

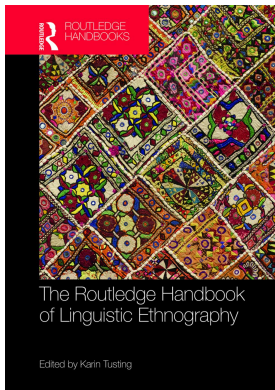
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Karin Tusting

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Julia Gillen, Winnie Siu-ye Ho

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Literacy studies

Julia Gillen and Winnie Siu-yee Ho

Introduction and definitions

For many linguistic ethnography researchers, the field of study known as literacy studies, or sometimes New Literacy Studies, is a useful area to work in or draw inspiration from. This is a difference indeed between at least the foundations of linguistic ethnography and linguistic anthropology. Key early works in the latter tradition such as Duranti (1997, p. xv) essentially identified “linguistic” as concerned with spoken language, writing of “the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice”. Thus, the most useful potential contribution of written language becomes to inform linguists about spoken language. On the contrary, researchers of literacy studies recognise that in contemporary societies and indeed in most of the knowable past, many of us spend much of our time engaging with written language. The ways we do this and the forms our communications take vary with technological and social change (Barton, 2007).

There is a considerable conceptual overlap between literacy studies and linguistic ethnography (Tusting, 2013). This lies in the following features:

- An ethnographic stance, especially in the commitment to uncovering the emic, deploying a number of research methods, as appropriate, and considering the role of the researcher (Green et al., 2003; Nichols, 2015).
- A recognition of the dynamic, dialogic relationship between text and context, in which each is regarded as interplaying with the other (Street, 1993).
- A preference for the longitudinal over snapshot studies as being more likely to engage with authentic practices (Compton-Lilly, 2014).
- A historical and conceptual grounding in sociocultural theories and approaches (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

In this chapter we will seek to offer an overview of literacy studies that is designed to be useful to linguistic ethnographers. We must first offer a cautionary note: literacy studies has been an extremely fertile domain of research for over 40 years. At the end of this chapter we recommend two recent extensive survey volumes and even these hefty tomes could not

find the space to mention all notable research in this territory. This short chapter aims to be coherent rather than comprehensive and readers already familiar with the area will immediately identify absences from this account of major studies, let alone many remarkable and worthwhile smaller works important in the field. We hope to imbue readers with a thirst to explore literacy studies further.

The essential impetus for literacy studies is to arrive at ethnographic understandings of what literacy means to people in the course of activities which involve reading and writing. As we explain below, the impetus for the creation of literacy studies, also known as New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1991), was and is to reject a narrow skills-based view of literacy as actually or potentially decontextualisable from conditions of use. Discourses around the place of literacies in societies, especially when considering definitions of literacy in education and in relation to measurements of people's skills, are profoundly culturally and materially situated. "The control of literacy, its use, and the conditions under which people become literate is an enduring political and religious preoccupation" (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 3).

Literacy studies, in common with linguistic ethnography, tends to work from the bottom-up, rather than the top-down, in seeing its key empirical contribution as investigating literacy practices as they occur, situated in specific materially constituted situations. A key notion is therefore that of vernacular literacies: 'essentially ones which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which have their origins in everyday life' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 247). This focus has proved fertile for empirical studies of often overlooked areas of historical writing, e.g. Barton and Hall (2000); Lyons (2013).

To a greater extent, literacy studies is contributing to investigations of ways in which everyday literacies are themselves evolving in the present day. Work on "new literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) investigates literacy practices as they have emerged especially in the 21st century with its swift pace of technological and social change. Those working in this field describe the rapidly multiplying intertextualities that thread across modes and genres, as people take up semiotic resources in one place and reshape them to fit their purposes in other domains (Kress, 2003; Georgalou, 2017). A key characteristic that sets literacy studies apart from other approaches to online written communications is a resistance to decontextualising text-based approaches. Literacy studies, including when working in virtual spaces, recognises the need to appreciate peoples' situated understandings, purposes and values as well as the various kinds of pressures on their capacity to pursue their own interests. This can only be achieved partially and subjectively, and requires a determination to remain adaptive, flexible and reflexive in research methods; as Latour (2005, p. 143) advises: "Tools are never mere tools ready to be applied: they always modify the goals you had in mind."

