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9. CONTEXT AND LITERACY PRACTICES

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This chapter reviews recent progress in resolving tensions between conceptions of literacy as a system of locally situated cultural practices and conceptions of literacy as a broader system of written language that transcends specific individuals and local contexts. Such theoretical tensions have arisen out of earlier, long-standing literacy debates—the Great Divide, the Literacy Thesis, and even debates about situated cognition itself. Recent reviews and critiques of the "New Literacy Studies" examined here—Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Collins and Blot, 2003; Street, 2003a, 2003b—are reaching toward new theoretical ground to address emerging concerns about the adequacy of current literacy theories framed in terms of locally situated social practices. This new work should be of interest not only to those working in the field of literacy but also to applied linguists in general, because the core issues have to do with the nature and role of context in language use, whether in oral or written form.

The current debate regarding the nature of literacy has intellectual roots that can be traced back to earlier contrasts Street (1984) drew between "autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy. This important contrast was itself a reaction to influential debates at the time about the consequences of literacy for individuals and societies. We focus here on a related but quite distinct contrast evident in the more recent work, that between the *local* and *remote* (sometimes termed "global" or "distant") contexts for literacy events and practices. There is not space here to review in detail the well-known and important controversies about the "consequences of literacy." Nevertheless a brief overview of these earlier developments will set the stage for the ongoing debate about context that we will examine more closely.

The Great Divide, the Literacy Thesis, and Other Binaries

The so-called "Great Divide" theories of literacy (Finnegan, 1988; Scribner & Cole, 1981) hold that there are fundamental and far-reaching cognitive differences between literate and nonliterate societies and individuals. Various Great Divide theories, once very popular in the social sciences from the 1960s through the early

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1980s, focused on cognitive difference (including broad differences in language use) at the societal or the individual level. Anthropologists and historians constructing Great Divide theories were primarily concerned with broad differences between literate and nonliterate societies, whereas psychologists and other social scientists constructing Great Divide theories were concerned primarily with cognitive differences among individuals of varying literacy statuses within literate societies (e.g., Olson, 1988, 1994; Olson & Torrance, 1991).

Societal-level Great Divide theories grew out of seminal articles and books such as Levi-Strauss' (1962) *The Savage Mind*, Goody and Watt's (1963) article "The Consequences of Literacy," Havelock's (1963) *Preface to Plato*, and McLuhan's (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Individually-focused Great Divide theories were developed through influential articles by cross-cultural and cognitive psychologists such as Greenfield's (1972) "Oral or Written Language: The Consequences for Cognitive Development in Africa, the United States and England," Olson's (1977) "From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing," and Scribner and Cole's (1978) "Literacy without Schooling: Testing for Intellectual Effects."

Whether focused primarily on differences at the individual or societal level, the Great Divide theories asserted categorical differences in cognition and language as consequences of literacy, a notion some have termed the "Literacy Thesis." Literacy was presumed to have broad and ubiquitous consequences in such areas as: abstract versus context-dependent uses and genres of language; logical, critical, and scientific versus irrational modes of thought; analytical history versus myth; and so forth. The influence of structuralism in the social sciences of this period can be seen in the strong dualities used to describe the deep differences posited between literate and nonliterate societies (e.g., "primitive" vs. "civilized," "simple" vs. "advanced"), modes of thought (e.g., "prelogical" versus "analytic," "concrete" vs. "abstract"), and ways of using language (e.g., "utterance" vs. "text," "context-dependent" vs. "abstract").

By the early 1980s, these Great Divide theories came under attack for being too simplistic and for exaggerating differences to create false dichotomies between types of societies, modes of thought, and uses of language. Poststructuralists such as Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault provided powerful critiques of the structuralist positions underlying the work of Havelock (1963), Ong (1982), and Goody (1986). New empirical evidence further challenged the sweeping assumptions and interpretations of Great Divide theorists. At the societal level, for example, in-depth historical studies questioned the simple unidirectional causality of literacy in social and economic development as described by Great Divide theorists. Historically rising national literacy levels, once believed to drive economic development, turned out, on closer analysis, to be more complexly intertwined in the development cycle, sometimes being as much the result as the cause of economic growth (Graff, 1979, 1987).

