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## **Diverse nature of literacy: The sociocultural perspective**

### **ABSTRACT**

Considering the pace of the contemporary changes in the world, largely due to global trends and rapid development of media technology, it is commonly accepted that literacy cannot connote reading and writing any more as it did until several years ago. Much broader conceptualisations of what literary practices stand for are needed as people actually use literacy in diverse contexts and for different purposes. These are offered by sociocultural theories and approaches, which, despite being dissimilar with one another, do not undermine the traditional views on literacy and its practices but forward new complex and inclusive ways of understanding the phenomenon.

Keywords: literacy, sociocultural orientation, diverse approaches

### **1. Introduction**

Literacy is a complex dimension of thought involving numerous perspectives. Ever since the term was coined, it has been subject to considerations of how it should be defined and applied (Leu, Everett-Cacopardo, H., Zawilinski, Mcverry, & O'Byrne, 2012, p. 1). The deictic nature of the concept concerns both the meaning of the term itself and the understanding of what literacy stands for forwarded in numerous theories describing the ways people become literate, access information, communicate and act (Freire, 2001, p. 106).

Before the 1970s, the term 'literacy' scarcely featured in formal discourse concerning education. The well-established words were 'reading' and 'writing'. The related notions referred to such features as the reader's phonemic awareness, fluency or comprehension. Different aspects of reading and writing conceptualized the then primary orientation which stressed the cognitive and psycholinguistic nature of literacy and based on cognitive and language processing theories. These defined language in terms of mental processing residing in individuals primarily

engaged in processes like decoding, retrieving information, comprehension, inferring and so forth (Gee, 2015, p. 35). The notion of ‘literacy’ was used in relation to non-formal educational settings, particularly relating to illiterate adults involved in non-formal instruction. With time, it started to move from the marginal position in educational discourse to the very forefront of cultural policy, practice and research (Landshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 3–4). Having progressed from a static notion denoting reading and writing into the one related to the socialization of a person, the concept was increasingly denoting “the ways of being in the world” (Gee, 1990, p. 17). The factors that spurred the change were, amongst others, the literacy crisis in the 1970s, the economic growth and well-being of western societies, efficiency and quality accountancy, as well as the appearance of sociocultural theories (Landshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 3–4). Soon, numerous studies were developed which focused on the way people use literacy because ignoring the changes taking place in the world of information and communication was no longer possible.

The first sociocultural approaches originated in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century along with research conducted into adult, family and community by Street (1984), Heath (1983) or Barton and Hamilton (2000). The research concerned primarily with how literacy was used in everyday life so that reading and writing could become meaningful and relevant. These instances examined how literacy instantiates culture (Halliday, 1973; Gee, 1990); how it varies in cultural contexts (Bakhtin, 1986), or how its uses relate to power (Hymes, 1994). Soon, it was commonly acknowledged that language can never function independently of its sociocultural context. As Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) contend, it always comes “fully attached to other stuff: to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspective on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world” (p. vii). Hence, communicative acts are nothing else but “facets of the cultural values and beliefs, social institutions and forms, roles and personalities” (Hymes, 1994, p. 12).

To fully understand literacy in use, a strong emphasis was put not only on culture but also on such notions as ‘identity’ and ‘power’, which responded to calls for investigating situated language use. This required scrutinizing contextual information and its role in conveying meaning. Accordingly, numerous case studies were conducted in ethnography, sociolinguistics or discourse to show the ways people used reading and writing in different contexts with different backgrounds. Variation visible in diverse practices made researchers assume that there is no single literacy but a variety of literary practices (Street, 2001, p. 430; Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 3). All of these endeavours have had their practical implications of how literacy is interpreted and what is expected of literacy learning and instruction.

Presently, the research findings are all included under the umbrella of the sociocultural stand on literacy, whose approaches concern social and cultural

contexts in which people practice literacy, involving at the same time power relations. The most influential perspectives in the broad field are *Literacy as social practice*, *Multiliteracies* and *Critical literacy*. All of these, as Perry (2012) informs, have their affordances and limitations but significantly contribute to the field by explaining how people relate to the world and make meaning multimodally (pp. 50–51).

