

EDITORIAL

Literacies and sites of learning

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Situated literacies

The New Literacy Studies has a tradition of researching literacy practices outside educational settings. The importance of studying literacy located in particular sites has been identified by Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), Baynham (2004) and Street (1994, 2004). *Language and Education* has played an important role in publishing research in situated literacies. Indeed, the development of research on local literacies as a field of study was stimulated by the publication of special issues of the journal in 1994 (8:1&2, 3, 'Sustaining Local Literacies') and 2004 'Ethnographies of Literacy' (18:4).

This special issue, 'Sites of Learning Literacies', put together by scholars at the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre, develops the theme of the 'situated' nature of literacy, which has been long central to our work. Our research has always been driven by an interest in addressing 'real world issues' around literacy in particular places, such as literacy in offenders' lives (Wilson 2004, 2010); the impact of digital technology (Gillen 2009; Lee and Barton 2009; Papen 2009; Gillen and Barton 2010); literacy and health (Papen 2009, 2008); literacy and aging (Hamilton 2009); literacy and development (Papen 2005); literacy and globalisation (Papen 2007); literacy and everyday life in particular places (Papen 2005; Barton and Hamilton 1998); and the literacy practices of policy, relating policy-making processes to its realisations in local settings (Hamilton 2009, 2007; Hamilton and Hillier 2007, 2005). Our research has tended to start with the real world issue, then to focus in on literacies and learning (both within and outside educational institutions), and finally to identify implications for education (Appleby and Hamilton 2005; Hamilton 2005; Papen 2005; Barton et al. 2007). We argue that exploring literacy as a social practice in particular sites can offer a distinctive contribution to social scientific understandings of a social world in which systems, structures, practices and histories are all mediated by physical and digital texts (Barton 2001; Papen 2005; Barton and Papen 2010; Barton 2009).

In this special issue, we bring together our interests in literacy in real-world settings and our interests in learning to analyse in detail the significance of the particular sites in which literacies are learned outside of educational settings. As Hamilton (2006) points out, drawing on Livingstone (2000), learning outside educational institutions is different in a range of ways. It arises from everyday activities; it addresses immediate needs; it is free of the pedagogic relations that characterise educational institutions; it is undertaken on one's own, without externally imposed curricula or an instructor; and its processes and objectives are set by those participating in it. She analyses a range of ethnographic studies of literacy to identify significant concepts which have emerged from these, including the importance of literacy scribes, brokers, mediators and advocates; motivations from everyday life; contextualised yardsticks for judging success; and mixing different media. The papers in this

special issue address literacy learning across a range of different sites and situations, including workplaces, community settings, and virtual spaces.

Papers in this issue

The first situation explored is that of becoming or being ill, and the literacy learning processes which result from that. Papen draws on research carried out with 45 adults, most in adult basic education or English classes, around their experiences of illness. She describes the way experiences of illness can drive people to seek information and to learn new literacies. Enormous amounts of written information about health are now available, particularly through the Internet, and the paper explores how adults engage with the various resources that are available to them to learn more about and to manage their situations. Papen explores how the learning people undertake and the literacy practices they engage in are shaped by the situations in which they find themselves. As people engaged with literacy learning related to their health issues, they drew on their prior knowledge and experience, and on their existing relationships with other people. Some participants became 'experts' in their field, while others drew on the expertise of other people to learn about their conditions and to filter information for them. The paper identifies the social, economic and personal factors that constrained people's learning. While the self-directed and informal nature of this learning resonates with much of the adult learning literature Papen discussed, its incidental, ad hoc and task- and need-specific nature are particular to the situation.

Tusting's paper explores the learning processes engaged in by staff in educational workplaces, specifically an adult education college and an Early Years centre. These institutions are subject to increasing levels of accountability demands which are interpreted as being part of more general processes of commodification of education. The paper explores the impact of these demands on the workplace experiences of members of staff. It explains how particular aspects of the two sites foster or hinder the development of mastery, or 'skilled knowledgeability', in these practices, interpreting these from a situated learning perspective. The paper identifies the importance of the availability (or otherwise) of resources such as time and space, mediating artefacts, and other people, in these learning processes. Changes in demands, such as the requirement to use particular phrasings drawn from managerial rather than pedagogic discourses, and disjunctures between these demands and people's own understandings of their professional identities, had negative impacts on the learning processes they engaged in.

The next two papers explore two quite different online sites of learning new literacies. Barton explores the learning that takes place on Flickr, the online photo management and sharing application. He argues that this represents a new space for vernacular learning which takes place in a new way, through sharing meaning-making with others on a website which offers complex sets of affordances for this. Study of sets of Flickr sites together with online interviews reveals the discourses of learning participants draw on (both explicit and implicit), and the characteristics of the learning they engage in. People responded to challenges, engaged with other people, and experimented. They gave accounts of how the new literacy practices and photographic practices they learned were entwined with broader learnings about their lives, their imagined futures and themselves. The many spaces for reflection offered by Flickr were taken up avidly by participants, controlling and developing their own informal, self-generated learning in conversation with many others, through the possibilities opened up by these online literacy practices.