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New studies also challenged the idea that literacy necessarily has a direct effect on individual cognition as well. The landmark study by Scribner and Cole (1981) among the Vai of Liberia was extremely influential in breaking down the Great Divide theory at the individual level, failing to find broad differences in cognition that could uniquely and categorically be attributed to literacy. Linguistic research was also contributing to the demise of the Great Divide theories, providing empirical data that challenged the very assumptions of categorical differences between oral and written language underpinning the Literacy Thesis (e.g., Biber, 1986; Feldman, 1991; Halverson, 1991, 1992; Tannen, 1982).

Scribner and Cole's (1981) work also persuasively introduced the concept of *literacy practices*. Rather than seeing literacy as a set of portable, decontextualized information processing *skills* which individuals *applied*, Scribner and Cole reframed literacy as a set of socially organized *practices* (conceptually parallel to religious practices, childrearing practices, etc.) in which individuals *engaged*. This conception of literacy as social practice spread rapidly among social scientists and educators in the early 1980s, helped considerably in its advance by the simultaneous dissolve of the Great Divide theories separating oral and written language. The emerging theory of literacy-as-social-practice drew on the well-developed theories and methodologies of sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication as it moved forward. The application of social practices theory to literacy was also advanced by authors who critiqued literacy as one more exclusionary device used by powerful groups to further their social and economic interests. Education scholars such as Street (1984) and Gee (1988) argued persuasively that literacy often functions restrictively and hegemonically in societies to implement social controls and maintain social hierarchies.

As ethnographic studies of literacy practices in a variety of contexts accumulated during the 1980s, theorists began to systematize new ways of understanding the development, acquisition, and use of literacy. The approach termed the "New Literacy Studies" (Gee, 1991; Street, 1995) was based on two key principles: seeing *context* as fundamental to understanding literacy, and eradicating any clear distinction between orality and literacy.[1] Operating with these core principles, ethnographic studies explored how text and speech are intertwined in daily use and how local contexts inevitably determine the shapes and uses of literacy. As a counterpoint to the many problems of the Literacy Thesis, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) research turned away from a general examination of broad sociopolitical and economic forces and began a careful consideration of concrete, local uses of literacy (e.g., Barton, 2001; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993).

Brandt and Clinton: Limits of the Local

In their 2002 article, *Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice*, Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton consider how the NLS framework has shaped literacy research, especially the growing collection of ethnographies of literacy. As the title of their article suggests, Brandt and Clinton are

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not satisfied that literacy can be fully understood by looking only through the lens of the local context in which a literacy event takes place. They ask: "Can we not see the ways that literacy arises out of local, particular, situated human interactions while also seeing how it also regularly arrives from other places—infiltrating, disjointing, and displacing local life?" (2002, p. 343). They contend that by privileging the local context as the *only* relevant context, NLS creates a "great divide" between local and global contexts that is not only unnecessary, but also hinders our understanding of the forces at play in everyday literacy events.

Brandt and Clinton describe the reach and depth of the NLS theoretical perspective as they discuss Besnier's (1995) ethnography of literacy in a Polynesian community:

> So absorbed into local context does literacy appear in this study, in fact, that Besnier suggests that we can treat literacy practices as windows into a group's social and political structure – that is, not only can one look to local contexts to understand local literacy, but one can also look to local literacy practices to understand the key forces that organize local life. This is the radical analytical accomplishment of the social-practice perspective. (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 343)

Though they acknowledge the fundamental importance of local context, Brandt and Clinton disagree with Besnier's formulation of literacy practices as simply a reflection of the local context. They argue that local context alone is insufficient to explain the uses and forms of literacy. They find an example of the limits of the local context in Besnier's own work: Local residents commonly ignore the content of English slogans on the t-shirts they wear. Besnier uses this example to point to the power of the local context—these slogans have no meaning for local t-shirt wearers and so they are ignored and do not enter into local literacy practices in any way. Brandt and Clinton argue on the contrary that the presence of these slogans demonstrates the connections between the local context of this Polynesian island and more remote contexts.

Brandt and Clinton readily admit that literacy research must be rooted in people's intimate everyday experiences with text. However, their critique of NLS rests on the idea that the local and global contexts are not two discrete realms. Rather than restrict their analytical framework to consider only how literacy is shaped by *local* social and cultural phenomena, the authors suggest that literacy practices can include transcontextualizing components. To this end, they propose the constructs of *localizing moves* and *globalizing connects*. The concept of *localizing moves* describes the work people do when they shape literacy practices to meet personal needs and to match local social structures. *Localizing moves* have been abundantly described in NLS ethnographies of literacy.