## 2. Literacy as social practice

The first dominant sociocultural perspective on literacy is *Literacy as social practice* as it underpins the other approaches in the broad spectrum of the sociocultural stand. It draws heavily on Street's work (1984), who distinguishes between autonomous and ideological models of literacy, with the former one standing for neutral and decontextualised skills and the latter – for practices grounded in specific contexts and thus “intrinsically linked to cultural and power structures in society” (Street, 2001, p. 433). Other theoreticians working in this tradition who added to the theory include Morrel (2004) and his interest in urban youth; Lewis, Enciso and Moje (2007) with their focus on identity, agency and power; Luke's (2004) institutional structure and power; Purcell-Gates, Duke & Martineau's (2007) communities and values; Gee's (2004) social mind, affinity groups; and Latour (2004) with her literacy as ‘collective property’. These scholars' endeavours grouped under the umbrella of *New Literacy Studies (NLS)*, which, as Lankshear and Knobel (2003, p. 2) note, represent a new tradition in deliberations on literacy.

The developing theories on literacy as social practice insist that literacy is what people “do with reading, writing and texts in the real world”. Such practices involve more than just actions with texts and they are better understood as “existing in the relationships between people, within groups and communities, rather than a set of properties residing in individuals” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, pp. 7–8). In this line, literacy refers to a set of practices which can be inferred from discrete events mediated by written texts. These observable literacy events inform about literacy practices that relate to unobservable values, beliefs, attitudes and power structures. Thus, it is justifiable to speak about literacy practices – cultural ways of utilizing literacy patterned by beliefs, attitudes and values. Furthermore, all practices arise from institutional and power relationships with some being more dominant than others. In this context, literacy is seen as embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices, which change due to cultural modes and habits, often informal, appearing and making sense.

The fact that literacy so often connotes print and written words stems from the emphasis on traditional literacy events. In fact, it is a much broader cultural conception relating to “particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in a cultural context” (Street, 2001, p. 11). The key notion here is the term

‘context’, which, in Gee’s (2011) understanding, includes more than the physical setting in which a communication act takes place (p. 100). Context may also relate to everything that the setting involves, be it gestures, gaze, body movements, etc., in other words, participants’ shared knowledge on how to act accordingly. For Barton and Hamilton (2000), context refers to the situatedness of the events, to the moments when they take place in the existing relations between people within communities (p. 8). Thus, new literacies are social as participating in any type of literary act unfolds in a social context, where readers and writers enact their roles as members of communities they represent. By doing so, they become part of the interactive process which posits “a shifting and dynamic relationship between text producers, text receivers and the text itself” (Wallace, 2003, p. 9).

The theory of literacy as social practice helps to describe what types of knowledge are needed in order to effectively engage in given literacy practices. In short, people do not only need lexico-syntactic and graphophonic knowledge, which consists of lexis and syntax to read and write. They also require cultural knowledge which includes beliefs, values and expectations, as well as genre knowledge, which informs about textual features, uses, purposes of use, and structural aspect of a particular genre to read and write meaningfully (Perry, 2012, p. 57). This knowledge can be acquired in a fluent or native-like way, when one gets embedded or apprenticed into a particular community. This way, they start appreciating language as members of the group in its social context (Wallace, 2003, p. 44). From a sociocultural perspective, the ‘bits’ accompanying reading and writing cannot be separated out from text-mediated practices, or form the ‘non-print’ bits, like values, contexts, tools or spaces (Landshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 13). This implies coordinating all elements to be “in sync” in order to involve socially recognized ways of doing things (Landshear & Knobel, 2007a, p. 4).

