

Literacy and Development

Ethnographic Perspectives

Edited by Brian V. Street



**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Literacy and Development is a collection of case studies of literacy projects around the world demonstrating literacy theory in practice.

The contributors present their in-depth studies of everyday uses and meanings of literacy, and of the literacy programmes that have been developed to enhance them. Arguing that ethnographic research can and should inform literacy policy in developing countries, the book extends current theory and itself contributes to policy making and programme building.

With case studies from India, Namibia, Eritrea, Peruvian Amazonia, Ghana, Bangladesh, China and Pakistan, this collection examines a wide cross-section of society and addresses in specific contexts such issues as:

- literacy, schooling and development
- multilingual literacies, ideology and teaching methodologies
- women's literacy and health
- household literacy environments as contexts for development
- literacies, gender and power.

Contributors: Sheila Aikman, Archana Choksi, Priti Chopra, Caroline Dyer, Pat Herbert, Bryan Maddox, Uta Papen, Clinton Robinson, Anna Robinson-Pant, Regie Stites, Martha Wagar Wright, Shirin Zubair; with an Afterword by Alan Rogers.

Brian V. Street is Professor of Language in Education at King's College London, and Visiting Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. His publications include *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1991), *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy* (1993) and *Social Literacies* (1995).

LITERACIES
Series Editor: David Barton
Lancaster University

Literacy practices are changing rapidly in contemporary society in response to broad social, economic and technological changes: in education, the workplace, the media and in everyday life. This series reflects the burgeoning research and scholarship in the field of literacy studies and its increasingly interdisciplinary nature. The series aims to provide a home for books on reading and writing which consider literacy as a social practice and which situate it within broader institutional contexts. The books develop and draw together work in the field; they aim to be accessible, interdisciplinary and international in scope, and to cover a wide range of social and institutional contexts.

SITUATED LITERACIES
Reading and writing in context
Edited by David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic

GLOBAL LITERACIES AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB
Edited by Gail E.Hawisher and Cynthia L.Selfe

MULTILITERACIES
Literacy learning and the design of social futures
Edited by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis

CITY LITERACIES
Learning to read across generations and cultures
Edited by Eve Gregory and Ann Williams

LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT
Ethnographic perspectives
Edited by Brian V.Street

Editorial Board:

Elsa Auerbach *Boston University*
Mike Baynham *University of Technology, Sydney*
David Bloome *Vanderbilt University*
Norman Fairclough *Lancaster University*
James Gee *University of Wisconsin*
Nigel Hall *Manchester Metropolitan University*
Mary Hamilton *Lancaster University*
Peter Hannon *Sheffield University*
Shirley Brice Heath *Stanford University*
Roz Ivanic *Lancaster University*

Gunther Kress *University of London*
Jane Mace *Southbank University*
Janet Maybin *Open University*
Greg Myers *Lancaster University*
Martin Prinsloo *University of Cape Town*
Brian Street *University of London*
Michael Stubbs *University of Trier*
Denny Taylor *Hofstra University*
Daniel Wagner *University of Pennsylvania*

LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Ethnographic perspectives

Edited by Brian V. Street



London and New York

First published 2001
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

The collection © 2001 Brian V.Street
Individual chapters © 2001 the contributors

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Street, Brian V.

Literacy and development: ethnographic perspectives/Brian V.Street.
p. cm.—(Literacies)

Includes bibliographical references.
1. Literacy—Developing countries—Cross-cultural studies. 2. Ethnology—
Developing countries. I. Title. II. Series.

