Literacy and Cultural Discourse: The Relativity of Print

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Abstract: Literacy performance is not universal but must be understood within the context ot a group of people with particular cultural values and characteristics. This paper describes the literacy functioning of a group of participants within a Newfoundland setting. The results suggest a number of Implications, especially, for literacy assessment and programming.

Resume: La performance en alphabetisatlon n'est pas un concept unlversel mate on doit la comprendre d l'Interieur du contexte d'un groupe de gens qul partagent des valeurs et des characterlstlques culturelles partlculieres. Cette etude decrlt le fonctlonnement de l'alphabetlsatton d'un groupe de participants au sein d'un milieu terre-neuvien. Les resultats suggerent un nombie d'Implicatfons surtout en ce qul concerne revaluation et la mfce en oeuvre des programmes en alphabetlsatton.

Literacy within the North American context has generally been viewed from an "outside-in" perspective. That is, authorities (including the media) decide who shall be literate, and when and how. A good example of this is the Southam Literacy Survey (1987), a measure of the functional literacy levels of Canadian adults. The survey questionnaire, consisting of two forms, one of 10 items and one of 14 items, was administered to 2398 Canadians. The illiteracy rate in Newfoundland, based on a sample of 105 respondents was recorded as 44 percent, yet 4 of the items on the forms dealt with organizing a meeting, a task of no relevance to many people taking the test. From the "outside-in" perspective, literacy implications are usually described in terms of the benefits that should follow naturally from literacy development.

Research is needed to determine how people value literacy and how literacy levels interact with the total functioning of the individual in relation to others and to his/her environment. Only by understanding this context can authorities, and government agencies in particular, respond most effectively to perceived literacy needs. Smith (1986) emphasizes the need for such research:

> An ethnography of literacy (or illiteracy) that is true to its cultural roots will examine without preoccupation both the social consequences of the particular illiteracy under investigation and its various levels of meaning to individuals. It

will be sensitive to the entire web of relationships human beings find themselves
enveloped in (p. 271).

The purpose of this study was to investigate how residents in a Newfoundland
setting responded to particular literacy tasks.

Participants and Methodology

The participants consisted of a core group of nine individuals and a peripheral
group of about 10. The core group might be classed as of lower middle class
socioeconomic status and lived mainly in an urban area. There were five females
and four males; the age range would be approximately 35 to 65 years. This study
continued over the course of a year.

An ethnographic approach guided the collection and analysis of the data. Hill
(1983) argues that "the ethnographic approach allows for an in-depth investiga-
tion since the researcher lives in the community studied for an extended period
of time and attempts to understand the social phenomena investigated from the
point of view of community residents themselves" (p. 28). The data reported here
are part of a larger study with an overall purpose of studying the interaction of
cultural values and literacy. One area on which the author focussed concerned
the relationship of background knowledge, and oral language in interpreting and
using print. Wilcox (1982) suggests that within *a* larger study one is able "to select
among phenomena in the process of research" (p. 499).

Overall, the researcher's role was that of participant-observer and since he
had recently arrived in the community it was only "natural" that he would ask
questions re different practices. Mishler (1986) states that an ethnographic
method bases its interpretation of data within a particular cultural context so the
researcher was always careful to speak as if he were attempting to function
effectively (which was true) within this context and questions asked reflected this
intent. There was no attempt, for example, to have respondents hypothesize,
conjecture, nor did the researcher raise practices from other cultures/geographic
areas for comparative discussion. According to Kerby (1991) participants
frequently become "locked into a mode of life that may not change in any essential
way over many years (and). . . repeat the same routines" (p. 38). The challenge
was to tap into the participants' personal consciousness of then- routines and to
understand the situation as they perceived it, which Guba and Lincoln (1985)
refer to as interpretative inquiry,

Literacy Discourses

In order to understand literacy (utilization of print) among a particular
segment of Newfoundland society, it is important to understand the notion of
discourse, for as Gee (1991a) states, "Learning to read is always some aspect of
some discourse" (p. 6). Gee defines discourse as "a socially accepted association
among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to
identify oneself as a member of a 'social network' " (p. 3). Discourse may be

primary or secondary. All people, through being part of a family or other close knit group, acquire primary discourse. Gee explains:

> All humans, barring serious disorder, get one form of discourse free, so to speak, and this through acquisition. This is our socio-culturally determined way of using our native language in face-to-face communication with intimates (intimates are people with whom we share a great deal of knowledge because of a great deal of contact and similar experiences) (p.7).