A *globalizing connect* describes a local literacy practice that has far-reaching implications and uses outside of the local context. Brandt and Clinton provide an

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example in the shape of a local representative of a national agricultural company. This representative reads the local weather forecast and talks to local farmers in order to gauge crop outputs. In other words, he is a participant in the same types of literacy practices as the local farmers themselves. However, he uses this local literacy event in a different context when he relays local information to headquarters and thus plays a role in a literacy event that unfolds on a much larger scale. This example shows how local literacy events can serve multiple interests and play a part in remote literacy events and large-scale processes of knowledge creation.

Brandt and Clinton also use the concept of *literacy sponsors* to highlight the ways that multiple forces can be at play in local literacy practices. The idea of literacy sponsors (Brandt, 1995) refers to the institutions, policies, and people that make the acquisition and practice of literacy possible: the government, corporate scholarship foundations, religious groups, and so on. Literacy sponsors often wield power over uses of literacy and they can provide and control access to literacy materials (textbooks, the Internet, etc.) Using literacy sponsors as an analytical tool highlights the tension among different immediate and remote forces at play in a given literacy practice. Brandt and Clinton explain this concept:

> When we use literacy, we also get used. Things typically mediate this relationship. Attention to sponsors can yield a fuller insight into how literate practices can be shaped out of the struggle of competing interests and agents, how multiple interests can be satisfied during a single performance of reading or writing, how literate practices can relate to immediate social relationships while still answering to distant demands. (2002, p. 350–351)

Thus, when looking at literacy events, the local context is only part of the picture. The written materials at the center of a literacy event are often not locally produced. Their presence allows for remote actors to play a role (more or less consequential) in local practice. Brandt and Clinton highlight the material aspects of literacy as the key factor that allows multiple remote actors to influence a given literacy event and to shape local literacy practices.

It is important to note that Brandt and Clinton do not advocate a wholesale disavowal of the importance of the local context, nor do they contend "that the technology of literacy carries its own imperatives no matter where it goes" (2002, p. 344). Rather, their formulation of context allows for distant influences on local practices to be clearly identified not as disinterested "autonomous" forces, but as ideological players in their own right. They deny the existence of some remote, "autonomous" literacy and they view distant influences on local practices as integral, subjective participants in local literacy events. They contend that "local literacy events cannot exhaust the meanings or actions of literacy" (2002, p. 344). Brandt and Clinton continue:

> Social practices are not necessarily the shapers of literacy's meaning; indeed, they may be the weary shock absorbers of its

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> impositions. That people manage to absorb or mollify these demands in different ways may be evidence of local ingenuity, diversity, agency, as much recent research emphasizes, but it is just as much evidence of how powerfully literacy as a technology can insinuate itself into social relations anywhere. (2002, p. 354)

Brandt and Clinton repeatedly note that literacy as a technology has the ability to travel, integrate, and endure. It is these unique properties that contribute to literacy's transcontextualizing capabilities. Brandt and Clinton contend that there is no divide between local and global contexts: People's everyday intimate experiences of literacy are in conversation with remote forces at play in the larger sociocultural context.

Street: Yes, but Not *Autonomous* Remote Influences

In responding to recent critiques of NLS, Brian Street (2003a, 2003b) vigorously defends NLS as a solid theoretical foundation for investigations into the nature of literacy. First, he reiterates that literacy, as a social practice embedded in existing social structures, cannot be separated from the ideological baggage which participants bring to any literacy event. Street emphasizes that even literacy acquisition is not a neutral process—it is a social practice involving students and teachers. Likewise, literacy practices that are taught in school are not neutral or autonomous, but serve certain ideological interests.

In specifically discussing the *Limits of the Local*, Street agrees with Brandt and Clinton's focus on the *relationship* between the local and the "distant" as a more fruitful focus for research than either realm in isolation. However, he cautions that Brandt and Clinton not confuse "distant" forces at play in literacy events with "autonomous" literacy. Street emphasizes that "distant" influences are indeed ideological. Brandt and Clinton seem to answer this concern in their discussion of literacy sponsors and the subjective control they can wield over the shape of local literacy practices.

Street acknowledges that "we need a framework and conceptual tools that can characterize the relation between local and 'distant'" (2003b, p. 4). However, he contends that NLS provides ample theoretical space for this type of analysis in its conceptualization of literacy events and literacy practices. Street quotes Heath's definition of literacy events, "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes" (Heath, 1982, p. 93). Literacy practices, on the other hand, are more complex social phenomena which include the larger social and cultural meanings that participants ascribe to a given literacy event. In this way—through reference to the larger sociocultural background that participants bring to a literacy event—Street contends that the concept of the literacy practice functions as a framework that accommodates "distant" influences on local literacy events.