Historical perspectives

In this section, we sketch the contours of the historical perspectives of literacy studies in the 1980s and beyond for linguistic ethnography practitioners, drawing on work from the sociocultural school of thought, as well as inspirations from a wealth of ethnographies of literacy.

Literacy studies have been shaped and influenced by some major ground-breaking work with a continuing shift from "texts-as-products to texts-in-culture-as-a-process" (Creese, 2008, p. 234). Such a transformation originated in a sociocultural approach to literacy, appreciating that people learn literacies in their social contexts, gradually internalising cultural

knowledge (Wertsch, 1985; Vygotsky, 1988). This shift, bringing the social to the cognitive domain, is common with regard to oral language too. In these sociocultural accounts the emphasis is therefore always on local, cultural repertoires of communication and how these are learned through participation (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000). Research on reading and writing, thus, is envisaged as moving beyond a focus on individual thought processes to take account of meaning-making interactions and social and cultural practices more broadly. As Leont'ev (1978, p. 13) wrote, "Cognition does not exist outside the life process that in its very nature is a material, practical process."

Drawing on such sociocultural ideas, Scribner and Cole (1981) set out to investigate linkages between cognition and material processes in literacy practices. Researching the Vai people of Liberia and Sierra Leone, they were able to disentangle the effects of literacy learned in schools, religious institutions and informally, since these did not necessarily map on to one another in different people's life experiences. They found that cognitive gains, as demonstrated in the performance of tasks, could be correlated with the skills and foci of specific literacy practices rather than existing in any decontextualised way. Further, their work constructing appropriate tasks in order to understand and assess literacy activities had to be designed to be ecologically valid, that is, to make sense according to their participants' understandings and experiences. In this way, they drew together ethnographic precepts with the attention to local authenticity in approaching and assessing literacies that had been pioneered by sociocultural psychologists such as Vygotsky and Luria, in their work originally conducted in the 1930s.

The classical empirical studies of Heath (1982, 1983) challenged the traditional views of the so-called literacy myth that associates literacy automatically with other gains, whether cognitive or markers of external validation. She further offered a distinctive ontology and epistemology to both the sociocultural approach to literacy and ethnographic approaches to the study of language practices. In her work on examining the equal but different values of literacy practices and language socialisation processes in three sociocultural groups or communities, her work can be regarded as foundational to explorations of orality and literacy together in the context of social practices (Gee, 2015).

The first community was the mainstream families whose "initiation-reply-evaluation sequences" style of literacy events echoed the teaching and learning activities at schools. The bedtime reading and other family literacy events in such a White middle-class community with teacher-mothers followed the school-expected patterns. The second community was a White working-class community adopting a "teach them how to talk" approach instead. Parents or caretakers engaged the preschoolers in daily activities but did not associate texts or pictures in bookreading with social contexts, perceiving as unnecessary explicit explanations during literacy events. The third community, which was Black and working-class, possessed a style Heath termed the "learn to talk" style. No spoken or written materials were tailor-made for babies, although they tended to receive monologic storytelling. Caregivers of the second and the third communities did as much to support their children as the mainstream community but the key difference between them was that their common literacy practices did not align well with those the children went on to find themselves confronted with at school. The observed differences between sociocultural groups in their orientations towards literacy led many researchers to pursue further studies exploring dis/connections between school and community in literacy studies.

Another leading influential work in literacy studies, aligning with the practice-oriented view of literacy developed by Scribner and Cole (1981) and the understandings of literacy apprenticeship proposed by Heath (1983), is Street's (1984) book *Literacy in Theory and Practice*.

Drawing on his fieldwork in rural Iran in the 1970s, Street claimed that all literacy is ideological in nature, confronting the still largely hegemonic attitude regarding literacy as a matter of individualised cognition, a perspective which he described as the “autonomous model”. Street regards literacy as situated practices shaped by social factors including local ideologies, social contexts and political influences. He emphasises the importance of social and cultural contexts in which reading and writing make sense, while rejecting the argument that literacy can ever be only a set of discrete skills. Street (1984) further reinforces the importance of the nature of literacy as embedded in social practice. Research participants, like all of us, understand and engage in their particular literacy practices associated with their social communities while pursuing authentic goals in their reading and writing activities.

