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## What is Literacy? – A Critical Overview of Sociocultural Perspectives

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### Abstract

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Sociocultural perspectives on literacy include various theories focused on the myriad ways in which people use literacy in context, which include a strong emphasis on power relations. Yet, these theories also have important differences, and many in the field of literacy do not clearly differentiate among them. I provide a critical overview of influential sociocultural perspectives on literacy, focusing on three major perspectives: (1) literacy as social practice, (2) multiliteracies, and (3) critical literacy. In an effort to support researchers in framing their scholarly work and to support practitioners and other consumers of research make sense of research, I discuss the ways in which each theory would answer the question, “What is literacy?” as well as the affordances and limitations of these theories in terms of literacy development, literacy use, and literacy instruction.

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## Introduction

Recent literacy policies and programs have been shaped in large part by cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives (e.g., Muth & Perry, 2010; Pearson & Hiebert, 2010), such as those promoted by the National Institute for Literacy (e.g., McShane, 2005), the National Reading Panel (2000), and the National Early Literacy Panel (2008), that focus on particular skills such as phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. Although they have had a lesser impact on policy and instruction, sociocultural approaches to literacy have long played an important role in the field of literacy. Indeed, many of the theories that literacy scholars draw upon in their work emerge from sociocultural perspectives (Gee, 2000; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007a; Tracey & Morrow, 2006) grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978). While sociocultural theories of literacy development and practice have been taken up in K-12 contexts, much of the groundwork for these theories originated in adult, family, and community literacy research from scholars such as Street (1984), Barton and Hamilton (1998), Heath (1983), and Purcell-Gates (1995). This research has been concerned with understanding the ways in which people use literacy in their everyday lives, finding ways to make literacy instruction meaningful and relevant by recognizing and incorporating students' out-of-school ways of practicing literacy, and decreasing achievement gaps for students whose families and communities practice literacy in ways that may differ from those in the mainstream or in positions of power.

Although there is no single sociocultural theory on literacy, literacy scholars sometimes treat sociocultural perspectives on literacy as unified or interchangeable. Indeed, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007b) argue that “the word sociocultural has taken on both great prominence, and, we would assert, some lack of clarity in application” (p. 1). One widely-adopted graduate text, Tracey and Morrow's (2006) *Lenses on Reading*, illustrates the way in which sociocultural theories are often undifferentiated, in comparison to cognitive theories. This book contains one chapter on social learning theories; in contrast, the cognitive theory of Constructivism receives its own chapter, and Information/Cognitive Processing theories are spread over three entire chapters. Some may argue that this treatment reflects the relative “newness” of the acceptance of sociocultural perspectives on literacy development; however, sociocultural and sociolinguistic theories on literacy development and practice have been influential for decades.

Because of the differences among the various theories united under the sociocultural umbrella, it is more appropriate to speak of sociocultural perspectives as a collection of related theories that include significant emphases on the social and cultural contexts in which literacy is practiced. Major theoretical perspectives within this paradigm include *literacy as a social practice*, *multiliteracies*, and *multiple literacies*. Sociocultural perspectives also include an emphasis on power relations; thus, *critical theories* play an important role in this perspective. In fact, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007a) suggest that the term *critical sociocultural perspective* may be appropriate to describe many of these theories. Having a clear understanding of the specific theories that fall under the sociocultural umbrella is important for both literacy researchers and literacy practitioners. For example, is there a difference between *multiliteracies* and *multiple literacies*? Are *new literacies* and *new literacy studies* the same? The theoretical ways in which we describe literacy matter: Terms like *new literacies*, *multiliteracies*, or *literacy as a social practice* have implications that extend beyond the pages of scholarly and professional journals:

Metaphors for literacy do not stand on their own. They are part of a particular view on literacy that has implications for how we think about learners, how we think about what they ought to learn and how this could be achieved. (Papen, 2000, p. 12)

Given the ways in which theories shape our understandings of literacy learning and instruction, my goal in this manuscript is to provide a critical overview of influential sociocultural perspectives on literacy. As there simply is not enough space for a complete review of all theories that fall under the sociocultural umbrella, I focus this review on three major perspectives: (1) literacy as social practice, (2) multiliteracies, and (3) critical literacy. I discuss the affordances and limitations of these theories; that is, the ways in which these theories are – and are not – useful in speaking to literacy development, literacy use, and literacy instruction. This critical overview may be helpful for literacy researchers in framing their scholarly work; it also may help practitioners and other consumers make sense of research emerging from this paradigm.

### **Framing the Perspective**

Sociocultural perspectives on literacy are related to sociolinguistic conceptualizations of the ways in which language instantiates culture (e.g., Gee, 1996; Halliday, 1973), the ways in which language use varies according to contexts (Bakhtin, 1986), the relationship between language use and power (Bourdieu, 1991), and the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1994). Halliday, coming from a functional linguistics perspective, suggested that culture is realized through language. Language, thus, is never independent of social world, as it always occurs within and is shaped by a cultural context. According to Gee (1996), language “always comes fully attached to ‘other stuff’: to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world” (p. vii). Literacy, as one form of language use, therefore reflects all of this “other stuff.” Sociolinguists have described the many ways in which language and literacy are patterned according to context – what Bakhtin (1986) referred to as *speech genres*. Gee’s (1996) construct of *Discourses* as an “identity kit” similarly illustrates the ways in which language is connected with social roles and cultural and political contexts. Bourdieu (1991) suggested that language, as a set of practices, is more than a system of words and grammatical rules, but “also an often forgotten or hidden struggle over the symbolic power of a particular way of communicating” (Duranti, 1997, p. 45).