The duality existing in everything that is done with language is clearly explained by Gee (1990/2008, p. 121), who distinguishes between language alone and Discourses (spelt with capitalized D). Texts, whether written or spoken, construct some favoured positions from which they are supposed to be received. This positioning indicates how language is embedded in society and its institutions, families, school or clubs. It is not just language and action that must “fit” appropriately. In a socioculturally situated language use, one must simultaneously say the right thing, do the right thing, and in such saying and doing also express the right beliefs, values and attitudes (Gee, 1990/2008, p. 151). Being recognised, say, as an agent, a journalist or a student, ensures being part of Discourse (Landshear & Knobel, 2007a, p. 3). If one does not act accordingly, s/he takes a resistant position. Ergo, people do not read and write texts, they *do* things with them, things that involve more than just reading and writing. They interact with others – often with those who share a significant social identity, i.e. lawyers, academics, gamers, etc. If they do it well, they are judged as ‘insiders’ (Gee, 2015, p. 36). Thus, it is not about

the individual, as in the cognitive tradition, but about the individual's membership in various social and cultural groups. What determines what types of experiences a person has and how they pay attention to the elements of these experiences is their participation in the practices of different groups.

In short, as the *NLS* followers argue, literacy is something people do in the world with their achievement centring in social and cultural practices. Being a primarily sociocultural phenomenon, literacy should be studied in a full range of contexts and practices. Written language is used differently in different practices and employed in different ways by different social and cultural groups. However, it never functions all by itself. It is rarely cut off from oral language and action; that is acting and interacting; knowing, valuing and believing; using different sorts of technologies (Gee, 2015, p. 36). As texts are part and parcel of innumerable everyday "lived, talked, enacted, value-and-belief laden practices" (Gee et al., 1996, p. 3), those involved in different social processes read and write differently, and these different ways with words are part of different ways of being and doing life.

Furthermore, it is not possible to disregard rules and conventions, which determine whether people act appropriately. Cultural competence involves competence with the meaning system of any social practice; be it political debates, committee meetings, lectures or small talk. Thus, as Lankshear and Knobel (2011) stress, the orientation concentrates on texts in relation to contexts and knowledge what given contexts of practice make for appropriateness and inappropriateness of particular ways of reading and writing (p. 18).

### 3. Multiliteracies perspective

The second distinct orientation, an offspring of the *NLS* research, is the approach of *Multiliteracies*, developed by the New London Group. As Cope and Kalantzis (2000) note, the theory responds to issues of the changing world and the new demands placed upon people as makers of meaning in their changing workplaces, own spaces and dimensions – their life-worlds (p. 4). With an increasing emphasis on digitality, the fundamental ways of becoming literate are modified as they involve being able to access information, using communication technologies and taking action (Leu, 2007, p. 1). Additionally, the nature of literary practices, which go far beyond print, has been redefined by the Internet and other forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Being embedded in popular culture, they are mediated by reading and writing as well as various tools (Gee, 2015, p. 44).

The perspective of literacy as *Multiliteracies* again emphasizes the real-world contexts where literacy is performed, as well as the significance of power relationships. It differs from the first perspective in that it suggests engaging with the multiplicity of communication channels and media and an increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). Accordingly,

it focuses much more on other modes, i.e. multimodal and multimedial aspects of communication, which can be gathered under the umbrella of ‘multimodality’ (Kress, 2010). Multimodality implies that meaning-making occurs through a variety of communicative channels in which “written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, radio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). It is a writing system that is inseparable from cultural organization in which meanings act as semiotic features. Print literacy, a privileged literacy in the school context, is just one of the forms of representations and meaning-making. Also, ‘text’ stands for more than print and includes a variety of print matters and systems (Godhe & Mangusson, 2017, p. 845). Thus, literacy should be perceived as a semiotic organization appearing in different realizations (Kress, 2010, p. 99). The broader scope of interest in different types of texts stems from the latest research conducted on reading comprehension which shows that reading online and offline is not fully isomorphic as skills required in both contexts are different (Leu et al., 2007, p. 2).

Due to a greater emphasis placed on modes of representation and digital technologies, multiliteracies are often associated with the term ‘new literacies’ – literary practices linked to new technologies or practices akin to changing contexts (Lankshear and Knobel 2003: x). Furthermore, the scholars who advocate the perspective focus on globalization stress how it impacts social life, power relationships and how language adapts in response to enable people to participate in a “networked society in which new technologies enable new ways of being and accomplishing things” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007b, p. 14).

