In the cookery example in Aside 1.2 the recipe was passed around a network of friends and relatives. Within such networks people take on specific roles and assert different identities as they participate in different literacy events. Our concern is to describe the social relationships which characterise literacy practices and the power and identity dimensions of these. The idea of networks is a first step in this. The strength of the notion of networks is that it provides a simple way of moving beyond a focus on individuals and individual encounters, towards one which shows how literacy links across people and localities. The significance of networks in the study of literacy is emphasised in the work of Arlene Fingeret (1983) and Linda Ziegahn (1991) in the United States. They have studied adult literacy students and the social networks they establish, paying particular attention to the different roles people take within such networks.

We utilise the idea of networks in several places. One of our informants, Harry, has a range of informal networks in his daily life. Another person, Shirley, uses private and public networks to get things done in the community. We can see networks in family life and in the workings of local organisations. During the research we have moved from a generalised idea of networks to a more differentiated one, distinguishing between different kinds of networks and their functions, seeing how some are more public, formal, official and structured than the more private and informal everyday networks (as discussed in Barton 1994:42–3). We see in our research how networks have a function for people in many activities: in getting things done in groups, when finding out information, in providing mutual support. We utilise the concept in several chapters, gradually developing a more complex view. In addition, we see how networks can also involve coercion and exclusion, and can be normative and controlling. Network, like community, is a cosy and beguiling word, but closely structured local social relations can also be oppressive, disruptive or resistant to individuals' needs for change. This arises, for instance, with family resistance when people have wanted to return to education, and with one of our informants, Eddie, and his membership of gangs. We see ways in which networks have negative aspects as well as positive ones, and they can be constraining as well as supportive.

UNDERSTANDING LITERACY AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

Within the home there are unequal power relations, including those between adults and young children. More generally in society there are inequalities, such as those associated with social class and gender. These structure people's participation in literacy events. There are also issues concerning adults who are labelled as having problems with literacy. In addition, many of people's activities are related to social institutions where literacy is located in formal hierarchies: this is true of institutions such as schools, religion, the welfare system and the legal system. Literacy between equals is just one sort of literacy. It is necessary to develop ways of incorporating the unequal nature of many social relations into understandings of literacy. This also includes the relationship between researcher and those being researched.

Stephen Reder and Karen Reed Wikelund's notion of 'practice engagement theory' (Reder and Wikelund 1993; Reder 1994) is helpful in accounting for the fact that participants may engage with literacy practices in different—and often unequal—ways. They use notions of domains of practice, roles and participant structures. They identify three aspects of literacy practices: technology, function and social meaning, and they suggest that people may engage with any or all of these three aspects in a particular literacy event. They define social meanings as 'beliefs about who should engage in a particular literacy practice, in what situations and under what circumstances—that is, the propriety of participation—as well as the social distinctions marked by use of literacy in a particular context (Reder and Wikelund 1993:179).

If literacy is often located in unequal social relationships, this inequality is most apparent in the access to literacy resources which people have. The idea of access is therefore related to the important concepts of control and power. We discuss these later under the heading of the 'social regulation of texts', a phrase used by Gemma Moss (1996) and implicit in Dorothy Smith's work on the constitutive role of texts in social institutions (1988). Literacy practices involve the social regulation of texts, that is who has access to them and who can produce them. The resources people have access to can be seen in terms of technical skills and equipment, as well as sites and supports for learning. These may be institutionally based or informal. Resources consist of physical resources as well as people (see Giddens 1984), and include collective or shared resources for literacy in households, neighbourhoods and publicly available in the community more generally, such as in bookshops, libraries, educational institutions, advice centres for dealing with bureaucracies and other literacy-related problems. The notion of discourse communities, mentioned earlier, is useful here: a given person may or may not have access to membership of such groups and their discourse.

