

# WRITING AND LITERACY



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# LITERACY: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

Text:

Barton, David. 2007. *Literacy: an introduction to the ecology of written language*. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ch. 1. An integrated approach to literacy, pp. 1-9.

Ch. 3. The social basis of literacy, pp. 33-50.

# WHY STUDY LITERACY?

- "The nature of knowledge and the nature of communication are changing in fundamental ways, and literacy is central to this."
- "More than one hundred years after the introduction of compulsory schooling we do not have an educational system which turns out happy, well-educated people."
- „... around ten per cent of adults in countries like Britain and the United States are not satisfied with their level of literacy.” (1)

# AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERACY

- "The first starting point is people's everyday lives and how they make use of reading and writing." (3)
- „this approach starts from people's uses of literacy, not from their formal learning of literacy.  
It also starts from everyday life and from the everyday activities which people are involved in." (34)

# WE NEED A **SOCIAL** VIEW OF LITERACY (THESES 1.-3.). 1. EVENTS AND PRACTICES

1. Literacy is a social activity and can best be described in terms of **literacy practices** people draw upon in **literacy events**.

**Literacy event:** any activity that involves the written word; the particular activity where literacy has a role

**Literacy practice:** common patterns in using reading and writing in a particular situation; the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy

## 2. DIFFERENT LITERACIES AND DOMAINS

2. People have **different literacies** which they make use of, associated with different **domains** of life.

**A literacy** is a stable, coherent, identifiable configuration of practices (38)

These differences are increased across different cultures or historical periods. (38)

„In multilingual situations different literacies will often be associated with different languages or different scripts.”

# CATEGORIES DEFINING LITERACIES

- **What purposes and whose purpose?**
  - Imposed vs. self-generated
  - Dominant vs. vernacular
  - Imported vs. indigenous
- **Construed versus creative literacy**
- **Different domains of life**

„There are different places in life where people act differently and use language differently.”

## 3. SOCIAL ROLES AND RELATIONS

3. People's literacy practices are situated in broader **social relations**.

- social roles; gender
- social relations, networks
- social institutions

This makes it necessary to describe the social setting of literacy events, including the ways in which **social institutions** support particular literacies.



## WE NEED A PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW OF LITERACY (4-6) 4. COMMUNICATION

4. Literacy is based upon a system of symbols. It is a symbolic system **used for communication** and as such exists in relations to other systems of information exchange. It is a way **of representing the world for others.**

written language can be a powerful form of language: we need to examine how writing extends the possibilities of language (43)

it can be useful to consider literacy as a technology

**„With written language you can do things you cannot with spoken. It does not just amplify spoken language. It extends the functions of language, and enables you to do different things.” (43)**

## 5. COGNITION (LITERACY AS THOUGHT)

5. Literacy is a symbolic system used for **representing the world** to ourselves.

„A practice account of literacy inevitably induces a practice account of thinking, covering how it is constructed and supported by social practices.” (45)

?

**writing mediates between individual cognition and social phenomena.**

**... any piece of writing is an external representation or outcome of internal cognitive processes. (45)**

## **6. ATTITUDES AND VALUES**

**6. We have awareness, attitudes and values with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values guide our actions.**

**It is generally accepted that the practices of another culture have to be discovered by detailed observation; this is no less true of cultures we are close to. (47)**

# THE HISTORIC DIMENSION (7.+8.)

## 7. INDIVIDUAL HISTORIES

7. Literacy has a history. Our **individual life histories** contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards which the present is built upon. We change and as children and adults are constantly learning about literacy.

„At any point in time a person’s literacies are based on the possibilities provided by their past experiences.” (48)

People learn in their everyday lives and not enough attention has been paid to this everyday or **vernacular learning**.

## 8. SOCIAL HISTORY

8. Literacy events and practices have a social history.

"Hopefully, examining examples from the past such as the spread of printing can illuminate current changes." (50)

# EXAMPLES

Which of the two quotations describes a literacy practice?  
Which points made by Barton could it illustrate?

1. "At dinner, when my wife is present or a few friends, I have a book read aloud; after dinner a comedy or lyre playing; afterwards a stroll with my people, among whom are erudite individuals. Thus the evening passes in varied discussions, and even the longest day is quickly seasoned."
2. "Many people without a school education use books not as tools for study but as decorations for the dining room!"

Guess at which time (century) and place (country) these utterances were made!



# ANSWERS TO THE LAST QUESTION

**Where and when: Rome, first century AD**

**Who:**

**1. Pliny (Plinius) the Younger 2. Seneca**

# LITERACY PRACTICES IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

"The Romans used written receipts and kept written accounts, wrote up political slogans, organized their armed forces by means of a mass of documentation, kept records of who became a citizen, circulated the texts of magical spells and books advocating religious beliefs, abused each other and protested love to each other in graffiti, wrote letters, and, in great numbers, commemorated the dead."

(Martin, *The history and power of writing*, cited in Steven Roger Fisher: *A history of reading*, 2004: 66)

# HOMWORK FOR NOVEMBER 19

## (CHOOSE ONE OR MORE TASKS)

- Read a part of Walter Ong's book "Orality and literacy" and find out what he means by his nine points of characterization of "primary oral cultures" – from (i) "Additive rather than subordinate" to (ix) "situational rather than abstract".
- Read Walter Ong's article and find out what he means with his 14 points of what writing separates (all in section VII) – from 1. "Writing separates the known from the knower" to 14. "[...] writing separates being from time".
- Read about Walter Ong's ideas on the website <http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-1/ong-on-the-differences-between-orality-and-literacy>, in Wikipedia and/or other Internet resources.
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