Oral language is the key medium within the primary discourse. Gee adds that the acquisition of this discourse, the primary discourse, comes through "primary socialization within the family" (p. 7) and extends outwards. If the expanded circle of relatives and/or friends is homogeneous enough that they share a primary discourse, this cultural group functions as a "society of intimates" (p. 7). As such they possess information not available to others outside this discourse.

As people encounter others outside the intimate circle, they relate to them via a secondary discourse which "requires one to communicate with non-intimates (or to treat intimates as if they were non-intimates)" (Gee, 1991a, p. 7). Secondary discourses build on and extend the uses of language from the primary discourse. In many instances, written language is the common language medium within a secondary discourse.

Interrelating Print and Background Knowledge

The observed data on the respondents were coded and catgorized in terms of how they function vis a vis each other for the purpose of utilizing print information. The results are summarized under a number of general statements.

1. Oral language is used as an interpretative vehicle for written language within primary discourses.

Print is ordinarily part of a secondary discourse. However, there are occasions when print events are brought into the primary context as part of the participants' daily functioning. While sales flyers, for example, originate within a marketing discourse or context and the use of language in these flyers is usually generated by marketing strategies and needs, the use of sales flyers is important in the context of daily living within a primary discourse.

It seems that in the Newfoundland context the use of print within the primary discourse depends on oral language as an interpretative mechanism. Sales flyers are a significant part of oral language interactions and participants regularly comment on, and share information pertinent to using flyers. One participant may check with another whether he/she noticed a particular sale, or may comment that he/she was able to take advantage of a particular sale. Frequently, items on sale are not publicized in flyers but are advertised on signs adjoining the business and it is only through oral language that many people will be aware of the sale. Such sales may include a bargain on milk (an expensive commodity in Newfoundland) at a service station, or on cheese at a corner store. Sometimes

there are "in-store" specials, *a* knowledge of which is also shared by word-of-mouth. It is also common that when a person plans to buy a "bigger" (in value) item, he/she checks with the store manager to see if and when a sale of such an item might be forthcoming.

Gee (1991b) states that "language is always something that is actively constructed in a context physically present or imagined, by both speaker/writer and hearer/reader through a complex process of inferring that is guided by but never fully determined by the structural properties of the language" (p. 93). In the case of sales flyers, the use of oral language embodies a larger context - that of family/friends and the economic conditions.   The language itself is not important but rather its effect of enabling someone to capitalize on a "bargain". Because of a strong oral language network "complete" print information is not necessary for that functioning to occur.

Other instances in which oral language supercedes print in providing for interpretation include dealing with the lack of identifying, directional or locational information. For example, the addresses of stores, theatres, or other institutions are frequently not included in announcements/ advertisements as this knowledge is generally known. In the case of one flyer, not even the name of the store was indicated, since people were able to associate the flyer format with the particular store.   Interpreting print via background knowledge and oral language interaction as done by the Newfoundland respondents is as Freire (1991) states, a form of "re-writing" the context by transforming it. No longer is the print of the flyer autonomous; no longer is the secondary discourse of the print crucial to its use. The context of sales flyers is analysed and utilized to the advantage of the participants who capitalize on sales through oral language, either through seeking more information, or sharing existing information. For these participants, the word "literacy", according to Courts (1991) suggests a state of being and a set of capabilities through which the literate individual is able to utilize the interior world of self to act upon and interact with the exterior structures of the world around him (or her) in order to make sense of self and other" (p.4)

2. Background knowledge is essential in communicating via print within primary discourse.

According to Freire (1991) "reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies reading the world" (p. 144). In order to interpret print and communicate the meaning, it is first essential that the participants read the world. Participants must know the address of stores; they must know that corner stores and service stations publicize sales via advertising boards/signs; they must know that certain stores (especially supermarkets) promote sale items at certain times during the day (maybe around noon, or a couple of hours before closing, especially on Saturday nights when some stores close at 10:00 P.M.