An emphasis on culture, activity, identity, power, and the sociocultural contexts in which literacy occurs engenders approaches that align with this epistemological viewpoint. In advocating for an *ethnography of communication*, Hymes (1994) argued that “facets of the cultural values and beliefs, social institutions and forms, roles and personalities, history and ecology of a community may have to be examined in their bearing on communicative events and patterns” (p. 12). Responding to calls for situated understandings of language and literacy in use, much of the empirical work that has led to the development of current sociocultural perspectives has emerged from ethnographic research, discourse analysis (Rex et al., 2010), and other situated case studies of literacy in practice. According to Street (2001), various perspectives coming out of anthropology and sociolinguistics focused researchers on the ways in which people used reading and writing in different contexts. As Street notes,

The rich cultural variation in these practices and conceptions leads us to rethink what we mean by them and to be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people's literacies. (p. 430)

Much sociocultural research in literacy, therefore, is built on an assumption that “an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings” (Street, 2001, p. 430). Street warns, however, that it is not enough “to extol simply the richness and variety of literacy practices made accessible through such ethnographic detail: we also need bold theoretical models that recognize the central role of power relations in literacy practices” (p. 430).

### **Major Sociocultural Theories of Literacy**

In the following sections, I describe the theories of *literacy as social practice*, *multiliteracies*, and *critical literacy*, describing what is common among the three perspectives, as well as what differs among them. Because literacy as a situated social practice underpins other theories within the larger umbrella of sociocultural theories on literacy, I devote more space to the discussion of this particular theory than the others in this manuscript, in order to lay the groundwork for understanding other theories.

#### **Literacy as Social Practice**

The theory of literacy as a social practice has been heavily influenced by Street's (1985) early work in Iran. Grounded in data that described the various ways in which people used reading and writing for different purposes in their everyday lives, Street's theory contrasted *autonomous* and *ideological* models of literacy. The autonomous model – under which most formal literacy instruction operates – conceptualizes literacy in strictly technical terms. That is, literacy is assumed to be a set of neutral, decontextualized skills that can be applied in any situation. Literacy is something that one either has or does not have; people are either literate or illiterate, and those who are illiterate are deficient. The autonomous model attributes important consequences both to individual cognition and to society through the intrinsic characteristics that literacy is assumed to have. In contrast, the ideological model conceptualizes literacy as a set of practices (as opposed to skills) that are grounded in specific contexts and “inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society” (p. 433).

Others working within this tradition (e.g., Alvermann, 2008; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Hagood, 2002; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007a; Luke, 2003, 2004; Purcell-Gates, 2007), sometimes referred to as the *New Literacy Studies*, have added to this theory. As Street (2003) explains,

What has come to be termed the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1996) represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985). This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power...and asking “whose literacies” are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant. (p. 77)

In this sense, the term *New Literacy Studies* is essentially equivalent to literacy as a social practice. What is “new” in this sense? As Lankshear and Knobel (2003) explain, “the *New Literacy Studies* comprise a new paradigm for looking at literacy, as opposed to the paradigm, based on psychology, that was already well established” (p. 2; emphasis in original). In other words, the *New Literacy Studies* challenges autonomous paradigms of literacy.

The theoretical work of Barton, Hamilton, and others based at the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre in the United Kingdom has been particularly influential in further developing theories of literacy as social practice. In answer to the question “What is literacy?,” theorists of literacy as a social practice would say that literacy is what people *do* with reading, writing, and texts in real world contexts and why they do it: Barton and Hamilton (2000) note that “in the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy” (p. 7). They caution, however, that practices involve more than actions with texts; practices connect to, and are shaped by, values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships. Social relationships are crucial, as “literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relationships between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals” (p. 8). Barton and Hamilton (2000) outlined six propositions about the nature of literacy:

1. Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts
2. There are different literacies associated with different domains of life
3. Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others
4. Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices
5. Literacy is historically situated
6. Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. (p. 8)

Drawing upon Heath’s (1983) work, Barton and Hamilton differentiate between *literacy events* and *literacy practices*. Literacy events are observable; that is, we can see what people are doing with texts. Practices, in contrast, must be inferred because they connect to unobservable beliefs, values, attitudes, and power structures. Due to the emphasis on literacy events, those who work within this framework of literacy as social practice tend to focus on print and written texts.

An example may be useful here in illustrating the nature of literacy as a social practice. Sudanese refugees frequently engaged in literacy events that involved reading the Bible for various purposes (Perry, 2007, 2008, 2009), such as following along during a church service, for Bible study classes, or for guiding personal prayer. As a social practice, these events connected with the larger life domain of religion or spirituality. Reading the Bible was done purposefully, for a variety of reasons, as the refugees engaged with their Christian communities. This practice has been shaped by the social institution of the church, with historical and power dimensions. Historically, socially, and politically, the practice of reading the Bible is generally valued among the mainstream culture of the U.S., which has been predominantly Judeo-Christian. Thus, the practice of reading the Bible is, at least in the U.S., more dominant, privileged, and valued above the practice of reading other holy texts, such as the Quran. However, this practice must also be

considered in the historical context of the participants' lives: In the Sudan, African Christians are a minority that has been actively oppressed by the Arabized Muslim majority. Reading the Quran was a more dominant and privileged practice that was valued above reading the Bible; in fact, reading the Bible (practicing Christianity) could have serious negative consequences. Finally, this practice has changed for these refugees as their contexts have changed. Many participants switched to reading the Bible in English instead of in their native Arabic, in order to actively participate within American Christian communities.