LC161 .S83 2001
302.2'244'091724—dc21 00—059237

ISBN 0-203-46841-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-77665-8 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-23450-6 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-23451-4 (pbk)

CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	vii
<i>List of contributors</i>	viii

Introduction	1
BRIAN V. STREET	

PART I

Literacy and development: ethnographic perspectives on schooling and adult education	19
---	-----------

Introduction	21
---------------------	-----------

1 Literacy, schooling and development: views of Rabari nomads, India	27
CAROLINE DYER AND ARCHANA CHOKSI	

2 ‘Literacy—your key to a better future’? Literacy, reconciliation and development in the National Literacy Programme in Namibia	40
UTA PAPAN	

3 More than just chanting: multilingual literacies, ideology and teaching methodologies in rural Eritrea	61
MARTHA WAGAR WRIGHT	

4 Betrayal and solidarity in ethnography on literacy: revisiting research homework in a north Indian village	78
PRITI CHOPRA	

CONTENTS

PART II

Literacy and development: local literacies and development agendas 93

Introduction 95

5 Literacies, languages and developments in Peruvian Amazonia 103

SHEILA AIKMAN

6 Another language, another literacy? Practices in northern Ghana 121

PAT HERBERT AND CLINTON ROBINSON

7 Literacy and the market: the economic uses of literacy among the peasantry in north-west Bangladesh 137

BRYAN MADDOX

8 Women's literacy and health: can an ethnographic researcher find the links? 152

ANNA ROBINSON-PANT

9 Household literacy environments as contexts for development in rural China 171

REGIE STITES

10 Literacies, gender and power in rural Pakistan 188

SHIRIN ZUBAIR

Afterword: problematising literacy and development 205

ALAN ROGERS

Index 223

FIGURES

2.1	National Literacy Programme in Namibia, Primary Health Care, Learner's Work Book, p. 22	54
2.2	National Literacy Programme in Namibia, Basic English, Learner's Work Book, 1st edition, 1992, p. 39	55
2.3	National Literacy Programme in Namibia, Primary Health Care, Learner's Work Book, p. 19	55
4.1	An extract from Saraswati's writing on meeting No.1	81
7.1	<i>Hishab</i> (accounts): a farmer's record keeping	142
7.2	Managing poverty: a record of household expenditure	143
7.3	Literacy mediation in market activities	147
7.4	Literacy and numeracy fused in daily life	149

CONTRIBUTORS

Sheila Aikman is Lecturer in Education and International Development at the Institute of Education, University of London, with a special teaching and research interest in language and development, language policy, curriculum and knowledge issues, and indigenous people's education, especially intercultural and bilingual education. She holds a Postdoctoral Fellowship with the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation 1997–9: researching intercultural and bilingual education policy and practice in Latin America.

Priti Chopra is completing a PhD at King's College London. Her research is based on an ethnographic study of communication practices for women in three north Indian villages. She completed a postgraduate degree in Language Studies and Adult Education from Lancaster University. She has worked as an adult education facilitator in the UK and India.

Caroline Dyer (Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education, University of Manchester) and Dr **Archana Choksi** (Research Associate in the Faculty of Education, University of Manchester) have been collaborating as a North-South research team for eight years. Their research among the Rabari nomads continues through policy advocacy and regular returns to the field. They are currently leading a DFID-sponsored project which links their theoretical perspectives on literacy practices for ethnic minorities with the education of primary teacher educators in three states in western and central India.

Pat Herbert has worked in Ghana for many years and is Literacy Materials Development Consultant for GILLBT (Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation), an NGO working in partnership and co-operation with SIL.

Bryan Maddox studied Social Anthropology at Sussex University. He is currently a part-time teacher of Anthropology and is working on a doctorate in education based on ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh. He has

CONTRIBUTORS

extensive experience as both a teacher and a researcher in the adult literacy field both in the UK and Asia.

Uta Papen is currently carrying out research for her PhD at King's College London, on literacy, language and tourism in Namibia. Her background is in Social Anthropology and History with a geographical focus on sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. She carried out fieldwork on indigenous medicine in Cameroon. She worked for several years at the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) in Hamburg where she was involved in research and training programmes on literacy, post-literacy and adult education. She also co-ordinated an international research project on innovations in adult education.

Clinton Robinson works with SIL UK; he spent ten years in Cameroon working in linguistic research and language development. He currently heads SIL's International Programmes department in the UK. His interests and publications include sociolinguistics, African rural development, language planning and policy. He holds degrees in Modern Languages (Oxford), Linguistics (Paris), Rural Development and Sociolinguistics (Reading).