Having read the world and having acquired a certain body of information enable the participants to act more effectively within their environment. For

example, participants know on which days various businesses release sales flyers so not only do they wait until the final sales flyer in the sequence is released to do comparative shopping, but also they plan their shopping route so that they travel the shortest distance between home and stores and back again.

Background knowledge also allows them to be more critical shoppers. For example, participants note such detail in sales flyers as the number of tissues in a box, the number of sheets in paper towels. Critical reading also occurs in assessing the cost for utilities; for example in evaluating heating costs, participants note the number of days from one billing date to the next, so that the cost of heating "per month" may be evaluated against 28 days or 31 days.

3. *Those not sharing the necessary background knowledge are at a disadvantage.*

Because of the emphasis on background knowledge in the Newfoundland context and the presence of restrictive print information, these people not sharing this knowledge as participants are disadvantaged. As an example, an instructor in a local college was to visit a workplace site for a group of college students in a nearby community. The contact person in the community gave the instructor directions, "After you pass the sign entering the community, come straight down the road and then up a steep hill and you will see Smith's Garage on your left; you just can't miss it.". The instructor drove to the community, down the road and up the hill and soon found she was well beyond the community without having found the site. She called her contact from a pay phone. All she said she saw along the way was an ESSO and a Petro Canada station. The contact interrupted, "That's it" she said, "the ESSO station on the way up the hill." But the instructor continued, '1 didn't see a sign 'Smith's Garage'". "Oh, I don't believe there is one" said the contact, but everyone knows it is Smith's".

A second example concerns a memo from a University department which read, "This is to advise that effective immediately budgetary items which were normally referred to person-X should now be referred to person-Y". This assumes that new staff in particular know which budgetary items were referred to person-X. It also forces those outside the primary discourse to become part of it through the preferred mode of oral language. For a new staff member to operate effectively, he/she would have to find out which budgetary items are now referred to person-Y and this communication would likely occur through oral language.

A final example not only illustrates the disadvantage of the person outside the primary discourse but also the categorization of that person as being an outsider. The example refers to voting in a municipal election in which the public announcement in the local paper did not indicate who qualified as a citizen eligible to vote. This meant that a recent arrival had to ask to find out this information. The first response of the person asked was, "Oh, where are you from" How long have you been here? etc.".

4. Assessing literacy must be congruent with the respondents' discourse.

The four items on the Southam Literacy Survey questionnaire relating to setting up a meeting would not be functional for the respondents of this study. Whereas the tasks in the questionnaire were termed "functional" this was hardly the case. Firstly, the meeting is a ficticious one and of no relevance to the respondents who judge the value of a meeting in terms of the issues to be discussed. Furthermore, the matter of setting-up and arranging meeting space is the function of "others", the setting-up is usually under the control of a secondary discourse and is usually authoritative in nature as when a government or union official calls a meeting about the Northern cod moratorium or a school board to explain its decision to construct a new school. In fact, there may not even be a notice of a meeting, the information being communicated through the "grapevine method". Since participants tend to know participants who have a stake in the issue, the information gets passed selectively and effectively.

The task of making physical arrangements for the meeting is the responsibility of the person hired by the premises where the meeting will be held and not that of the general public.

Ironically, literacy evaluators from outside the primary discourse may find themselves "illiterate" in that context in the sense that the context operates on minimal print and considerable background knowledge , the latter which they will likely lack. Literacy assessment is relative to the task at hand and the discourse which guides the task's meaning.

5. Not only does the use of print vary by discourse, but the organization of discourses may vary by geographic / cultural region.

This is stated more as a hypothesis because data from other contexts (urban/rural, geographic regions, cultural groups) are needed to confirm it. In addition to the 19 respondents on whom the previous data are based, data from an additional 10 residents (mainly in a rural area) led to the above statement.