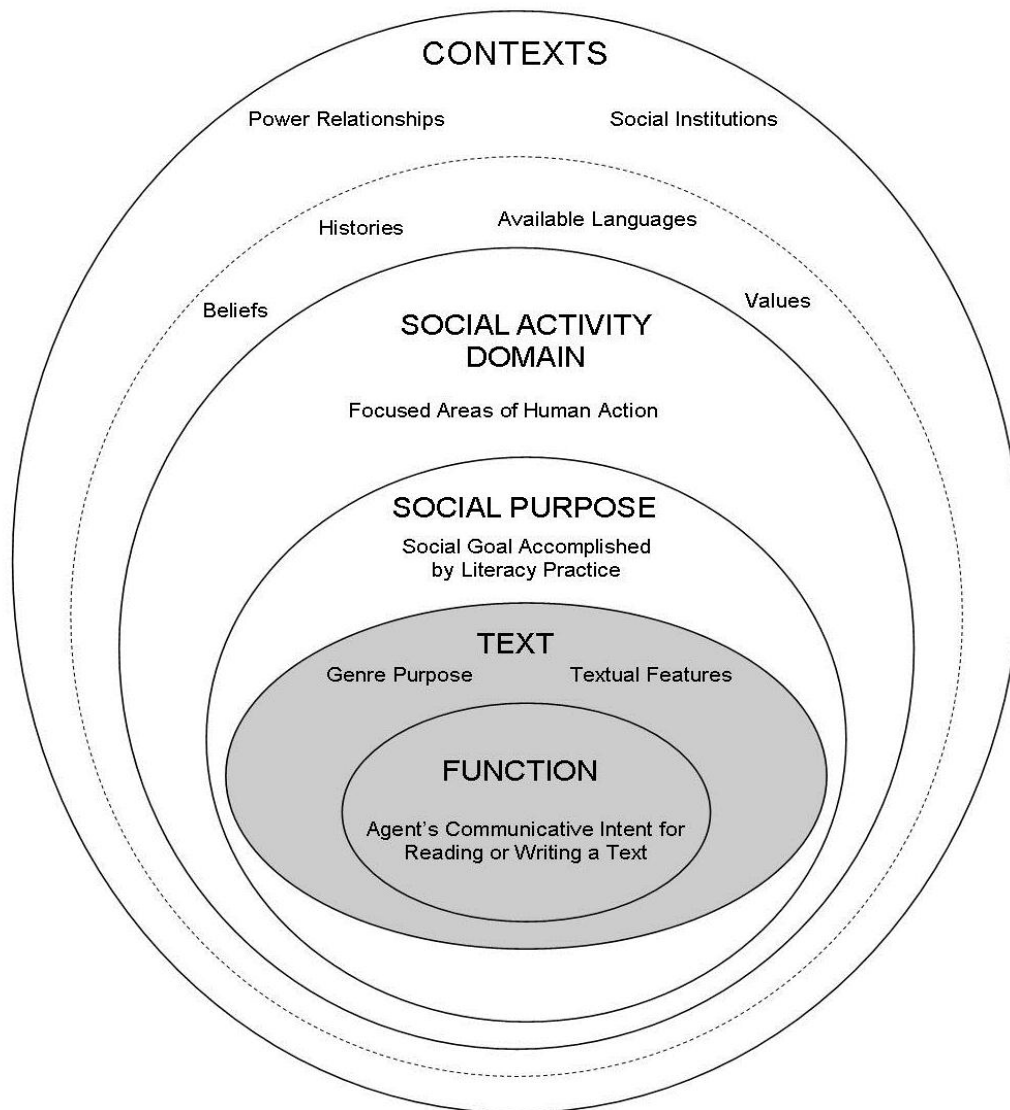
One critique of existing theories of literacy as social practice is that the connection between literacy events and literacy practices has been, at best, vague. How can practices be inferred from events? In our ongoing work with the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS), Purcell-Gates and I have used the theory of literacy as a social practice to frame our investigations of literacy in various marginalized communities. Over the past eight years, the process of analyzing the data across multiple case studies has allowed us to develop a model (Figure 1) that represents the theoretical relationship between literacy events and literacy practices (Purcell-Gates, Perry, & Briseño, 2011).

The central, shaded layers of the model represent observable literacy events, beginning with the agent's intent for reading or writing, and then moving to the text itself. For example, a refugee from Iraq may read through online admissions information for various university programs to learn information about program(s) to which he or she might apply. Together, this function or communicative intent (locating admissions information), along with the actual text (online university websites), mediates the agent's purpose for engaging in the event (to apply for – and, ideally, to obtain – admission to a university program). This immediate social goal is shaped by larger domains of social activity (such as *schooling*), which are in turn shaped by other contextual layers. For example, the applicant's personal history, along with beliefs and values, will help to shape which types of programs he or she might apply for. If the applicant had previously been educated and worked as a doctor in Iraq, he or she might apply for medical programs in order to be certified to practice in the U.S. Power relationships and social structures are integral to this context: If, for example, the applicant cannot provide documentation of his or her prior educational attainment, due to having fled his or her country under duress, this lack of documentation will shape whether or not he or she may apply to certain programs.