It is worth highlighting two notions mentioned above that have been widely adopted by literacy researchers and some subsequent linguistic ethnographers: “literacy events” and “literacy practices”. Literacy events, as described by Heath (1982, p. 50), are “occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies”. Larger sociocultural factors have to be taken into consideration when interpreting literacy events. Developed from Heath’s concept of “literacy events” and Street’s “literacy practices”, Barton (1991) argues that literacy practices are common patterns found in reading and writing texts for social activities, cultural values and ideological purposes. Barton’s (1994) fundamental synthesis of ideas about literacy as a social practice influenced the increasing number of researchers adopting this approach. Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) book, an ethnographic study of everyday life in a small town in North West England, also pioneered a “local literacies” research genre.

With regard to the above-mentioned studies located in a broadly sociocultural approach to literacy, it can be noted that schools and households, in addition to workplace, religion and entertainment, as suggested by Wagner et al. (1986), are five social domains where literacy practices have typically been studied. However, literacy studies and linguistic ethnography researchers made new connections between domains. For example, Street’s Iranian fieldwork, mentioned above, showed that people have different literacy practices in different domains of life but can then make novel connections across. Social functions and practices, learned in the context of participating in religious life, played a vital role in influencing newly developing commercial literacies in the community, rather than schooled literacies as might perhaps have been expected. The latter tended to orient away from village-based practices (Street, 1984).

All the literacy studies research discussed above align with the broad and rich working definition of literacy proposed by UNESCO (2004, p. 13):

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

However, it should be noted that UNESCO, like other pan-national and influential organisations, has not necessarily continued to pursue such definitions that go beyond functional, individualised understandings of literacy skills.

Critical issues and debates

The foundational works of literacy studies raised questions that are still key to critical issues and debates today. The most important single impetus for much work in literacy studies lies in

the desire to understand and value authentic literacy practices as they exist, in all their diversity and richness. This runs counter to a very strong driver of top-down educational policies that often seek to identify one-size-fits-all solutions to issues such as perceived deficiencies in literacy levels. At the same time, for literacy studies practitioners themselves, as indeed other ethnographers, a challenge lies in studying situated practices: can findings be generalised?

For literacy studies in general, engaging with real world issues, none is more crucial than the interrogation of the autonomous view of literacy and the consequent impoverished outlook for shaping formal institutions involved with literacy if this is permitted to drive literacy policy. This takes the shape of resistance to a narrow, skills-based definition of literacy and a recognition of the consequences of powerful, constraining discourses on the life courses of individuals especially those who have been born or placed in positions of unequal opportunities. There have been many critiques of the constraining effects of such narrow understandings of literacy. A vivid example is provided by Purcell-Gates (2005, p. ix). She adumbrates the literacy education landscape without literacy studies, as "...literacy research, policy, and funding focused myopically on literacy instruction alone. This resulted in a system of thought and a system of instructional policy that is closed, with no feedback beyond itself." She evokes parallels from other realms of life such as imagining if football instructors had never seen a game and only ever focussed on a few discrete elements such as dribbling and passing. The result she terms a "solipsistic cycle of literacy instruction ... with literacy itself now defined as measured by instruction in literacy" (Purcell-Gates, 2005, p. ix). Probably the most difficult task for literacy studies is to communicate this message, so very distant, as Purcell-Gates makes plain, from understandings of literacy that currently drive policy on literacy in education in many countries.

In the course of endeavouring to gain any traction on educational policy, one issue that arises is the value of literacy studies itself. Brandt and Clinton (2002) published an article entitled "Limits of the local: expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice". This paper tackled an issue that many had seen as problematic for literacy studies, that are also questions raised for linguistic ethnography in general: if the objective of investigative research is to provide a richly detailed situated case study, what possibilities are there for extending findings and implications beyond the local? Is essentially descriptive work, however carefully achieved, bounded by its own limitations? How can grounded empirical work contribute towards the building of theory?