Certainly, in *a* primary discourse, oral language takes precedence over written language. Within the Newfoundland context, the significance of oral language and background knowledge to capitalize on and compensate for minimal print cues may differ from that in other geographic/cultural regions. The predominance of background knowledge and oral language (discussed in relation to statement #1 above) is also highlighted by an incident at a neighbourhood gas bar where a couple of pumps were out of order. The management did not think to place an "Out of Order" sign as the regulars would know and those who didn't would soon find out by trial and error. The assumption was that the customers would come to this conclusion rather than thinking they were not operating the pumps correctly.

When print occurs within a secondary discourse (under the control of an agency/institution) it is usually viewed as formal, impersonal, and authoritative. While oral language is essential for interpreting print in a primary discourse its role is almost negligible in interpreting print in a secondary discourse and takes on more of a role in sharing. Oral language is used to "read out" the written

language, the meaning of which then stands on its own outside the primary discourse but may be an object of discussion within the primary discourse. Even newspapers may be viewed in this way. The print takes the event away from the peoples' control. The print refers to events "outside" the people rather than being integral to their lives. It is an "independent, objective" account of an event. For example a person may talk of a death announcement in the paper (citing the wording) in a very different way and with different information than in discussing the event in a social context. It is like describing a snapshot of the event rather relating it from personal knowledge. Newspapers are often read in short intervals interspersed with talk about what has been read. For example, *a* person notes an item of interest and then immediately phones someone who is also interested to chat about it. This is not unlike reading in the workplace when short periods of silent reading are interspersed with talk to share and interpret what has been read (Mikulecky, 1982).

Oral language is also interjected into secondary discourse from a humanistic or an expectation of personal interaction. As an example, after a major storm during which thousands of households were without electricity and hundreds of calls were received at the Light and Power Company, a company official returned calls to check if the caller had had the power restored and if things were functioning adequately. In fact, it is not uncommon for *a* citizen to phone the premier on a certain matter and talk to him directly.

When print is associated with institutional and traditionally powerful organizations such as the government and the church, and functions to direct or control, it takes on an authoritative meaning which is generally accepted rather than questioned. A parish bulletin, for example, had the effect of regulating the behaviour of parishioners through the following statement:

> Notice: It has been brought to my attention that continuous fighting and arguing is still going on at the Parish card games...This must stop immediately, so that the people who like to attend the card games can relax and enjoy themselves. So I am asking the people who attend the card games to report to me the name/names of the person/persons who is causing the trouble and that person/persons will be asked to stay away from the card games so that the rest can enjoy themselves.

Discussion and Implications

Policy makers must realize that literacy is not an easy term to define. It is perhaps best defined in terms of its relativity. Certainly, the concept of discourse is essential in understanding literacy and the nature of a discourse may vary across regions and cultures. In some contexts, the broader defintion of literacy, that of making sense out of all signs and symbols, may be most appropriate. A knowledge of the geographic/cultural context, the mutually-held goals, the shared knowledge and the operational routines is essential to understanding literacy.

"Print literacy" according to Courts (1991), "is best defined as a meaning-making process rather than a simple coding or decoding of meanings already

presented as given" (p. 3). He continues, "It has not been an overemphasis on meaning-making processes that has caused the literacy problem, but an overemphasis on fragmented contexts, an overemphasis on bits and pieces of knowledge with little focus on relationships among the fragments" (p. 3). In a Newfoundland context, making sense of print literacy must also include the support of background knowledge and oral language. It is recommended that in Adult Basic Education literacy classes the emphasis should be on meaning-making. Analysis of word structure and language patterns should not be dealt with in isolation but within *a* larger context which provides meaning through the use of background knowledge and oral language interaction. Institutional programs should reflect the community contexts in interpreting print.