However, new literacies are not solely about new technological stuff. They are about ‘a new ethos’ in which literary practices are seen as participative, collaborative and multimodal (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 184–185). These, in Bawden’s (2008) understanding involve “engaging with meaning in intensified digital environments” (p. 19). Another crucial concept linked to the technological stuff and networks is that of ‘the new mindset’. People acknowledging changes accept new ways in which literacy unfolds, i.e. multiple spaces, remade hybrid spaces or travelling across them, which are accessible if appropriate principles of collaboration, leverage and participation are followed (Landshear & Knobel, 2007b: 6). They see the world as de-centred, post-industrial, enabling services and participation, where expertise and authority are distributed and open, enabling new social relations to emerge. They celebrate post-industrial reality because it celebrates inclusion, membership in affinity spaces and collective expertise. It makes criteria and norms for success in enterprise explicit and possible. Also, rather than thinking about new technologies enabling new practices, scholars agree that sometimes it is the new practices that make new technologies emerge. Websites exemplify the very points of what Landkshear and Knobel (2011, p. x) call ‘new ethos’. The chosen sites invite people to interact with content in ways

that make such concepts as ‘participatory culture’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘distributed expertise’ meaningful. Accordingly, doing things requires substantive changes in the ways people approach the contemporary world. By interacting with others, they participate in affinities, enact relationships, share interests or contribute collectively to making sense in chosen affinity groups (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 80). Ever advancing technologies determine who will or will not be available to interact in a participatory culture.

Other terms appearing in the context in educational documents include ‘digital literacy’ or ‘21<sup>st</sup> century literacies’. As Martin (2008) proposes, digital literacy is an “awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities” (p. 167). The tools are employed to access, manage, evaluate, and construct new knowledge, create media expressions and communicate with others in the context of specific life situations. In other words, they enable “constructive social action and reflect upon this process”. In short, new literacies combine digitality with new social acts (Davies, 2012, p. 20). The new social acts in turn require new skills including word processing, hypertext, lab cams, digital streaming podcasts and many more; managing, analysing and synthesizing multiple streams of simultaneous information; building relationships with others by posing and solving problems collaboratively and cross-culturally; knowing how to sample flows rather than work their way through queues; designing and sharing information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes as well as attending to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments. All these are central to individual and community success (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 24–25).

Duly, the ‘stuff’ of new literacies, be it the new ethos, the new mindset or the technological stuff, has multiple implications in the real world. It impacts many domains of people’s public and individualized lives relating to education, doing research or functioning in an increasingly complex world.

#### **4. Critical literacy perspective**

The last major social perspective on literacy, i.e., *Critical literacy orientation*, to some extent considered by the above two paradigms, regards the significance of power relationships. It sees literacy as demonstrating its ideological nature shaped by dominant and privileged groups and their values. Indeed, “versions of sociocultural theory that would better address the issues of power, identity and agency” become indispensable (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 2). It is because, as Freire (2001) notices, literacy stands for people’s relationship to the world, which, if consciously established, can make words be used for purposes of empowerment (p. 173). In other words, it implies a meaningful ability “to reflect about their capacity of reflection about the world, about their position in the world, about the encounter of consciousness” (p. 106). Literary practices must implicate conscious

acting as they “supply different access routes, different degrees of sponsoring power, and different scales of monetary worth to the practices in use” (Brandt, 2001, p. 251).

Accordingly, the critical dimension of literacy involves an awareness that all social practices, including literacies, are culturally constructed and elective. They include some representations and classification – values, purposes, rules, standards and perspectives at the same time excluding others. To participate effectively and productively in any literary practice, people must be socialized into it. However, if individuals are socialized into a social practice without realizing that it is selective, and that it can be acted upon and transformed, they cannot play an active role in changing it. Hence, the critical dimension of literacy is the basis for ensuring that individuals are not merely able to participate in some existing literacy and make meanings within it but that they are able to transform and actively produce it in various ways (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 18).