Anna Robinson-Pant is a lecturer in Education at the University of East Anglia. She has over eight years' work experience in Asia, particularly Nepal, at central and grassroots level, working in education, health and gender, using ethnographic and participatory approaches. Her particular focus is on adult literacy (training, research and planning) and NGO development administration/management. She was winner of the UNESCO/UIE International Award for Literacy Research 1998 for her study of Women's Literacy and Development in Nepal.

Alan Rogers holds the post of Special Professor of Adult Education at the University of Nottingham. Formerly Executive Director of Education for Development (1985–98) based at the University of Reading, he has worked in adult education for more than forty years, the last twenty-five mostly in developing countries, specialising for the last few of these in adult literacy programmes. He is currently engaged in research into non-formal education in the context of developing societies. He is Reviews Editor for the *International Journal for Educational Development*.

Dr Regie Stites is an evaluator and a specialist in the area of adult education and lifelong learning in SRI International's Center for Education and Human Services, California. From 1984 to 1987 he worked as foreign language teaching expert in the People's Republic of China. He has worked as a Project Director in the National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL), at the University of Pennsylvania, where his research has focused on literacy

CONTRIBUTORS

skills retention, applications of advanced technologies to adult learning, adult literacy standards, and the evaluation of effective practices in adult basic literacy instruction.

Brian Street is Professor of Language in Education in the School of Education at King's College London, and Visiting Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. He has been active in applying theory to practice and, in addition to ten books, he has written over sixty scholarly articles and has been involved in lecture tours, workshops, training programmes and research on literacy and development in a number of countries, including Australia, USA, South Africa and Canada. He is a member of Technical Support teams on current Aid projects in Nepal and South Africa.

Martha Wagar Wright is currently a PhD candidate in educational linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education. Her work on multilingual literacy included six months in rural Eritrea, at the Compassion of Jesus Hospital and health-education programme, conducting research as a participant observer and teachers' consultant in local schools. Presently she is completing her dissertation and preparing to return to Africa with her family, to work in another healthcare-educational outreach programme among nomadic groups in north-east Uganda.

Shirin Zubair is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the Baha-ud-Din Zakariya University in Pakistan. She has been a teacher and researcher in ELT in Pakistan and has been on the visiting staff of University Grants Commission, NAHE and AIOU, Islamabad. She has recently completed her PhD at Cardiff University on women's access to multiliteracies in rural Pakistan, using ethnography and extensive fieldwork. Her research centres on women's literacy and development issues in underdeveloped, multilingual communities and culturally shaped beliefs about women's education.

INTRODUCTION

Brian V. Street

Ethnographic perspectives on literacy

In recent years there has been growing awareness of the value of qualitative, ethnographic approaches to educational research and the contributions it can make to development planning. Ethnographic research can be utilised at all stages of the project cycle, from project identification to project appraisal and can help to complement more positivist statistical surveys by revealing the cultural and social dimensions which may positively or adversely affect how a project is taken up.

(Yates 1994)

In many literacy projects, 'literacy experts' and planners have made prior assumptions about the needs and desires of beneficiaries. A number of literacy projects in recent years have challenged these assumptions by stressing that before launching into literacy programmes and interventions it is necessary to understand the literacy practices that target groups and communities are already engaged in (Freebody and Welch 1993; Yates 1994; Prinsloo and Breier 1996). Researchers trained in 'ethnography'—that is, using field work methods and sensitised to ways of discovering and observing the uses and meanings of literacy practices to local people themselves—have conducted studies into these everyday practices and their relationship to the programmes designed to alter them. Their findings are now being included from the earliest stage in projects (Yates 1994; Prinsloo and Breier 1996) and fed into the campaign design and development.