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The paired concepts of literacy events and literacy practices effectively highlight the difference between a local event and the larger forces that shape the participants in that event. However, it seems that these concepts provide an analytical *space* for understanding the relationship between the local and the distant, but without further development these concepts do not yet constitute a coherent framework for understanding this relationship. What exactly are these "distant" forces? If we concede that literacy is not an autonomous entity, then what is the nature of literacy within the broader sociocultural context? Likewise, how do these "distant" forces impact individual literacy events? The concepts of literacy events and literacy practices provide an answer as to *where* the local and the distant collide (in many everyday literacy events), but they fail to provide an answer as to *how* this interaction occurs.

Street offers insight into these questions in his discussion of literacy practices as *hybrids*:

> The result of local-global encounters around literacy is always a new hybrid rather than a single essentialized version of either. It is these hybrid literacy practices that NLS focuses upon rather than either romanticizing the local or conceding the dominant privileging of the supposed "global." As we shall see when we discuss practical applications of NLS across educational contexts, it is the recognition of this hybridity that lies at the heart of an NLS approach to literacy acquisition regarding the relationship between local literacy practices and those of the school. (2003b, p. 4)

If we acknowledge that local literacies do not exist autonomously, but commonly draw on perspectives that participants have developed through participation in other literacy practices—school literacies, work literacies, religious literacies, bureaucratic literacies—then we see that a "single essentialized version" of local literacy practices ignores much of the context that participants use to create the practice in the first place. Likewise, "global" literacy does not exist in an essentialized, pure form, but only emerges as one piece of hybrid literacy practices that are always, necessarily locally constituted. We come to see that "local" and "global" (or distant, remote) contexts do not exist in contrast to one another, but as constituents of a larger whole. This conceptualization of all literacy practices as hybrid constructions echoes Brandt and Clinton's analysis of local literacy practices as "weary shock absorbers" of the impositions of distant participants.

Collins and Blot: A Proposed Resolution with Power and Identity

In his foreword to Collins and Blot's *Literacy and Literacies: Text, Power and Identity,* Street (2003a) addresses critics of situated, ethnographic studies of literacy who claim that NLS promotes a "relativistic" definition of literacy. These critics contend that even thousands of individual ethnographies of literacy would not form a coherent composite picture of the impacts of literacy on society at large. Street concedes that some NLS research "runs the danger of romanticizing such local

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[literacy] practice against that of the dominant culture. It is here, perhaps, that NLS has hit an impasse: how to account for the local whilst recognizing also the general—or the global" (2003a, p. xii). Though NLS was founded on the idea that local context must be the focus of research on literacy as a situated social practice, advocates have recently emerged for a shift in focus to include the broader ways in which literacies pattern in society.

In the first chapter of their book, Collins and Blot identify what they term a universalist/particularist impasse in current debates about literacy research and theory. Like Brandt and Clinton, Collins and Blot identify the origins of NLS as a response to the Literacy Thesis. The "universalist" view is aligned with autonomous views of literacy that deal with the broad social and cognitive impacts that ensue from the widespread introduction of alphabetic literacy into a society. Adherents of the autonomous theory of literacy contend that a written document contains an independent meaning that is wholly recoverable and transferable regardless of the contexts in which the text is created and used. Though many of the more strident initial claims of the Literacy Thesis have been refuted by in-depth historical analysis, the view of literacy as having the ability to transform both individual people and society at large remains a powerful current in modern Western thought.

The "particularist" view includes the many detailed ethnographies of literacy that have demonstrated how the immediate social context determines the use and nature of texts. Situated approaches to literacy have shown that literacy and orality are not discrete categories, but rather written and spoken language commingle and inhabit the same communicative space. Ethnographic accounts of literacy offer fascinating details into how people bring life to texts in everyday literacy practices. According to the NLS view, literacy practices simply cannot be understood without reference to the local context in which they exist.