Brandt and Clinton (2002) argued that dichotomising local practices against powerful forces such as government policies, reductionist global discourses and major economic transnational companies active in literacy education is a self-limiting and thus ultimately harmful strategy. They drew on the work of Latour (e.g. 1993) in two key ways. First, they discuss the relationships of literacy technologies to contexts beyond the immediately local. Using the example of a discussion in a US bank around a mortgage application, they demonstrate how understandings of the context, including the technologies present in the environment, permeate the participants' actions. But also those very technologies cause the mediated transaction to feed forward into larger arenas of impact, such as the Federal Reserve. The selection of the example now appears extraordinarily prescient, for it was a crisis in mortgage lending that led to a financial crisis and major recession in the US in 2007–2009 (Duca, 2013). It would not be difficult to trace the results of this crisis into many areas of the lives of people who suffered as a result, including their literacy activities – and indeed Duca (2013) selected a sign advertising refinancing services overgrown by grass, as a vivid illustration for his essay. Second, Brandt and Clinton (2002) interrogate the "great divide" between people and things, arguing that more complex analytical frames are needed than those that distinguish

between the agentive power of people and that of objects seen as mere tools in their hands. This presaged a growing amount of interest in literacy studies in approaches that are sometimes clustered under the term “post-humanist”.

So, for many literacy studies researchers, as other linguistic ethnographers, the challenge between the local and the generalisable becomes recast as a process of rethinking of the relationship between people and technology in the world. Nothing can be held constant and rethinking the locus of power becomes a moral imperative.

Current contributions and research areas

The major contribution of literacy studies is to contribute situated studies of literacy that enrich actual and potential understandings of the diversity of literacy in the human experience. We have already quoted Purcell-Gates’s (2005) powerful preface stimulated by a notable collection of case studies from diverse global locations, working across areas of often distinct empirical fields of literacy studies: family, community and education. Since its beginnings literacy studies has generated many such valuable studies, in many of which sectors of society sometimes viewed as marginalised or less powerful are revealed as engaged in sophisticated literacy practices (Besnier, 1995; Gebre et al., 2009). Often, children are revealed as active agents in their encounters with various literacies, and studies show the complex inter-relationships among their own understandings, those of institutions and the resources made available to them (Dyson, 2016).

We strongly recommend two collections of contemporary literacy studies volumes as the best way to gain a view of the rich landscape of literacy studies in the first decade of the 20th century (Hall et al., 2013; Rowsell & Pahl, 2015). Many of the chapters are by authors leading current projects and all the topics represented have salience as we write this overview. In her foreword to the first volume, Gutiérrez (2013, p. xxix) is explicit about the social justice agenda driving research in literacy studies, its background and consequences:

I would like to argue for an expanded view of learning as the organization of possible futures – one that requires a more interventionist stance to remedy the current conditions in which nondominant youths learn and appropriate multiple literacies in particular.

Rowsell and Pahl (2015), with a similarly global reach and commitment to diversity, organise their book into sections by approach and theme: namely *The foundations of literacy studies; space-focused approaches; time-focused approaches; multimodal approaches; digital approaches; hermetic approaches; making meaning from the everyday* and *co-constructing literacies with communities*. This demonstrates key current concerns in literacy studies over developing theoretical underpinnings from more traditional sociocultural theories into multimodality and new ways of approaching considerations of time and space, drawing on contemporary philosophers of materiality (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2009). The final two section titles demonstrate the persistence in literacy studies of attention to vernacular literacies and the importance of finding out about people’s authentic social and cultural connections, rather than resting on assumptions made, very often, from “above” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

As digital technologies and especially the internet became more pervasive in many societies, literacy studies researchers have also demonstrated the value of studying people’s practices across digital and physical domains, and complexifying issues of “access”. In a powerful polemic Gee (2003) argued that video games embodied better design principles for learning than formal education.

Main research methods including approaches to analysis

This section will elucidate the main research methods of literacy studies, which can inspire linguistic ethnographers. Readers of this handbook will notice an essential overlap in methodologies with much other research in this area, as so much literacy studies work has adopted “the conjuncture of ethnography and linguistics” that Rampton et al. (2004, p. 2) described in their UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum position paper. They argued that “language and the social world are mutually shaping, and [that] close analysis of situated language use can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity”. Both the study of talk and the study of context are combined in fieldwork.

It is beyond the scope of this section to illustrate all the possible methodological approaches of literacy studies to linguistic ethnographers. This section aims at consolidating the following emerging research endeavours which focus on the interplay of literacy studies and linguistic ethnography instead: micro-level linguistic analysis, rich observation, documenting artefacts, ethnographic descriptions with insider perspectives on writing and speaking activities in the research contexts. We offer three main characteristics that shape the trajectory of linguistic ethnography and literacy studies.