This edited volume brings together the work of a number of such ethnographers of literacy projects who have spent many years conducting in-depth qualitative studies of everyday literacies in different parts of the world and of the literacy programmes that have been developed to enhance them. The ethnographic approach represented here is, then, more concerned with attempting to understand what actually happens than with trying to prove the success of a particular intervention or 'sell' a particular methodology for teaching or management. The dominant account of literacy programmes remains concerned with 'effectiveness', often measured through statistics on skill outcomes, attendance, etc., and justified through correlations with important development

indices such as health, agricultural production and economic take off. The findings of the ethnographic approach may lead to different measurement and claims for outcomes and to different curriculum and pedagogy than in many traditional programmes (Hill and Parry 1994; Holland and Street 1994; Black and Wiliam 1998). What counts as 'effective' cannot, then, be prejudged, hence the attempt to understand 'what's going on' before pronouncing on how to improve it.

The ethnographic approach to literacy in development programmes derives from recent theoretical approaches which argue that literacy is not just a set of uniform 'technical skills' to be imparted to those lacking them—the 'autonomous' model—but rather that there are multiple literacies in communities and that literacy practices are socially embedded (Heath 1983; Street 1993b, 1995; Barton 1994; Barton et al. 1999). The academic research emerging from this new field of interest is thus of considerable practical significance, with implications for literacy programmes in particular and development programmes more generally (Wagner 1993; King 1994; Doronilla 1996; Robinson-Pant 1997; Hornberger 1998; Kalman 1999). This volume is written in that spirit of engagement between theory and practice, academic and applied concerns. It aims to make a contribution across the divide, in clarifying conceptual issues and enhancing knowledge on the one hand and in aiding policy making and programme building on the other. The contributors are all experienced ethnographers, who have both conducted research and engaged in practice in their chosen field sites. They approach the issues in a spirit of reflective and critical enquiry, less concerned to advocate particular approaches, methodologies and theories than to extend current thinking and thereby contribute to informed practice. In order to frame their work in this context, this Introduction first establishes the wider context in which literacy and development work takes place, namely what I shall term the 'New Orders'—the New Work Order, the New Communicative Order and the New Epistemological Order. It then works through some of the theoretical and methodological responses to these changes that have been developed within what has come to be called the 'New Literacy Studies' (Gee 1990; Street 1993a; Barton et al. 1999), particularly with reference to contrasting 'models' of literacy—the 'autonomous' model and the 'ideological' model; and with reference to 'literacy events' and 'literacy practices'. I then turn to the practical implications of these theories and concepts, addressing some of the problems and objections that have been raised and anticipating some of the positive applications that could arise from a sympathetic adaptation of these approaches. This is followed by a brief résumé of the different articles, placing them in this broader context

The 'New Orders': work, communicative, epistemological

The 'New Orders'—the New Work Order, the New Communicative Order and the New Epistemological Order—require radical rethinking of what counts as

INTRODUCTION

literacy in the development context. This rethinking is as necessary for academics and researchers as it is for activists and practitioners: while the former have to accommodate to the needs of 'knowledge-in-use' the latter are being called upon to take account of knowledge-in-theory. This volume attempts to lay out some of the conditions for these accommodations and to bridge the divide between theory and practice in this field. In some cases (Namibia, Nepal) the New Work Order impinges directly on a particular group of people, and those working with them in terms of literacy development will need to conceptualise and accommodate these changes. In other cases, such as the transhumant Rabaris in north India, there was never a Fordist work order in the first place and the changes taking place cannot simply be conceptualised as a shift in work orders; however, the Rabaris are being continually affected by these global changes, such as the moves to settle them and the interest taken in them by outsiders. Moreover, the epistemological shifts that are suggested below also affect such people as the Rabaris in that what counts as learning and education and who has the right to define it will be salient issues for any development worker engaged with them as they are for the Rabaris themselves. I begin, then, with a brief account of the New Orders within which the experiences outlined in the chapters in this book are, to a greater or lesser extent, framed.