Collins and Blot note the need for an explanation that adequately addresses the quotidian reality of literacy as a locally-determined social practice while at the same time accounting for the unique place that literacy inhabits in modern Western society and thought. Such an analysis would shed light on the continuing patterns of access to, and use of, literacy among various groups in society. To achieve this end, Collins and Blot draw on post-structural theorists—primarily Bourdieu, de Certeau, Derrida, and Foucault—as they bring language, education, texts, and identity into the core of an argument about literacy and power in modern Western society. In their work, Collins and Blot agree with many NLS researchers, and they find much that is useful in their work. However, what Collins and Blot find missing in ethnographic accounts of literacy is an "account of why literacy matters in the way that it does in the modern West." (2003, p. 65). This question arises from the many long-standing and recurring connections between literacy practices and the exercise of power in society. Because an investigation of this issue would necessarily involve a scope of study larger than the immediate ethnographic context, this sort of analysis has not been a primary concern in many NLS accounts of literacy.

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Collins and Blot contend that considerations of *power* have largely been absent from most ethnographies of literacy. They cite Heath's (1983) seminal work as an example. Though this work provides an extraordinarily detailed view of how the different literacy practices of various groups in society impact (help or hinder) children as they encounter school literacy and discourse practices, Heath does not include an overt discussion of the ways that power in society has shaped what we know as "school literacy." She does not address the ways in which forces outside of the immediate context have contributed to the significance of "school literacy" and guaranteed its preeminent place in education and in society.

This argument about the partisan nature of "school literacy" is strongly reminiscent of Street's (1984) core contention that all literacy events carry ideological meanings. Literacy education in schools does not simply teach a set of decontextualized, discrete cognitive skills. Rather, the types of literacies that are taught—for example, sustained silent reading, comprehension questions, fill-in-the-blank forms—contribute to an organization of society according to the vision of those who have captured the power to create, endorse, promote, and institute particular brands of literacy in society.

As they discuss Heath's (1983) work in terms of ideological literacy and power, Collins and Blot praise the work for its eloquent and detailed description of the differences in literacy practices among communities, and for its implicit acknowledgment that "school literacy" is only one type of literacy among equals. But Collins and Blot claim that the book comes with a surprise ending. Throughout the book, Heath discusses locally-developed projects and strategies designed to incorporate the skills students acquire at home and in the community into their developing "school literacy" practices. The surprise comes in an epilogue which details changes in federal education policies that blocked and reversed many of these local efforts and replaced them with programs based on a more autonomous view of literacy that emphasized decontextualized, skill-based training and standardized testing. Collins and Blot contend that the body of Heath's analysis is missing a key point that ties her micro-analysis of language and literacy in local contexts to decidedly nonlocal federal policy decisions that nevertheless impact local life.

For Collins and Blot, the key point is that "writing is usually associated with power, and particularly with specifically modern forms of power" (2003, p. 5). This leads them into a detailed consideration of the nature and consequences of power in society. Drawing on the work of the French poststructuralists, they see power not only as a macro-level force imposed in the form of institutions, bureaucracies and overt violence, but also as an intimate presence in all facets of everyday life. Power relations on a societal level create the shape of everyday life that in turn determines how individuals are educated, how each of us fits into society, and how we are able to define our identities. Thus, macro-level power translates into intimate and personal decisions about micro-level identity and conceptions of self. This analysis includes "school" or dominant literacy as a mode of delivery of macro-level power, whereas identity includes conceptions of a literate self built through years of education, bureaucratic involvement, and employment. Thus Collins and Blot see

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literacy and power going hand in hand. Collins and Blot attempt to bridge the local/global divide with careful consideration of power and identity at the micro- and macro levels.

Discussion: Connecting Local and Remote Contexts

These authors present different conceptions of *context* in their understandings of literacy. Although they agree that theories of literacy as social practices need to represent nonlocal contextual influences more explicitly, they differ in how they suggest we understand such distant influences. A key difference among their theories is in how they propose to connect the local and global contexts of literacy.

Street argues that the NLS already has the requisite theoretical framework in place, in which local contextual features interact in as yet unspecified ways with more global *literacy practices* to generate locally constructed *literacy events.* Brandt and Clinton propose a framework in which literacy events are understood in terms of both *localizing moves* and *globalizing connects*. Collins and Blot attempt to integrate local and distant influences through the dynamic interplay between micro- and macro-levels of *identity* and *power* in discourse and interaction.