Although the theory of literacy as social practice may not explain the process of *how* people learn to read and write, it can help to describe *what types* of knowledge are needed in order to effectively engage in given literacy practices. By investigating the practice of *literacy brokering* among Sudanese refugees (Perry, 2009), in which individuals seek informal help with texts and literacy practices, I identified three broad aspects of knowledge that adults need in order to effectively engage in literacy practices: lexico-syntactic and graphophonic knowledge, cultural knowledge, and written genre knowledge (Figure 2).

**Figure 1. Model of a literacy practice.**

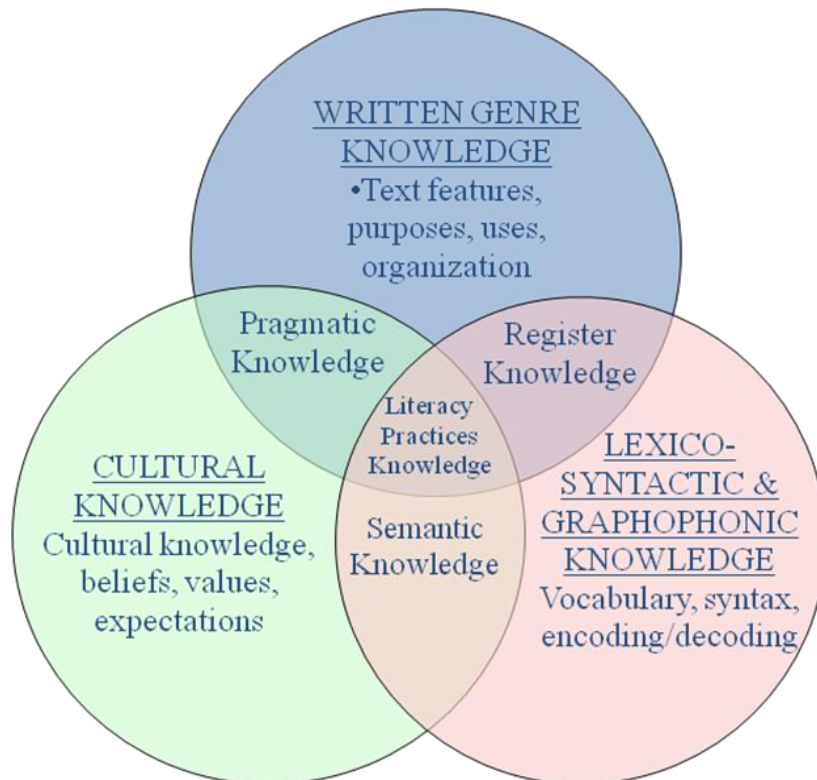
Reprinted from Purcell-Gates, V., Perry, K.H., & Briseño, A. (2011). Analyzing Literacy Practice: Grounded Theory to Model. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 45(4), 439-458. Copyright 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.



### Model of a Literacy Practice

The areas shaded in gray represent an observable *literacy event*, while the unshaded areas represent inferred aspects of the larger *literacy practice* that contextualize and shape the event.

**Figure 2. Aspects of knowledge needed in order to engage in literacy practices.**  
 Reprinted from Perry, K. (2009). Genres, contexts, and literacy practices: Literacy brokering among Sudanese refugee families. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(3), 256-276. Copyright 2009 by John Wiley & Sons. Used with permission.”



Lexico-syntactic and graphophonic knowledge consist of knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and how a given language is encoded and decoded in print. Cultural knowledge includes beliefs, values, and expectations. Genre knowledge includes knowledge of the textual features, uses, purposes for use, and organization of given genres. This model illustrates the usefulness of viewing literacy as a set of social practices, because it shows that cognitive skills (e.g., the ability to decode) are only one part of what it takes to be literate. In addition, individuals must have a great deal of context-dependent knowledge to engage in a literacy practice.

For example, one refugee family needed help understanding the meaning of, as well as what they were supposed to do with, sweepstakes documents they had received in the mail. The wife had unsuccessfully tried calling the company for more information to learn what they were supposed to do to claim the \$1,000,000 they believed they had won. Neither participant knew how sweepstakes programs worked in the U.S., and because they did not know how to either read the fine print or read between the lines, they took the documents' statements at face value. As the literacy broker in this event, I had to explain the concept of a sweepstakes to the couple. I showed them some of the “tricky” language the letter used (e.g., you will win “if you have the



winning number” [emphasis added]) and shared that my family referred to this type of text as “junk mail,” reflecting our belief that it was “not good.” These refugees, who were literate in several languages, needed access to a great deal of information in order to know what to do with the sweepstakes documents. Without cultural background knowledge regarding the sweepstakes and other similar schemes in the U.S., without experience with the genre of direct-mail marketing ploys, without knowledge of the registers used in such genres, this couple could not make sense of the documents, and they were at a loss as to what to *do* with them.

### **Multiliteracies**

Both derived and distinct from theories of literacy as social practice is the theory of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), developed by the New London Group. As Cope and Kalantzis (2000) note, the group’s focus was “the big picture; the changing world and the new demands being placed upon people as makers of meaning in changing workplaces, as citizens in changing public spaces and in the changing dimensions of our community lives – our lifeworlds” (p. 4). Like the perspective of literacy as social practice, multiliteracies emphasizes the real-world contexts in which people practice literacy. This theory also places significant emphasis on the role of power relationships in shaping literacy and literacy learning.