There are several models that help increase one’s proficiency and understanding of literary texts. They all draw on the functional language analysis approach (FLA), developed by Halliday (1978), which provides a foundation for principles in scrutinising text to show how its features enable it to mean what it does. FLA has helped other analytical resources like a related Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate what text does. Those using the CDA approach can describe, interpret and explain the relationship among language and important issues like economic trends, national policies or educational practices (Rogers, 2004, p. 3). Furthermore, they can identify patterns of language use at the societal level, which are of educational and cultural significance (Wallace, 2003, p. 46). Many other linguists, i.e., Gee (2011), Lankshear & Knobel (2007b), Lewis (2007) or Fairclough (2003), to name just a few, seem to investigate how conscious people perform social acts through literary practices, how they say things, do things and present themselves.

The CDA model was widely accepted and popularised by Fairclough (1992/2003). Fairclough’s analytical procedures involve a three-tiered scheme which includes description, interpretation and explanation of discursive relations and social practices at the local, institutional and societal domains of analysis. This analytical framework was further developed by incorporating elements of systematic functional linguistics. These comprised genre, discourse and style as the three properties of language that operate within and among the local, institutional and societal domains (Chouliarki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 7). Such a widened approach won recognition as it allowed analysts to move between a micro- and macro-investigation of texts.

A more practical and accessible strand in CDA was initiated by Gee’s work (1996, 1999, 2011). Gees’s formerly discussed distinction between D/d discourse serves as a model on which any analysis may be conducted. The small ‘d’ discourse,



the language in use, helps to understand how people write or say things to constitute what they do. In turn, what is written or said informs who the text's participants are at a given time and where the social practices take place, i.e. it determines the participants' social identities. In short, Gee (2004) sees texts as choices, artefacts, made by authors and publishers about events or entities to foreground required information (p. 48). In this respect, Discourse is not merely a pattern of social interactions but it is connected with identity and the way texts are distributed (Gee, 1999/2011, p. 60). Seeing how Discourse operates can move people beyond mere "reading off the effects" achieved due to particular grammar choices (Wallace, 2003, p. 35). By analysing the wording that constructs the participants' roles and the place where the social practice happens, one can get access to more abstract levels of judgement and interpretation and identify "socially recognized ways of using language," which equals with improving literacy (Gee in Lankshear & Knobel, 2007a, p. 3). It is so as CDA, besides relating form and function, involves empirical analyses on how such form-function relationships correlate to specific social practices. It thus seems logical to place the main emphasis on grammatical and semantic analysis to understand social usage of linguistic messages (Fairclough, 2003, p. 6). It may help see texts as strategies in which content is more or less explicit through the structure of narratives.

All in all, being critical involves questioning and not taking for granted everything that language presupposes. It means being reflexive, considering how one's positionality impacts one's interpretation of things; that is paying attention to texts' similarities, differences and the implications which these may have.

## **5. Conclusions**

Given that the sociocultural stand defines literacy so widely, the perspective may easily be critiqued and challenged as too broad. Nevertheless, it has much to offer and its orientations are relevant and in no way mutually exclusive. They all share some elements and conceptualise literacy as something one does. They shed light on the ways in which practices may vary across different communities and the varied ways in which people communicate and make meaning. Being literate requires skills that go beyond decoding, vocabulary and syntax and involves understanding the cultural context, gestures, genre features, or pragmatics. Any definition of literacy must also involve possessing skills required to effectively engage in the literary practices of a given context. Nowadays, it implies the use of some combination of texting, Facebook, Google, Google disc, Chrome and several mobile apps. Tomorrow these might be different means. Finally, sociocultural theories focus on the meaningful and purposeful ways people actually use literacy and their resulting implications. These entail having an understanding of how texts are used in the world to achieve social purposes, as well as having enough knowledge to ensure their own development. All this seems central to what people

do with their lives with literacy being decisive in full civic, economic and personal participation in a global community. Likewise, it has its implications in the present and future designing of educational curricula and syllabi.

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