In accepting Brandt and Clinton's argument that "remote" influences need to be accounted for, Street cautions against formulating these as "autonomous" influences. But without further development, it is not clear how the NLS framework of literacy practices offers a less "autonomous" formulation of remote influences than that proposed in the Brandt and Clinton framework. Why should the social and cultural forces included in NLS conceptions of literacy practices be considered less "autonomous" and somehow integrally linked to the local context, whereas the concept of global connects proposed by Brandt and Clinton is labeled "autonomous"? Street seems more comfortable with Collins and Blot's power-based formulation, although again it is not theoretically clear why "power" should wield a less "autonomous" type of global influence than "sponsorship" or other remote influences considered by Brandt and Clinton. Although power as formulated by Collins and Blot is certainly "ideological" in NLS terms, it is not clear why *remote* sources of power that influence *local* interactions are operating in a more "ideological" framework than other types of remote influence. How are we to tell? How do we avoid replacing an autonomous theory of literacy with an autonomous theory of power? Further theoretical elaboration and clarification are needed here.

Part of the difficulty may be that Street's (1984) contrast between "autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy does not serve well as a dichotomous classification of contextual influences on social interactions. The original distinction, rooted in the debate about the Literacy Thesis, was intended to contrast ways of understanding the apparent "consequences" of literacy. When conceptualizing the manner in which distant influences are involved in the construction of local literacy events, "autonomous" and "ideological" may not be suitable contraries. *From the perspective of local interactants*, might some distant

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influences be perceived as having relatively more "autonomous" influence than others? How are we to tell? At the very least, we need here a better formulation of the ways in which remote influences on locally constructed literacy practices may or may not be "autonomous."

Although many theorists adhere to the distinction between "ideological" and "autonomous" models of literacy, others focus more on a related distinction between conceptions of literacy as "situated" versus "decontextualized." From our perspective, it is less productive to ask *whether* (or which aspects of) literacy practices are *situated* than to ask about what contexts those literacy practices are situated *in*. In building theories based on close examination and analysis of local practices, NLS has not dealt systematically with identifying what makes a context "local." The context in which literacy practices are said to be situated is usually taken as a given for both the participants and the observer. But how do we locate the boundaries of the contexts in which literacy practices are situated? Where are the spatial and temporal margins? Although such questions about context boundaries have long been asked in microethnographic investigations (e.g., Shultz, Florio & Erickson, 1982), they also come to the fore again in discussing "local" versus "remote" influences on literacy.

There are several promising theoretical directions that can build on and extend the ideas developed in the three pieces reviewed here toward connecting local and global contexts of literacy practices. We will sketch two possibilities here. One way to connect the local and the distant is by conceiving of literacy as being situated in *multiple* contexts, each of which has its own time and space margins. One context is the "immediate" one, locally bounded in time, space, and interaction in much the way that studies of locally situated practices have described. That is the *local context*. There is another type of context in which the literacy event is also situated, a context usually having much broader space and time boundaries, expanded by the durable and portable material properties of writing as used in culturally and historically shaped literacy practices. A typical (but, we emphasize, *not* an inevitable or "autonomous") realization of the use of writing in social practices is the mediation of distant or remote social interactions, resulting in the expansion of context for specific literacy practices. That is a *mediated context*.

There are some parallels between this dual-context framework and the localizing moves and global connects suggested in Brandt and Clinton's framework. However, there are some important conceptual differences here that could be usefully explored in future research. The dual-context formulation, framed within the *polycontextuality* and *heterochronicity* of communicative activity (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995; Reder, 1993) posits multiple distinct contexts, whereas Brandt and Clinton propose a unitary context comprised of two different kinds of interactional components.

Key to developing theory in this area would be studies that carefully trace the historical development of *specific* communicative practices as they come into contact with writing (and other information technologies). Such research needs to

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describe carefully and analyze how writing both reshapes local literacy events and how it mediates distant social relationships and interactions and, in so doing, expands the mediated context. Reder's (1992) description of the impact of the introduction of Vai script into existing oral message-sending practices provides an interesting example, although much of the interpretation was retrospective and limited by sparse data. A more recent example based on the individual experience of a Burundese asylum seeker in Belgium appears in Blommaert (2004). Richer and more systematic studies will likely need to be prospective, closely following over time and space the impact of the introduction of writing (or other information and communication technologies) on the historical development of specific social practices *and* their contexts. Recent work by Hull (in press), Hayes (in press), and others provides rich data about the impact of new technologies on the formation of social worlds and communities among children and adults. Such work can provide important new data about the ways in which contexts and identities expand through the mediation of new literacies.