Gee et al. (1996; cf. Holland and Cook 1998), drawing upon the writings of economists and business theorists as well as critical sociologists, have attempted to characterise the New Work Order associated with globalisation of production and distribution, and to consider the implications of these changes for the kinds of language needed in work and in educational contexts. These changes represent the context within which contemporary literacy work is taking place and thus need addressing as much as do the theoretical underpinnings of literacy itself. Work, they suggest, is no longer defined and organised along Fordist lines, with mass production on assembly lines and its Taylorist principles of work organisation and discipline.

There is now a shift towards forms of production which employ new ways of making goods and commodities, serving more differentiated markets, or niches, through segmented retailing strategies. There is now a great deal more attention paid to the selling environment at every level of production, from design to distribution. So while the old work order stressed issues of costs and revenue, the new work order emphasises asset building and market share.

(Gee et al. 1996:vii–viii)

Associated with these defining concepts are ideas about proper organisational behaviour, including attention to flexibility and adaptation to change. Procedures are put into place to ensure both flexibility on the one hand and uniformity and guarantee of standards on the other. If consumers are perceived, through market research and company predictions, to demand the same jackets or the same

tomatoes in shops across their travelling experience, then mechanisms need to be put into place to ensure that wherever these are produced they conform to those standards. This Total Quality Management has been a particular feature of the New Work Order that has impinged directly on the educational setting, in providing models for quality control there too and in imposing reductionist and unitised notions of measurement and of quality on educational outputs and 'products'.

A further organisational change that has been of especial significance for language and literacy has been the notion of team working on projects rather than hierarchical forms of organisation that simply pass orders down a chain of command. In the new project-focused work order, all members of a team combine to design, negotiate and develop 'products' for sale and distribution. In order to accomplish this, all members of a team have to be equipped with the discursive skills that such negotiation and development involve, such as ability to present and hear arguments, and to develop material for presentation on communicative devices such as overheads, slide projectors, computer displays, etc. Radical researchers confronted with these changes have particularly focused on the claims often associated with them that suggest a commitment to democracy: words like 'collaboration', 'participation', 'devolution' and 'empowerment', all cherished terms of oppositional groups, such as those working in Freirean literacy campaigns, are now used to indicate a partnership between managers and workers. Gee and his colleagues are highly suspicious of these claims and would have us examine them critically, while acknowledging that changes are indeed taking place in both the work order and the communicative demands associated with it. Literacy programmes, then, now need to take account of such shifts and such critiques if they are to handle the complex communicative needs of the New Work Order.

A number of writers working in the area of social semiotics and visual design have suggested that, in this new context, the reading and writing practices of literacy are only one part of what people are going to have to learn in order to be 'literate' in the future (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Heller and Pomeroy 1997; Lemke 1998). They are going to have to learn to handle both the team work literacies described above and also the iconic systems evident in many communicative practices, such as the kinds of icons and the signs evident in computer displays like the Word for Windows package with all its combinations of signs, symbols, boundaries, pictures, words, texts, images, etc. The extreme version of this position is the notion of 'the end of language'—that we are no longer talking about language in its rather traditional notion of grammar, lexicon and semantics, but rather about a wider range of semiotic systems that cut across reading, writing, speech (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). This provides a broader framework for handling questions of literacy and language in both education and the workplace that, again, new literacy programmes are going to have to take into account. Papen, for instance, describes how literacy programmes in Namibia are attempting to take account of tourism as an economic outlet for

INTRODUCTION

many participants: this will involve them in not simply decoding written texts but also understanding issues of layout and presentation in advertising materials as well as in developing competence in other communicative channels. These include the ability to converse with tourists in a familiar register, and to handle the body language and communicative norms expected by today's safari travellers. Likewise, Maddox comments with respect to the literacies necessary for economic activity in Bangladesh that 'this is not simply spoken language written down but involves particular types of language, form and genre'. He notes that the primers available in literacy programmes tend to look in the opposite direction, offering a 'select and relatively limited vocabulary' and narrow alphabetic skills, just at the time when the broadening of vocabulary in particular, language in general and semiotic channels more broadly are the key components of learners' requirements in the world of work and social relations.