First, a core component in traditional literacy studies is linguistic analysis, such as text analysis or Gee’s “discourse analysis” (Gee, 2014). Gee here expands the meaning of discourse analysis from the orthographic or spoken forms of language to multimodal forms including art, pictures, music, architecture and historical documents. Taking the perspective of literacy as a social practice (Barton et al., 2000), typically literacy studies focus on how social and cultural perspectives and identities shape texts (as in Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Ivanič, 1998). Therefore, methodology combines analysis of both researcher-generated (etic) and participant-generated (emic) texts and artefacts, complemented by other instruments such as in-depth interviews and participant observations. Researchers are likely to adopt heterogeneous research methods including document collection, observing and participating in literacy events and asking interviewees to reflect on their practices (see Papen, this volume).

Second, given the complex nature of conducting linguistic ethnographic research through the lens of literacy studies, it should be recognised that reflexivity is an enterprise fraught with difficulty in the inevitably unpredictable events of everyday life (see Patiño-Santos, this volume). Research methodology should align with research objectives, research questions and research design, as we mentioned with reference to Latour (2005). Linguistic ethnographers themselves, ideally acting in collaboration, can exercise their own judgement on the appropriateness of their research methodology, taking into account priorities of social justice and ethical relationships with participants (see Copland, this volume). Whatever the degree of ethnographic stance, approaches to methodology tend to be dynamic and adaptable. Such flexibility can allow us to adopt appropriate tools whenever or wherever necessary.

Third, as technologies have emerged and evolved through the “new communications landscape” (Kress, 1998), the main research methods of literacy studies have transformed through giving increased attention to multiple modes. The same, of course, applies to linguistic ethnography (see Varis & Mingyi Hou, this volume). Two major phases of digital research in the field are worthy of mention. When referring to the shift to encompassing the digital, early influential research methods significant to literacy studies offered path-breaking methodologies, such as the multimodal transcription method developed by Hull and Nelson (2005), to work with texts produced through digital storytelling. The multi-media

compositions created by the urban teenagers in a community technology centre in California constituted an early generation of digital stories revealing youth engagement with digital literacies beyond the academic domain. Through examination of the adolescents' multimodal storytelling process, the interactions of spoken words and written texts with other multiple types of modes including images, music and videos are captured and analysed, as new pathways of non-print-based storytelling. Such research involving multimodality acts as a new research 'apparatus' (Nelson et al., 2008) for both literacy studies researchers and linguistic ethnographers (see Bezemer, this volume). The breakthrough of simultaneously adopting home and community as research contexts to examine multimodal composition also changed the classroom-oriented research trend in the field (Vasudevan et al., 2010).

Another phase of digital-related research contributing to literacy studies, in terms of research methodology, would be those studies investigating the increased pervasiveness of social media in everyday life. The extent of language-related research on social media platforms has been increasing rapidly in recent decades and an atmosphere of research tends to focus on social interactions between online participants. Three examples should suffice to illustrate. The first example is doing facework on Facebook as a new literacy practice as investigated by Davies (2012). We can draw inspiration from the way that the researcher investigates how various physical spaces such as bars, bedrooms and workplaces become the intersecting paths of online social networking sites. A community of practice is no longer confined to physical participation but can be extended to the digital settings. The research project on Flickr and Facebook conducted by Barton and Lee (2013) is also influential in the field. Users' postings on Facebook's profiles and walls are like an 'auto-biography': "a narrative of who we are and what kind of person we want others to see us" (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 84) as a presentation of the self is shifted from the physical world to the digital platform in fluid forms, in varying degrees of orienting to public audiences. A third instance of social media research contributing to these methodological perspectives is the reflexive research of two academic Twitter users (Gillen & Merchant, 2013) using a dual autoethnographic approach. This study depicts the digital communication as a meaning-making process and sociolinguistic practice in a rich semiotic environment. One point is worth emphasising here: the common ground of the above-mentioned studies is that they are text-centred yet deeply contextualised. In looking forward to the development of further studies, Mills (2015) offers useful suggestions in working with a number of "lenses" – social, critical, multimodal, spatial and material – in theoretically driven research "for the digital age".