Literacy is often treated as functional, something people use to get things done in their lives. A social view of literacy extends the notion of literacy by including other facets of the cultural practices of literacy. A first extension is

that identified by Kathleen Rockhill (1987; 1993) and by Jennifer Horsman (1990; 1994), who point out the emotional dimensions of literacy. They discuss how literacy constitutes both desire in the lives of women returning to education and threat to the men in their lives. We broaden this and identify other ways in which literacy represents threat and desire in people's lives. A simple example is that threat and desire come through the letter box in the morning: the opening of mail in the mornings can be experienced as threatening as people deal with bills; other letters, in the form of love letters and consumer catalogues, can also embody dreams, fantasy and desire. Niko Besnier (1993) has shown how written texts can encode emotion just as strongly as it is expressed in face-to-face interactions. Often in our discussions, people express other strong feelings about literacy, including disapproval, triumph, control or mastery, stigma, fear; the subject is charged with emotion. In order to talk about literacy people tell us about their *ruling passions*, and this has become an important organising concept in analysing people's interviews.

The bureaucratic, record-keeping functions of literacy have been frequently identified by others, for example, by Goody (1986). We can extend this by identifying ways in which literacy has other public functions, the many ways in which it is used as evidence, evidence of being educated or qualified, of being a certain sort of person, of belonging to particular social groups. Related to this, literacy is often used as display, for example when wearing logos on clothes, and as ritual, where it has a role in events such as seasonal celebrations, competitions and marking achievements. As well as having a legal function, the uses of signing ceremonies at weddings, in political treaties and business deals also have huge ritual and symbolic significance.

All these observations show that there are many different ways of engaging with literacy beyond a utilitarian functionalism, that as well as being active readers and writers, people can be passively incorporated into literacy practices, as when free advertising is put through the letter box or they carry home their shopping in plastic bags emblazoned with supermarket logos. Throughout this book we offer examples of the many different ways in which people engage with literacy.

Theories of culture

Social theory

Literacy studies is essentially an interdisciplinary endeavour, and in the process of articulating what is really an aspect of a theory of culture we have become aware of parallel concerns elsewhere in the social sciences. From a variety of different starting-points, many social scientists are aiming to redefine the relationship between the individual and the social, developing new concepts to express the links between the micro interactions which make

up experience of everyday life and the large-scale social formations which shape and are shaped by this local realm. Depending on whether they start from the micro world of social interactions and discourse or the macro world of social institutions and global change, different disciplines have elaborated different parts of the relationship between action and structure.

The sociological and historical approaches of theorists such as Giddens (1991) and Foucault (1972; 1977) start from social systems and the ways in which social practices are structured and regulated through particular configurations of knowledge and power. What these perspectives can contribute to literacy studies is an understanding of how to locate the notion of literacy practices within more general social practices and processes of social change, how these are constituted in specific social institutions and, in turn, how people's sense of personal identity is shaped by them.

A very clear description of how concepts from Foucault's theory can be applied to literacy practices in one domain is given by Cushla Kapitzke (1995:8-20) in her discussion of the religious practices of Seventh-day Adventists. She draws particularly on the notions of 'discursive formations' and the 'disciplinary techniques' that are used to enforce social rules in everyday life. She shows how these can be helpful in revealing the broad and persistent patterns which underlie the local details of literacy practices and how people make sense of them. We can see the relevance of these concepts in the interpretation of our own data, although our own starting-point is rather different in that we are looking at the interface of a range of dominant discourses of literacy with the vernacular, rather than focusing on practices in one dominant domain as Kapitzke does.

Another perspective on our work is provided by theories of language and discourse which pay attention to social theory, such as Norman Fairclough's elaboration of critical discourse analysis (1989), Gunther Kress's social semiotic theory (Kress and Hodge 1988) and the work of both James Gee (1990; 1992) and Jay Lemke (1995) on discourse and social processes. As mentioned earlier, literacy studies contributes to such work by its emphasis on analysing practices as well as analysing texts, and by providing practical ways of doing this. More generally it can contribute to social theory by emphasising the importance of written texts in the discursive formations of powerful institutions (as in Smith 1988; 1993).

Media and cultural studies

A further area in relation to which we locate our study of print literacy is recent ethnographic work on the use of other media and technologies, such as television, video and computers in the home. New perspectives on literacy are suggested by these investigations of the social and cultural contexts in which communication media function. For example, taking reading in a broad sense, Gray (1992) points out that there are continuities in people's

LOCAL LITERACIES

reading preferences and habits across the media: women's viewing of television, film and video genres echoes their consumption of print texts. Media studies research in an ethnographic tradition also examines the way different media are used together, or complement each other, and how their use is structured in the home by domestic routines, priorities and technologies. Such research looks at leisure patterns, how these are changing and how they are structured by, for example, gender or employment. It asks how and why adults regulate children's behaviour.