Finally, I would like to address what Barnett and Griffin (1997) and others refer to as the crises of knowledge that are leading to a New Epistemological Order. Within the academy, they suggest, postmodernism and reflexivity have led to a valuing of the local against the universal, including a critique of Enlightenment science and the kind of modernism on which much development work has been founded. Outside the academy, meanwhile the marketisation of knowledge has likewise led to a challenge to the dominant position previously held by universities. In this new commercial world knowledge as inert commodity can be bought and sold for profit, measured as though it were inert information, and judged for 'quality' as though it were just another commercial product in which 'quality' refers to the object itself but not to the process of learning, questioning and engagement in which receivers relate to it. This new knowledge is based in numerous, non-academic settings, such as large business corporations and leisure industry outlets, for whom the critical perspective of university approaches to knowledge is less important than whether it will sell in the marketplace. Faced with this crisis of knowledge from multiple sources, Barnett asks what can be the role of the academy in the New Epistemological Order. His response is of direct relevance to the projects described in this volume: the role of the researcher is to be that of a 'practical epistemologist', involving critical engagement in real world projects and action, doing 'participatory' work. At the same time, this involves reworking the university as a forum for debate that offers a discursive space for critique of the bases of knowledge claims and frameworks in ways that for-profit knowledge industries do not. The practical epistemologist engages with knowledge in use, not simply with propositional knowledge, and he or she works *with* partners in real world contexts in the interests of equity and justice.

It could be argued that this approach to knowledge work already applied to much of the engagement of progressive literacy activists and practitioners in recent years (cf. Rogers 1994, 1999; Prinsloo and Breier 1996; Hornberger 1998) but has yet to be accepted in some policy circles, where traditional forms of knowledge and rationalist models of development predominate (Crush 1995;

Grillo and Stirrat 1997). The authors in the present volume have all engaged with the reflexivity and boundary crossing required of academics working in applied areas of literacy and communication, as Chopra brings out explicitly in her chapter on how the subject of literacy programmes is constructed, which she characterises in terms of 'betrayal and solidarity'. Combining these new approaches to knowledge with attention to the New Work Order and the New Communicative Order provides the contemporary researcher on literacy with a very different agenda and framework than envisaged in the modernist era of programmes to 'eradicate illiteracy'. The argument of this book, then, is that ethnographic approaches to literacy in development can offer such an accommodation of theory and practice and address the larger issues raised in the New Orders, while maintaining a focus upon the local meanings through which we all experience such processes. The ethnographies of literacy presented here provide telling cases of the application of theoretical and conceptual tools to practical programmes. I turn, therefore, to some of the terms and concepts that have emerged within the 'New Literacy Studies' as a way of building a language of description for literacy work in this context. My aim is to operationalise these approaches as a basis both for research purposes and for practical applications.

A personal approach

In keeping with current reflexive approaches to social science research, I would like to begin by describing why I myself took on ethnographic research in this area, as a way of answering the larger question, regarding the implications of this approach for research and practice in the development field, which the authors in the volume address. As with many of the researchers whose work is featured here, the answer derives from a personal research history. I went to Iran during the 1970s to undertake anthropological field research (Street 1984). I had not gone specifically to study 'literacy' but found myself living in a mountain village where a great deal of literacy activity was going on: I was drawn to the conceptual and rhetorical issues involved in representing this variety and complexity of literacy activity at a time when my encounter with people outside of the village suggested the dominant representation was of 'illiterate', backward villagers. Looking more closely at village life in the light of these characterisations, it seemed that not only was there actually a lot of literacy going on but that there were quite different 'practices' associated with literacy—those in a traditional 'Qur'anic' school, in the new state schools, and among traders using literacy in their buying and selling of fruit to urban markets. If these complex variations in literacy which were happening in one small locale were characterised by outside agencies—state education, UNESCO, literacy campaigns—as 'illiterate', might this also be the case in other situations too? I have kept this image in mind as I have observed and investigated literacy in other parts of the world—urban Philadelphia, South Africa, Ghana, Nepal, the UK, etc. In all of these cases I hear dominant voices characterising local people as 'illiterate' (currently media in the UK are full of such accounts, cf.