Implications for practice

The arena of contemporary literacy studies tends to present itself as both ambitious and wide-ranging, "an area of scholarship that explains how meaning is made in everyday lives" (Rowell & Pahl, 2015, p. 13). A key demand of literacy studies today is a refocussing of the place of literacy in the lives of people, especially from more vulnerable sections of the world's population. As Hamilton (2012, p. 136) writes:

When narratives are generated in a skilfully organised, participative environment then greater diversity and a different perspective on the experience of literacy learning can emerge to interrupt and complicate the dominant policy and popular media narratives.{These constitute] an artificial grid placed over experience which benefits some and disadvantages others, depending on where you are positioned within the social order.

It is difficult to see that much, if any, contemporary linguistic ethnography could take place without paying attention to the relationship between literacy practices and social practices:

Material (paper and digital) texts are central to the co-ordination of social processes in contemporary societies. The social institutions which shape our lives are co-ordinated in very large part by means of the flows and trajectories of material texts. ... A focus on the role of texts in mediating, co-ordinating, regulating and authorizing activities is a crucial means by which ethnographies can be extended beyond the scope of the local practices under observation.

(Tusting, 2013, pp. 5–6)

Further, technology and media are always inextricably linked with literacies, in any specific instantiation of space and time. As the editors of another recent collection of research in literacy studies state, "... the literacy-media-technology nexus is continually recycling and modifying the sociocultural conditions of its time, making certain subject positions available and others contested" (Merchant et al., 2017, p. 6). Thus, it is likely that fruitful explorations of identity and literacy practices will continue to include a historical perspective, to illuminate the roles of economic and cultural relationships, and institutions that sponsor literacy practices (Brandt, 2001).

Imaginative explorations of literacy that extend backwards in time can also help to elucidate our potential routes forward, as argued lucidly by Graff (2010, p. 56):

History mandates focussing and refocusing the lenses of time, place, and alternative spaces. It probes and prompts us to comprehend what has been, what might have been, and what there might be: choice, agency, and possibility, in their fullness and their limits.

Future directions

As already argued in this chapter in multiple ways, a major direction in which many literacy studies researchers will continue to work is to make progress in reforming dominant understandings of literacy, putting forward demands for new policies that connect better to people's authentic purposes and strive for increased social justice. See, for example, the edited volume *New Literacies Around the Globe: Policy and Pedagogy* (Burnett et al., 2014). Their concluding "charter for education" calls for a rejection of narrow frameworks in favour of a collaborative approach to empowerment. While recognising the potential of digital technologies and all the other means to hand that may improve literacy pedagogy, their approach is not reliant on the interests of profit-based programmes but rather echoes the insightful conclusions of a practical approach to literacy education in Ethiopia associated with Brian Street (Gebre et al., 2009). That work ends on the potential benefits of (linguistic) ethnography in the field:

For that is what ethnography does – it turns the world upside down. It teaches the teacher to learn from the learner. And paradoxically in that way we shall create better teaching and learning programmes for everybody.

(Gebre et al., 2009, p. 151)

While emphasising continuities, we can also identify ways in which new theoretical insights are serving to advance literacy studies. We take as a particularly fertile arena of practice, although not perhaps the most obvious given policy constraints, that of pedagogy in the

early years. Post-humanist approaches, which acknowledge the essential connectedness between people and the world around them, decentring the focus on the human, are informing much exciting work. We see this movement as in part a resistance to an unremitting focus on achievements of individual children, attaining narrowly defined standards. The kind of emphasis on literacy skills measured in tests that Purcell-Gates criticised receives a healthy reaction in, for example, the focus on literacy processes in the moment that Kuby and Gutshall Rucker (2016) call “literacy desirings”. This collaboration between a researcher and an elementary school teacher is particularly worth mentioning as it is imbued with theoretical discussions, yet entirely practical, in a strong tradition of inspirational books that respect the capacities of children and regard literacy learning as social and as involving the imagination and play (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Wohlwend, 2013). Like those predecessors, Kuby and Gutshall Rucker detail their approaches to pedagogy, while thinking through the relational materialist theory that assists them to think more broadly than conventional approaches to instruction. Considering a unit focussed on non-fiction writing, for example, Gutshall Rucker, the teacher of a second grade class (aged around seven years old), explains:

[Kuby] and I brainstormed different types of nonfiction texts, such as books, how-to videos, and recipe books. Understanding a genre (e.g., nonfiction, personal narratives, opinion writings, and so forth) was just one goal for students. I also wanted students to consider the format, mode, and materials they use (**are entangled with**) to publish *for others to use* (**intra-act** with) their creations. As a class, we also spend time exploring what it means to publish as a writer. Students explore different modes, such as board games, maps, models, plays with scripts, picture books, how-to videos, and cooking shows.