In parallel with literacy research, ethnographic audience research debates the relationship between mass-produced media texts, the reader (or viewer) and the context of viewing, and it identifies active, differentiated readers who construct meaning and appropriate texts according to different social contexts and cultural knowledges (as in Morley 1992:15-16). This has included how readers react to and interpret texts, not just analysis of the text itself (see Radway 1987). Reading and writing can be viewed as extensions of people's identities, interests and roles, as James Lull (1988) has discussed with reference to family viewing of mass media.

Whilst we find many useful parallels, comparisons between literacy studies and media studies also reveal the limitations of each: mass media research has tended to focus mostly on viewing, not producing, and only in the context of leisure. Few parallels with writing, such as popular production of video, photography, local radio participation or CB use, have been studied. Because the mass media are largely consumed in the domestic environment, media research has been fascinated by home life and by the behaviour of adult viewers as well as children. Studies of print literacy, on the other hand, have focused largely on educational contexts and children's learning.

The public narrative on literacy

One motivation for developing new views of literacy has been many researchers' unease with more traditional characterisations of literacy, both academically and in public and educational debate. More complex views have developed out of dissatisfaction with purely psychological characterisations of reading and writing as autonomous skills. One feature of this developing field is the way it is moving beyond ideas of literacy as something solely located in people's heads as cognition. These studies contribute to ways of talking about literacy which properly acknowledge its situated nature and therefore offer the possibility of representing the multiplicities of literacies which exist in any culture. Potentially these studies can contribute to public and educational debate by providing an alternative discourse of literacy.

However, much public discussion and political debate still draws upon and supports simplistic views of literacy which treat it as an autonomous skill. The media narrative on literacy is an autonomous one, focusing largely

UNDERSTANDING LITERACY AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

on methods of teaching and learning and attributing blame. We wish to challenge this narrative. We refer to it deliberately as a narrative. It is a way of talking about literacy but it is more than just a particular set of words or a particular discourse. It is a narrative in that it is a continuing story of literacy, told over several years and which each newspaper article, radio commentary and television interview contributes to. In the media narrative on literacy the autonomous view of literacy usually provides the framing of what are regarded as possible or reasonable questions to pose and it limits what might be possible answers.

There are many recurrent themes within this narrative. There are debates about declining standards, fuelled by surveys of problems and failures, where correlations are turned into causalities. There is an obsession with teaching methods, polarised as phonics versus real books, and with the blaming of teachers; and endemic in much media discussion of family literacy is the blaming of parents. There are fears of a decline in reading, of new technologies and of their effects on the culture of the book. Deborah Cameron (1995) and others refer to such fears as 'moral panics'. The interest in new technologies is fuelled by a sense of anxiety as well as one of possibility, but it is often simplistically defined in terms of negative effects, the dangers to children and the effects on education practice and on reading and book buying.

The issues raised by these debates can be considered in a new light by taking on the perspectives offered by the social practices account of literacy. We intend that our work should feed into public discussions and educational discussions. For example, our approach assumes that children's progress in achieving literacy is strongly influenced by the cultural and linguistic experience they bring into school from their lives at home and in their local community. Detailed ethnographic accounts can identify the many ways in which reading and writing are used and valued outside of educational contexts—or ignored for more highly valued alternatives; at the same time such accounts demonstrate the need to understand more fully the ways in which adults make use of literacy, providing the models and support that initiate children into literacy practices.

Within the field of education there is a new willingness to look across the boundaries of formal educational institutions, schools and colleges, to understand informal learning strategies and the resources which people draw on in their lives outside of education, recognising that schools are just one specialised context in which literacy is used and learned. Ideas about lifelong learning, flexible and open learning and notions of critical pedagogy which consider the role of formal education within its broader cultural and political context all have implications for the study of literacy.

A final root of this study is a concern with educational opportunities for adults to develop their literacy. Another study based at Lancaster (Hamilton and Stasinopoulos 1987) used very different methods to pursue this issue. This research analysed computer data from a large-scale longitudinal study