The theory of multiliteracies differs from literacy as social practice in important ways. The construct of multiliteracies suggests two arguments: “The first argument engages with the multiplicity of communications channels and media; the second with the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). While the increased emphasis on cultural and linguistic diversity certainly aligns with theories of literacy as social practice, the emphasis on multiple communication channels is different. As Cope and Kalantzis note, this theory “focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone” (p. 5).

In other words, scholars who work within theories of literacy as social practice tend to focus on practices that surround *print* literacy, while those who work within the theory of multiliteracies emphasize what Kress (2000a, 2000b) terms *multimodality*. 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, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). In fact, Kress and others who work within this framework actively criticize those who focus primarily on print literacy practices:

So-called literate Western societies have for too long insisted on the priority of a particular form of engagement, through a combination of hearing and sight: with the sense of hearing specialized to the sounds of speech, and the sense of sight specialized to the graphic representation of sounds by “letters”, on flat surfaces. (Kress, 2000b, p. 184)

In critiquing the overemphasis on written forms of meaning-making and the neglect of other modes of representation, Kress calls for a theory of semiosis that accounts for the “‘interested action’ of socially located, culturally and historically formed individuals, as the remakers, the transformers, and the re-shapers of the representational resources available to them” (Kress, 2000a, p. 155). That is, in answer to the question “What is literacy?,” those who ascribe to the multiliteracies perspective actively reject definitions of literacy that focus solely on print or written texts and instead view literacy as involving multiple modes of visual, gestural, spatial,

and other forms of representation. Multiliteracies scholars do not reject print literacy, but they view it as only one form of representation and meaning-making among many – one that has been, and continues to be, privileged above other forms in schooling. The salient difference between theories of literacy as social practice and multiliteracies is how *text* is defined: multiliteracies theorists do not limit their definition of *text* to print only and instead include a variety of forms and semiotic systems.

Given the emphasis on multiple media and modes of representation, digital technologies, and their associated literacy practices are an important focus of work within multiliteracies. As a result, multiliteracies is often associated with the term *new literacies*, which may refer either to literacy practices that are associated with digital technologies or practices associated with a rapidly changing social context, depending on who is using the term (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

The New London Group and others have taken critical stances to higher levels than have researchers in the social practice framework (although this trend appears to be changing). Much of the work of the New London Group, for example, focuses on the changing social, economic, and political world; they discuss the implications of the post-Fordist economy and globalization as well as the implications these trends have on life chances and social futures (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Thus, while many who work within the theory of literacy practice acknowledge the dynamic nature of both culture and literacy practices, those within the multiliteracies framework place a much greater emphasis on the changing nature of the world – and the power relationships that are constructed within – and the ways in which language and literacy use change and adapt in response. As an example of ways in which a multiliteracies perspective impacts literacy research and instruction, Alvermann (2008) paraphrases Lankshear and Knobel's (2007) discussion of mindsets:

The first mindset assumes that the contemporary world has undergone little social, cultural, and economic change since the advent of cyberspace, except for one thing—technologies in use are greater in number and more sophisticated. The second assumes that the world has changed significantly as a result of individuals' eagerness to participate in a networked society in which digital technologies enable new ways of being and accomplishing things. (p. 14)

A critical stance is especially apparent in the multiliteracies theory's implications for practice. While researchers and theorists working within the framework of literacy as social practice have, for the most part, focused on describing the many ways in which various communities practice literacy, there has been less emphasis on implications for practice in literacy instruction. In contrast, much of the theory of multiliteracies is intimately tied to instructional implications. The New London Group's work argues that education must be reformed in such a way that encourages situated practice for critical understanding. Only through this pedagogy of multiliteracies can literacy education raise critical consciousness and ultimately transform practice. Thus, in responding to the question of what literacy is, scholars in this tradition might respond that we cannot think about what literacy is without also thinking about the ways in which literacy is taught. For example, Alvermann (2008) suggests that the second "mindset," described above, implies that expertise and authority are distributed, which blurs the distinction

between teachers and learners. Similarly, in describing the impact of new literacies on instruction, Hagood (2003) argues that critical media literacy should involve “engaging students in the analysis of textual images (both print and nonprint), the study of audiences, and the mapping of subject positions such that differences become cause for celebration rather than distrust” (p. 194).

### **Critical Literacy**

Both of the perspectives described thus far include at least some consideration of power relationships. Street’s work highlights the ideological nature of literacy, while Barton and Hamilton (and many others within the social practices perspective) note the ways in which literacy practices are shaped by power. Kress and others within the multiliteracies framework critique those who focus only on print literacy, suggesting that this semiotic mode may be overly privileged in Western societies. In contrast, critical theories emphasize both power and empowerment, and recently have expanded to include issues of agency and identity (e.g., Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Hagood, 2002; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007a; Moje & Luke, 2009). Indeed, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje call for “versions of sociocultural theory that would better address the issues of power, identity, and agency” (2007b, p. 2).