A second direction for future research is the application of theories originating in the sociology of science and technology to the analysis of literacy. Actant-network theory (also frequently termed actor-network theory), initiated by Callon (1986) and Latour (1987) in their seminal studies of the development of scientific knowledge, has been extended broadly to the sociology of knowledge by Law (1994) and others. Actant-network theory (ANT) conceives of *agency* as operating within heterogeneous networks comprised of *both* human beings and material objects. In attributing agency to networks of juxtaposed human and nonhuman "actants," ANT does *not* assume that the agencies enacted by people and by inanimate objects are necessarily the same. A key distinction is that only human actors are able to create or put non-human actants into circulation in the networked system.

Originally ANT was used to characterize the dynamic processes in heterogeneous networks through which new scientific knowledge and ideas gradually become accepted, new methods and tools become adopted, and through which decisions are effectively made about what is known and valued. Key concepts for understanding the operation of such heterogeneous networks are *translation*, (the creation of a network through stages of *problematization*, *interessment,* and *enrollment* of actants into *alliance* with definitions and identities created by focal actors), *inscription* (a process of creating material artifacts that protect actors' interests), and *irreversibility* (the extent to which it is subsequently impossible to return to an earlier point in the system's development where alternative possibilities exist).

Although the early developers of ANT were directly concerned with the role that texts (and other inscriptions) played in the development of science and technology, literacy theorists did not seriously engage this theoretical framework until Brandt and Clinton (2002). Brandt and Clinton began to work with some of these ideas, adopting in particular Latour's notion that written documents may have

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agency within human interactions. They saw such textual agency as enabling the "transcontextualizing" potential of literacy.

Barton and Hamilton (in press) have developed the application of ANT to literacy studies much further. Like Collins and Blot (2003), Barton and Hamilton are concerned with the theoretical representation of power within literacy research. They suggest that the concept of *reification* (Wenger, 1998) can serve as a useful conceptual bridge between communities of practice research and literacy studies. They offer many examples of how literacy serves to reify knowledge and understandings within communities of practice, a construct reminiscent of inscription in ANT. Building on the concept of reification, Barton and Hamilton develop the notion of *textually-mediated social worlds.* They argue that the model of a textually-mediated social world adds something vital to the community of practice theory that has been missing until now, the recognition and theoretical representation of the key roles played by language, literacy, and power within the dynamics of communities and social networks.

The insights of Barton and Hamilton may offer an important theoretical path forward. Future research may be able to extend these ideas by borrowing yet another construct from ANT, that of irreversibility. As noted previously, irreversibility in ANT is the extent to which an actant-network, at a given point in its development, is able to return to an earlier state in which alternative possibilities for future network development exist. An important feature of irreversibility to consider is its variable and continuous quality. This may provide some important new theoretical machinery for representing the remote influences of literacy (i.e., of inscriptions) within social networks. We suggest that the contexts inscribed by written materials in relatively irreversible states of actant networks will endow literacy with the appearance of having a relatively fixed ("autonomous") influence on social practices, whereas in more reversible network states, the inscriptions will endow literacy with influence that appears less "autonomous." In other words, when social groupings are in a state of flux (i.e., power players still forming alliances and meanings still have loose definitions) there is more focus on the players and their not-disinterested involvement is more readily apparent. When stable states of networks become institutionalized, the static (irreversible) relations of power seem "natural" and the influence of the tools of the powerful (e.g., literacy) *seem* to be inherent in the tools themselves. In this way, the powerful influence of the people who control literacy is misassigned to literacy itself, thereby endowing literacy with an *apparently* "autonomous influence." This may provide a step towards resolving the issues noted earlier about characterizing the nature of distant literacy influences on local interactions.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

As such theories of context and literacy continue to develop, it is important that they connect with issues of educational policy and practice. Ethnographically-based literacy studies have inspired many teachers and literacy practitioners with their accounts of the diversity of learners, literacy practices, and contexts and with

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their insights about the ideological content of school-based literacy. But such literacy studies are open to criticism that they have not developed a practical alternative pedagogy for literacy:

> Understandably, those working within this ethnographic framework seem to prefer description and analysis to prescription…Teachers may be convinced by the insights of NLS, but they must work within the increasingly narrow constraints of the school system…while sociolinguists argue that varieties of literacy are structurally equal and practice theorists decry the arbitrary dominance of one form of literacy over another, practitioners must decide whether and how to teach dominant literacies without becoming complicit in the reproduction of power. (Kim, 2003)

This is a major challenge for literacy educators, whether teaching in K–12 schools or adult education programs. Better theories about how contexts shape literacy practices should help teachers to see the literacy events in their classrooms and programs in relation to the multiple contexts in which they are situated, including the local classroom context and the broader and more distant contexts of home, community, and beyond. Good theory may provide educators with increased opportunities to perceive, understand, and create literacies that can appropriately inscribe and mediate these polycontextual and heterochronic spaces. Two simple examples illustrate the ways in which theoretical developments described in this chapter may be useful in improving educational practice.