For example, a notice (of something pertinent to the learners' lives) may be displayed and a segment of print read and discussed in terms of their background knowledge that enhances its meaning. A notice of a meeting to discuss the "cod moratorium compensation package", for example, can lead to much discussion and sharing of experiences (personal and otherwise), reacting critically, and drawing implications. Even the place of a meeting may be given extended meaning through a discussion of its location, the ease of getting there (on a bus route), parking facilities, etc. The need to attend to word structure should arise from such an exercise rather than initiate it.

The interrelationship of print, oral language, and background knowledge may also be used in writing assignments. Writing directions, memos, and personal and business letters may first be discussed in terms of what the reader (audience) may know and how much information needs to be conveyed. This kind of activity could be extended to writing narrative, essays, or argument where print takes on greater prominence in terms of the meaning to be conveyed.

Because of the predominance of oral language, talk should constitute the transition from home to school. Too often, schools immerse beginning students in secondary discourse literacy events. These are often foreign to the students and sometimes result in irrelevancy and failure. Students should be provided with opportunities and should be encouraged to "talk their way through" various print activities. That is, students should talk about the familiarity of the activity, where and when it would be found, how it would function in their lives, etc. Occasionally, stories could be dramatized. Social studies projects in which the students talk to/interview residents from the community should be organized. People from the community should be encouraged to act as resource people for various school topics/activities.

Policy makers should be suspect of surveys conducted by "outside agencies" that purport to be functional and profess to measure the degree to which a person can operate with print. The goal should not be one of evaluation, of determining what is right or wrong, better or worse. Rather, the goal should be one of determining what is.

Any literacy assessment should only be interpreted in terms of "assessment for what?" If, in the case of the Southam Literacy Survey, it is to compare the literacy levels of people across the country, then only items that are common to

all respondents (assuming that this is possible) should be used. If the assessment is to determine to what extent a person can cope with expectations in a workplace setting, then items pertinent to that workplace setting must form the basis of the assessment. If the purpose is to determine to what extent a person can function with written language in terms of critical reaction, such as might occur in a university context, then the assessment might require the individual to present an argument, a critique, or write an essay.

If the task is to assess the functional use of literacy for people in their "everyday" contexts, that is, the degree to which participants can *get* on with their daily lives with and around print, then tasks pertinent to that goal must be provided. In the case of the respondents in this study, such tasks would have to consider the support of oral language and background knowledge in interpreting print (often restrictive) and as this study has shown, the people would function quite well and even better than "outsiders" to that cultural context. In general literacy assessments must distinguish between describing what is versus suggesting what should be.

Adult literacy (basic education) programs must also be distinguished in terms of their purpose. A program aimed at helping adults function better within their everyday contexts is one focus; preparing adults to enroll in trades/workplace programs is another, while providing for adults to obtain a general educational diploma is a third. When adults do not see the connection and relevance between what is expected of them in an adult literacy (basic education) program and the nature of their functioning after the completion of the program, there is usually little motivation and investment of effort.

Promotional campaigns aimed at informing the populace how illiterate it is by quoting survey statistics may fall on deaf ears. Participants within the primary discourse described above do not perceive themselves as illiterate; in fact, it is the "outsider" who cannot function via print in this primary context. Such campaigns should focus on literacy opportunities (programs) of which individuals may take advantage. Once the opportunity/program is described in terms of what it is intended to achieve, the individual can decide whether or not participation in this will be meaningful for him/her.

The Relativity of Discourse and Print

The significance of print tends to be relative to the discourse in which it occurs. Print is not ordinarily a focal point in primary discourse and when it becomes interwoven with the lives of participants in a Newfoundland geographical/cultural context, its interpretation is considerably dependent on oral language and background knowledge. However, discourses may also be relative to the geographical/cultural context in which they occur. The primary discourse described in this paper as part of a Newfoundland geographical/cultural context may actually be considered an "extended" primary context because of the tendency to remove certain print activities from their ordinary secondary discourse contexts (business, government, etc.) and incorporate them into the daily functioning of the participants. The predominant use of background knowledge

often putting "outsiders" at a disadvantage may be unique to the Newfoundland context; this however, can only be determined through further research comparing discourses across geographical/ cultural contexts.

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