In defining literacy as reading both the *word* and the *world*, Freire (2001) recognized that literacy is more than a cognitive skill and that it includes power relationships. For Freire, the important point is “to understand literacy as the relationship of learners to the world” (p. 173). That is,

To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands; it is to *communicate* graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables – lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context. (p. 86; emphasis in original)

Freire (2001) defined literacy as a process of *conscientização*, or consciousness, which means taking the printed word, connecting it to the world, and then using that for purposes of empowerment. For Freire, “Literacy makes sense only in these terms, as the consequence of men’s beginning to reflect about their capacity for reflection, about the world, about their position in the world, about the encounter of consciousness” (p. 106).

Other critical theorists also have employed similar frameworks. Through her ethnographic work, Brandt (2001, 2009) used the construct of *sponsorship* to explore the ways in which individual literacy development connects to large-scale economic forces. Sponsors, according to Brandt,

Are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way.... Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes. (2001, p. 556)

While aligning in many ways with theories of literacy as social practice, Brandt brings issues of power to the forefront. She argues that analysis of sponsorship requires consideration of

not merely how one social group's literacy practices may differ from another's, but how everybody's literacy practices are operating in differential economies, which supply different access routes, different degrees of sponsoring power, and different scales of monetary worth to the practices in use. (2001, p. 561)

Brandt highlights the ways in which literacy acts as a commodity – one that individuals and groups may appropriate, misappropriate, or even reject. She suggests that theorists of literacy as social practice have exaggerated the power of local contexts to determine the “meaning and forms that literacy takes” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 337). Brandt seeks to restore the “somethingness” of literacy, in which literacy itself is a participant in literate events and practices.

While Brandt's work focuses on larger contextual factors, many working within a critical literacy perspective have focused on identity and on the ways in which individuals respond to power through literate practices, grounded in Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) work on identity and culture. Identity as a theoretical construct is intimately tied to critical literacy, as Hagood (2002) contends:

What is central to critical literacy that focuses on identity is the influence of the text and specifically of identities in texts on the reader. The text, imbued with societal and cultural structures of race, class, and gender, marks the site of the struggle for power, knowledge, and representation. (pp. 250-251)

Moje and Luke (2009) offer a comprehensive theoretical overview of identity within sociocultural perspectives on literacy; they note that while five general metaphors for identity shape literacy researchers' work in various ways, the commonality among them is that the construct of *identity* foregrounds the actor or agent in literate and social practices. Moje and Luke contend that identities mediate, and are mediated by, the texts that individuals read, write, and talk about, and that a theoretical focus on identity “is crucial, not to control the identities that students produce, construct, form, or enact but to avoid controlling identities” (p. 433).

The work of French sociolinguistic theorist Bourdieu (1991) offers a helpful frame for understanding critical theories, and for seeing the ways in which critical theories can, and do, connect with theories of literacy as social practice and multiliteracies. Bourdieu's work makes connections among language use, power and politics. Bourdieu connects his concept of *habitus* – the set of dispositions that incline us to think and act in certain ways – to that of *cultural capital*. That is, linguistic utterances are signs of both status and authority. Bourdieu, thus, believes that all linguistic exchanges (including those involving written texts) “are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (p. 37). Bourdieu argues that the social uses of language (including literacy) also symbolically reproduce power relationships and social differences. Various agents have more or less symbolic power, depending upon whether or not their symbolic capital is recognized by

those in power. Bourdieu argues that the powerful (such as educators) do symbolic violence when they deny or denigrate the practices of others (such as minority students).

### **What is Productive About Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy?**

The various theories included in sociocultural perspectives have much to offer the field of literacy in general. Notions about literacy have been shifting over the years, including beliefs that literacy is a singular skill set and that people are either literate or illiterate (Muth & Perry, 2010). Conceptualizing literacy as something one does, as opposed to a skill or ability one has, helps us understand the real-world ways in which real people actually engage with real texts, which ultimately could help educators make formal literacy instruction more meaningful and relevant for learners. As Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007b) note, “Few other theories have shed so much light on the education of people whose language, literacy, and very being have traditionally been marginalized or disenfranchised in schools and societies” (p. 3).

Understanding literacy as a socially-contextualized practice helps us understand the ways in which practices may vary across diverse communities, and the ways in which they also are dynamic and malleable. Understanding multiliteracies helps us understand the varied ways in which people communicate and make meaning, as well as resulting implications for language and literacy instruction. The focus on issues of power also helps us understand issues of access that people have, the ways in which social, economic and political structures may shape literacy practices, and the ways in which people may appropriate or reject certain practices. Running across all three major perspectives are implications for authentic literacy instruction, redefining *functional literacy*, and understanding power and literacy.

### **Focus on Authentic, Real-World Practice**

Sociocultural theories related to literacy focus on what people actually do with texts – the meaningful, purposeful ways in which people actually use literacy in real-world contexts. Viewing literacy as a diverse set of contextualized practices helps researchers and practitioners understand the full range of ways in which people use literacy in their everyday lives, as well as the various types of complex knowledge that users need to have in order to effectively practice literacy. When educators understand the diverse ways in which people practice literacy – and that these ways are intimately connected with who these people are and the contexts in which they exist – they may be able to better tailor literacy instruction to meet the needs of learners. For example, Jacobsen, Degener, and Purcell-Gates (2003) and Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Martineau (2007) advocate for teaching with authentic literacy materials and activities in education.