(Kuby & Gutshall Rucker, 2016, p. 59; emphases as in original)

The terms in bold are drawn from the work of the quantum physicist and philosopher Karen Barad (2007). “Entangled” refers to her notion that there is no separation between meaning and matter; we are always entangled in the world we perceive. Similarly to the ideas sometimes termed or relating to ANT (actor-network theory), a strong concept here is that viewing humans as the only actors in the world is overly simplistic and ultimately misleading. Objects and technologies constantly “speak back” to us; every action that we take exists in a web of artefacts, environment, embodiment and so on, all inseparable in the moment. That moment is inflected with past and future, as we are constantly influenced by past actions that shape the environment as well as understandings and experiences gained from the past, plus immanent futures. An important implication for contemporary literacy studies is that this takes researchers further than the traditional sociocultural concept of people as having agency and things as being tools.

Seen in this way, literacy studies is fertilised by a realm of social technical studies that do not necessarily have to name literacy as their object of enquiry. For example, Hutchins’s (1995) work on technologies, humans and environments, focussing on the concept of situated cognition, does not mention “literacy” yet can be read through a literacy studies lens (Gillen et al. 2012).

Finally, we would like to suggest that the main reason for the likelihood of the continuation of work that does explicitly situate itself as literacy studies into the future lies in the alignment of some of its continuing concerns and methods with contemporary foci even if these are inflected with newer theoretical concepts. We recently turned back to Besnier’s (1995) classic work, *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll*, and were utterly impressed by the way he expresses three persistent values of literacy studies.

First, Besnier takes account of literacy as intrinsically connected with other means of communication, drawing on the timeless wisdom of Keith Basso's insight:

Writing, wherever it exists, is only one of several communication channels available to the members of a society. Consequently, the conditions under which it is selected and the purposes to which it is put must be described in relation to those of other channels.

(Basso, 1974, cited in Besnier, 1995, p. 12)

Second, the site for this detailed ethnography study might be imagined to be a relatively self-contained society with some features of linguistic and social stability, since it is a "remote" Pacific atoll. But Besnier demonstrates that such assumptions, now fruitfully disturbed by notions of superdiversity (see Blackledge and Creese, this volume), were always a "figment of the anthropological, or at least of the Western, imagination" (Besnier, 1995, p. 49). Mobilities have long played a part in the history and development of literacy practices in Nukulaelae. Besnier uncovered the traumatic episode of the removal of all able-bodied men and some women through the lure of apparent engagement with their religious practices by a group of visiting Peruvian traders in 1863, who then enslaved them. Through painstaking investigations of his own he reveals diversity in languages beyond the dominant written Tuvaluan significant to elements of the population.

Third, although Besnier writes long before the post-humanist "turn", his detailed descriptions always include attention to the active, shaping characteristics of the dynamic environment and its technologies incorporating all the material factors that impact upon people's literacy practices whether writing letters or weaving names onto mats. Equally, the gaze of the researcher is always implicated in the discussion of findings.

Further reading

- Hall, K., Cremin, T., Comber, B., & Moll, L. (2013). *International handbook of research on children's literacy, learning and culture*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. (This is the most comprehensive collection of works looking at learning and education from a literacy studies perspective that has been published in recent years. The scope of its ambition is not only to overview the field, through inviting key contributors to sociocultural studies of literacy and learning, although this is achieved successfully, but also to move the field on through a commitment to social justice.)
- Rowse, J., & Pahl, K. (Eds.) 2015. *The Routledge handbook of literacy studies*. London and New York: Routledge. (This is very much a complementary volume to the one cited above, in that it endeavours to focus on the breadth and depth of literacy studies scholarship, although for the most part concentrating on areas not centrally concerned with education. The two volumes together represent a wonderful synthesis of literacy studies at what might turn out to be a pivotal moment in time. Necessarily, there are still many absences especially since neither can encompass much work published in languages other than English.)

Related topics

Multimodality; Digital approaches in linguistic ethnography; Faith communities; Ethnographies of academic writing.

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