First, studies which carefully follow the introduction of the use of writing into existing social practices (e.g., introducing the use of recipes into food preparation in the home) may provide educators with valuable insights about bridging classroom and home contexts, that is, about situating literacy practices in these dual contexts. A second example is systematic research on the Latour-like agency of both human teachers and written materials in students' acquisition of a second language (e.g., Ohta, 2004). Insights derived from such research and the theory-building it would drive could help educators to develop new models of language and literacy education with applications to improved curricula and programs.

Note

1. Later scholars extended the leveling of differences between orality and literacy to the leveling of such categorical differences among other modalities as well, within frameworks of both *multimodal* literacy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and *metamedia* literacy (Lemke, 1998).

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Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (in press). Literacy, reification and the dynamics of social interaction. In D. Barton & K. Tusting (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power and social context.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

In this chapter, Barton and Hamilton bring together theories of communities of practice, theories of literacy as situated social practices, and macro-level theories of social structure. They contend that because so many social interactions involve literacy in some way, a communities of practice perspective needs to include an account of the various ways that literacy is used to mediate interactions between people. The authors propose the concept of textually mediated social worlds. They discuss a variety of recent research that looks at how people create and use things as semiotic tools. Alternatively called reification, stable mobiles, or cultural artifacts, these things are often literacy materials. A theoretical focus on the properties of literacy as an object allows for connections to be made between macro- and micro-level perspectives of human interaction and the construction of knowledge in society.

Brandt, D., & Clinton, K. (2002). Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice. *Journal of Literacy Research 34*(3), 337–356.

Brandt and Clinton argue that New Literacy Studies has insufficiently theorized key aspects of literacy, thereby creating unnecessary fissures between local and global contexts, and between social actors and the objects (often texts) that play a role in their interactions. The authors draw on the work of Latour to argue for a greater focus on the material aspects of literacy. Looking at the properties of literacy as a material object reveals how the meanings and uses of literacies are not created solely by local actors, but are influenced by interested remote actors as well (e.g., government, boss, publisher). Brandt and Clinton provide a set of analytical terms to guide further research.

Collins, J., & Blot, R. (2003). *Literacy and literacies: Texts, power, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

This book traces the roots of New Literacy Studies (NLS) through an in-depth analysis of key works from both the "autonomous" model of literacy (Goody, 1986; Olson, 1994) as well as foundational works of NLS (Heath, 1983; Finnegan, 1988; Street, 1984). Collins and Blot identify a "particularist/universalist" impasse in current NLS work, which focuses on describing local literacies while giving only secondary consideration to the ways that local literacy events coalesce into broader patterns of literacy in society. Drawing on the Tolowa language revitalization program as a concrete example, the authors propose to move forward by situating literacy

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studies within the French poststructuralist tradition (Derrida, de Certeau, Bourdieu and Foucault) in order to draw out (1) the nature of text, (2) how literacy is entangled with issues of power in society, and (3) the intimate impact of literacy on individual identity.

Street, B. V. (2003a). Foreword. In J. Collins & R. Blot, *Literacy and literacies: Texts, power and identity* (pp. xi–xv). New York: Cambridge University Press.

In this essay, Street provides a succinct framework for recent debates in the field of literacy studies. Situated approaches to literacy have been accused of "relativism" and of "romanticizing" the local context. New Literacy Studies has struggled to account for the ways in which distant influences impact local literacy practices. Street suggests that this impasse can be dealt with through a consideration of broader theories of social structure and power. He introduces the Collins and Blot volume as an example of such conceptual developments.

Street, B. V. (2003b). What's "new" in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* [Online], 5(2). Retrieved November 4, 2004, from http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/articles/ bs152.htm.

In this article, Street responds to critiques of New Literacy Studies (NLS). He argues that the NLS view of literacy as a situated social practice provides ample theoretical support for literacy research through the concepts of literacy events and literacy practices. Ethnographies of literacy document observable literacy events while also providing insight into the construction of literacy practices. Although agreeing that the focus on the *relationship* between local literacy and distant (global or school) literacy is key, he warns against returning to an "autonomous" view of literacy. Street concludes with a discussion of the pedagogical implications of the literacy debate.

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