According to Jacobsen, Degener, and Purcell-Gates (2003), authentic, learner-centered instruction means using “print materials used in ways that they would be used in the lives of learners outside of their adult education classes” (p. 1). In other words, instructors use real-world texts for real-world purposes, not simply for the purpose of learning to read and write. For example, immigrant students might be interested in advocating for legislation such as the Dream Act; their instructor might use newspapers or internet news articles in reading instruction and encourage their students to write letters to the editor or to politicians to advocate for their positions. Thus, students are engaged with real-world texts for purposes that extend beyond classroom instructional goals. Yet, sociocultural perspectives on literacy also require an

understanding that what is authentic and meaningful in one context might not necessarily be so in another; the contextualized nature of authenticity requires nuanced understandings of literacy practices in order to make literacy instruction relevant and meaningful.

Although a focus on real-world practices may not effectively explain *how* people become literate in the first place, it can speak to the ways in which informal literacy learning occurs, particularly in out-of-school contexts. Theories related to literacy brokering (Mazak, 2006; Perry, 2009), literacy sponsorship (Brandt, 2001, 2009), or apprenticeship and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) offer insights into the ways in which people acquire, adopt, or appropriate new practices and/or facility with new textual genres. These informal learning theories may have something to offer formal instructional practice, particularly when instructors wish to teach in authentic, meaningful ways. Understanding and acknowledging the informal ways in which people gain access to new texts and practices in their everyday lives may lead to insights into the effective skills and strategies learners already use that can be built upon in formal instructional settings.

### **Redefining “Functional Literacy”**

Understanding literacy as a diverse set of practices should force researchers and practitioners to ask real questions about what terms like *functional literacy* mean. Papen (2005) argues that functional literacy is increasingly defined by economic considerations, as literacy has become “identified with the skills needed in the context of employment and economic development” (p. 9). For example, Papen quotes Rassool (1999), who defines basic literacy as “the acquisition of technical skills involving the decoding of written texts and the writing of simple statements within the context of everyday life” (p. 7). Those working within sociocultural theories of literacy would argue that a skills-driven model of functional literacy, particularly one grounded so heavily in employment and economics, ignores or denies the multiplicity of ways in which people meaningfully engage with print in their everyday lives. Sociocultural theories force consideration that individuals who might be considered “illiterate” in certain contexts may, in fact, be able to effectively read, write, and otherwise meaningfully engage with texts in other contexts. Conversely, these theories also suggest that individuals may be highly literate in some contexts, but have low levels of functional literacy in others. Many academics I know, for example, have been very successful in academic publishing, but face great difficulties in navigating new digital forms of communication, such as text messaging or social networking websites.

The results of my own work with refugees from Sudan required me to rethink and reconceptualize how I defined *functional literacy* and *basic skills*. The participants’ frequent need for brokering related to genre suggests that functional literacy involves more than being able to decode words on a page. Skills that are “basic” to being a functionally literate person go beyond decoding, vocabulary, and syntax and include an understanding of the cultural context, of genre features and purposes, of pragmatics. Any definition of functional literacy must capture all of these skills required to effectively engage in the literacy practices of a given context. Thus, being *functionally literate* involves having an understanding of the ways in which texts are used in the world to achieve social goals and purposes (Perry, 2009). Those who work within the multiliteracies framework likely would extend this definition even further, suggesting that a functionally literate person is one who is adept at using a variety of semiotic modes of

communication in the contexts in which those modes are used. Similarly, critical theorists also would challenge such a simplistic, skills-based notion of functional literacy, instead suggesting that someone is not functionally literate until that person can understand their world “in terms of justice and injustice, power and oppression, and so ultimately, to transform it” (Papen, 2005, p. 11).

### **Understanding Power**

A focus on the importance of issues of power is a thread that runs throughout sociocultural theories of literacy. Cognitive/psycholinguistic theories do not (and perhaps cannot) speak to the ways in which power relations shape literacy practices, and this focus on power is therefore an important contribution that sociocultural perspectives make to understandings of literacy and its use in the world. Sociocultural perspectives help researchers and practitioners to see and understand the ways in which power relationships help to determine which literacy practices are available to a given community, which are dominant and privileged, and which are marginalized (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984). For example, Street’s (1984) work demonstrates that the written practices associated with schooling are only one type of the many literate practices available, yet they are the practices that are both dominant and valued by those in power, and thus privileged. Kress (2000b) would extend this claim even further, by arguing that a focus on written texts and practices (and not the full range of semiotic modes) further privileges some practices and modes at the expense of other meaningful and valuable modes.

A focus on power also offers an understanding of the agentive ways in which dominant literacy practices are adopted, appropriated for new purposes, or rejected (Brandt, 2001, 2009; Perry & Purcell-Gates, 2005). In fact, this perspective raises awareness that individuals are agentive, and they appropriate or reject practices in purposeful ways that meet their needs – or in some instances, even challenge the practices of those in power.

### **Limitations of this Paradigm**

While sociocultural perspectives offer much to the field of literacy, there certainly are limitations. Scholars who work within this tradition have a wide range of ways in which they define the construct of *literacy*. While most who fall under the theory of literacy as social practice tend to focus on a definition of literacy that involves print or written text, those who espouse multiliteracies do not limit their definition to print and instead expand their definition of literacy to include all semiotic systems. Similarly, while Freire’s (2001) work involved a focus on teaching print literacy, he also expanded that definition of literacy to include “the relationship of learners to the world” (p. 173), including the process of *conscientização* – connecting print to the real world for purposes of empowerment.