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The paper by Gillen and colleagues explores a very different online site, analysing the learning processes which participants engaged in in a virtual world, the Schome Park island on Teen Second Life. The paper focuses on the learning processes which were evident in the literacy practices they engaged in. Analysis of interactions from inworld chatlogs and associated forum and wiki postings shows how people worked together to solve problems which arose in real time. Learning was enhanced by characteristics of this particular site, including particularly the open and collaborative relationships built up between participants. These were fostered by established practices in the site such as openness to collaborating, willingness to ask and answer questions, explicit recognition of others' achievements, and the use of humour. The real-time interactions in the virtual world were supported by participation in other online spaces, including a forum and a wiki, enabling each to be used for different learning processes appropriate to their semiotic affordances. These processes are interpreted from the perspective of distributed cognition, demonstrating the importance of the literacy practices of the community in fostering learning.

In the final paper, Hamilton takes a step back and explores the relationship between local sites of learning and broader policy perspectives. The paper argues that a "human resources" view of literacy learning is currently dominant in international policy. It traces the different models which have been dominant through the history of recent literacy policy, comparing different discourses of literacy, of learning and of citizenship, showing how the current model produces a particular 'moral order' of literacy in which formal learning is privileged, standardised and measurable outcomes are preferred, and the 'good' literacy learner is constructed as an individual citizen contributing to global prosperity. The paper analyses how the current dominant policy discourse is influencing particular sites of learning including workplaces, healthcare, and computer-mediated virtual spaces, identifying some conflicts between the nature of these sites and the dominant policy and educational discourses.

Literacy learning in contemporary sites

Taken as a whole, these papers draw attention to two significant aspects of literacy learning in contemporary sites. Firstly, they reinforce the social practice view of literacy, rooted in sociocultural theories of learning, activity theory and distributed cognition. This identifies the importance of learning taking place as part of goal-oriented activity, with other people in communities, drawing on a range of resources distributed within the environment. In all of these papers, people are learning new literacies for a reason, whether triggered by health issues, to learn about photography, or to learn to pilot a boat through a virtual regatta. It is where there is a conflict between people's goals and the learning that they are expected to do, as in the workplace example, that difficulties arise. This can be related to theories of self-directed and informal learning, but the point goes beyond self-directedness, hinging on the real purposes that are meaningful for people and the literacy learning that naturally arises from these. This is another aspect of the informal nature of literacy learning in these sites, highlighting again the literacy learning that takes place outside formal settings and challenging the privileging of formal learning which is dominant in the policy discourse Hamilton discusses.

Theories of distributed cognition, as explored in Gillen et al.'s paper, identify the ways people draw on a range of resources in the environment in which they are learning, including semiotic resources, resources of time and space, and other people. The papers identify the particular affordances of the different sites in which learning takes place. For

instance, Tusting identifies the importance for childcare workers of the posters on the walls around them which represent the frameworks they are working within. These provide continuous access to mediating interpretive resources in the environment, as they learn the literacy practices of writing observations and mapping them to the frameworks.

All the papers identify the importance of other people as resources for learning, and more broadly, the importance of learning taking place in a community, rather than through isolated individuals. Who is available, when and how, and what relationships are built up in the sites is of prime importance in shaping the learning which takes place there, from Gillen et al.'s teachers modelling the use of humour and openness to questions in the learning process, to Tusting's discussion of colleagues who know each other well being able to support each other's learning, to Papen's analysis of family members as mediators of health texts, to Barton's online communities who share their reflections on photographs and life. These relationships are not always positive ones and do not necessarily promote learning, as Papen's accounts of the hierarchies of medical knowledge, and Tusting's accounts of the disciplining and checking of workplace paperwork make clear. But what is evident nevertheless is that learning literacies in particular sites never takes place in isolation from others - challenging the vision of the 'learning individual' implicit in Hamilton's account of the dominant literacy policy discourse.

This links to the second key issue raised in different ways by these papers, that is, relationships between these local sites and broader social and political processes. Technological changes are of course very visible, in the masses of medical information now readily available online for Papen's participants, the avatars learning in virtual worlds in Gillen et al.'s paper, and the way vernacular photography is being transformed by the existence of new virtual communities in Barton's analysis. These sites are multi-modal and give access to a multitude of meaning-making resources, which participants are learning to use in response to their goals and purposes and the resources they have immediately available in the sites. But access to these technological resources remains differentially available, and support from other people remains crucial - another aspect of the mediation that Papen identifies.

Social changes are also identified which shape (and are in tension with) the literacy learning in these sites. Hamilton and Tusting both explore processes of commodification, very evident in educational settings but also in the world beyond. Such processes privilege what can be measured and thereby given exchange value. The personal purposes and interpersonal relationships, identified by each of the studies in this issue as being centrally important in learning literacies, are hard to measure and quantify, and therefore remain unacknowledged and undervalued. Papen's paper highlights tensions between the related ideology of consumer choice in healthcare, which interpellates an 'informed patient' with free access to a wide range of medical literacy resources, and traditionally hierarchical models of medical knowledge in which the doctor would act as the gatekeeper.

The studies of literacy learning in particular sites presented here therefore both reinforce and develop the focus on literacy as a situated social practice which is at the heart of our work. They show both the locally-shaped nature of literacy learning as part of purposeful social practices engaged in with others, and how focusing on such local practices can help us to better understand the impact of the broader social changes of which they are a part.

Acknowledgements

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