Given these wide definitions of literacy, some of which do not necessarily involve the ability to use print, one legitimate critique of this perspective is that *literacy* can be so broadly defined as to be almost meaningless. Depending on the particular theory involved, literacy can be defined as *any* form of communication/thinking, or “any old semiotic competence” (Erik Jacobson, personal communication, December 1, 2010). In fact, common parlance has co-opted the term *literacy* in this very way; thus, in terms like *financial literacy* or *cultural literacy*, *literacy* equals

facility with a particular body of knowledge, and not necessarily the ability to engage with print. While it is possible to maintain a focus on print literacy while also acknowledging that other semiotic systems are also in play and are important, it is also fair to claim that something is lost when the field defines literacy so broadly. While many semiotic systems exist, and while humans have the ability to make meaning multimodally, it is also true that there can be great benefit to understanding specific semiotic systems, such as written language, on their own terms.

The paradigm's focus on specific sociocultural contexts is an important aspect of this perspective, yet it is also a potential limitation. Understanding the unique ways in which contexts shape literacy practices – taking each context on its own terms – also has the effect of limiting the ways in which we can meaningfully speak across contexts. Moreover, as Brandt and Clinton (2002) suggest, a focus on the local introduces “methodological bias and conceptual impasses” (p. 337). Given the emphasis on social, cultural, and political contexts, researchers who work within this paradigm rightly tend to use ethnographic, discourse analysis, and/or case study methodologies. Yet, the nature of these methodologies also necessarily limits the nature of the claims that can be made. Unlike methodologies that aim for generalizability, the results of ethnographic, discourse analysis, and case study research are context-dependent, which also serves to limit the claims and other implications that can be made from these studies. This difficulty in speaking across contexts has been a significant limitation of this perspective (although the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study is attempting to challenge this limitation – see Purcell-Gates, Perry, & Briseño, 2011). Similarly, Brandt and Clinton (2002) rightfully critique this perspective as assuming “separations between the local and the global, agency and social structure, and literacy and its technology” (p. 338).

Another limitation to this paradigm, to which I have already alluded, is that it does not speak particularly well to the *process* of becoming literate. While we can observe the multifaceted ways in which people actually use literacy in their real lives, while family and emergent literacy theories attempt to address the ways in which sociocultural factors shape literacy development, and while we can also observe the informal ways in which people acquire new practices, sociocultural perspectives are limited in their ability to explain what actually happens when an individual learns to read and write – that is, when someone learns how to decode, encode, and otherwise make sense of written text. As a result, while sociocultural perspectives make an important – and, I would argue, essential – contribution to our understanding of what literacy is and how it should be taught and assessed, this theory alone may not be able to fully explain the phenomenon of literacy.

Similarly, although this paradigm offers some explanations for achievement gaps in literacy development (e.g., that learners with low literacy levels may experience difficulty because school literacy practices do not align well with or devalue what is considered meaningful and important in their cultural contexts), it also does not address the real difficulties that learners may have with acquiring literacy. This limitation may have significant, tangible consequences for learners who may have real cognitive limitations or learning disabilities. As a result, sociocultural paradigms may be limited in what they can offer instructors who are working with struggling readers.

## Conclusions



In addition to the above limitations, those working within cognitive and psycholinguistic paradigms critique the sociocultural paradigm for ignoring issues of learning/development and schooling, for having a diminished focus on print literacy and the important cognitive sub-skills related to print literacy, and for having too few practical implications for instruction. I have attempted to address some of these critiques in my previous discussion. For example, I have shown that some newer research does look at issues of learning and development, albeit largely from an informal learning perspective. In adult and family literacy, for example, researchers have demonstrated practical applications of sociocultural perspectives in instruction by using authentic literacy materials and activities (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Gagne, & Jang, 2009; Jacobsen, Degener, & Purcell-Gates, 2003). Similarly, practical instructional implications also come from thinking about issues of critical literacy (a la Freire), as Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) demonstrated in work with women in Nicaragua.

Despite limitations and legitimate critiques, the sociocultural paradigm nevertheless has much to offer theory, research, and instructional practice in literacy. All paradigms offer both limitations and strengths, and they do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. As Papen (2005) noted, the metaphors – and, I would add, theories – the field uses to think about literacy shape thinking about literacy instruction. Because there are real implications for real learners, it therefore behooves researchers and theorists to think carefully about what various paradigms offer and to not dismiss alternate paradigms out of hand. For example, in their book, *Print Literacy Development: Uniting Cognitive and Social Practice Theories*, Purcell-Gates, Jacobsen, and Degener (2004) critique seemingly contradictory perspectives and offer a useful lens through which both paradigms may be united.

Although it is certainly true that the sociocultural paradigm may only poorly explain the processes by which people become literate, and although it is also true that these theories, as yet, may be more limited in what practical implications they can offer literacy instruction, it is also true that in order to truly understand literacy and learners, educators must see literacy and learners in *all* contexts, not just in the contexts of schooling. Additionally, there also must be an understanding that cognitive processes are shaped by the social contexts and practices in which they occur. As Purcell-Gates, Jacobsen, and Degener (2004) claim, “to study reading and writing as if they exist separately from larger, socially related and constructed discourses is, at best, foolish and, at worst, hegemonic” (p. 66). What is needed is an understanding that literacy development can, and does, occur in all contexts – and that formal schooling is only one of those contexts.

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