Street 1998) while on the ground ethnographic and literacy-sensitive observation indicates a rich variety of ‘practices’ (Heath 1983; King 1994; Doronilla 1996; Robinson-Pant 1997; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Hornberger 1998; Kalman 1999; Street 1999). When literacy campaigns are set up to bring literacy to the illiterate—‘light into darkness’, as it is frequently characterised—I find myself asking first what local literacy practices are there and how do they relate to the literacy practices being introduced by the campaigners? In many cases the latter forms of literacy fail to ‘take’—few people attend classes and those who do drop out, precisely because they are the literacy practices of an outside and often alien group (Abadzi 1996). Even though in the long run many local people do want to change their literacy practices and take on board some of those associated with Western or urban society, a crude imposition of the latter that marginalises and denies local experience is likely to alienate even those who were initially motivated.

Research, then, I believe, has a task to do in making visible the complexity of local, everyday, community literacy practices and challenging dominant stereotypes and myopia. This indeed has become a major drive in much recent research, of which the present volume is a key example. Following through its implications for programme design, including pre-programme research on local literacy practices and for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment/evaluation, is a major task that requires first a more developed conceptualisation of the theoretical and methodological issues involved in understanding and representing ‘local literacy practices’. I now lay out some of the theoretical and methodological assumptions that underpin such work.

Autonomous and ideological models of literacy

In developing contexts the issue of literacy is often represented as simply a technical one: that people need to be taught how to decode letters and they can do what they like with their newly acquired literacy after that, an approach I have referred to as an ‘autonomous’ model of literacy (Street 1984). The ‘autonomous’ model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself—autonomously—will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. The model, however, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it and that can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal: the research described in this volume challenges this view and suggests that in practice the approach is simply imposing Western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures. The alternative, ideological model of literacy, to which many of the chapters in this book refer, offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model—it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. Literacy, in this sense, is

always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others (Gee 1990). The argument about social literacies (Street 1995) suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that 'literacy' can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced afterwards.

For these reasons, as well as because of the failure of many traditional literacy programmes (Abadzi 1996; Street 1999), academics, researchers and practitioners working in literacy in different parts of the world are beginning to come to the conclusion that the autonomous model of literacy on which much of the practice and programmes have been based was not an appropriate intellectual tool, either for understanding the diversity of reading and writing around the world or for designing the practical programmes this required (Heath 1983; King 1994; Doronilla 1996; Robinson-Pant 1997; Hornberger 1998; Kalman 1999). They have instead turned to an ideological model of literacy.

One example, to bring home the significance of this argument concretely, comes from an article in *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*—a collection of articles by anthropologists who have worked in literacy around the world and have attempted to apply dynamic models of culture to dynamic models of literacy (Street 1993b). Kulick and Stroud conducted anthropological research in New Guinea villages and began with the questions that developers ask: what is the impact of literacy? However, they soon noticed that literacy was being added to the communicative repertoire in more complex ways than the concept of 'impact' conveyed. They noted that the things that people did with that literacy were rather different from what the people who had brought it had imagined. Missionaries had brought it and wanted to use it for conversion and for control and discipline; this is similar in many contexts where missionary groups have brought reading but not writing for precisely that control purpose—if people can write, they actually can write their own things down, if they can read they can only read what you provide them (Clammer 1976). They can still reinterpret a text they only read but they have rather more control over a text they write themselves. Kulick and Stroud, being social linguists as well as anthropologists, were interested in what happens to the communicative repertoire when such missionary literacy arrives: they argued that instead of talking about the 'impact' of literacy, we should ask the question, how do people 'take hold of literacy'? What they saw happening was that people were using literacy in the way that they had used oral interaction. There were precise conventions for making a speech, the dominant one being that you must not appear to put anyone else down when you make it. It is both inappropriate to put someone down and inappropriate to speak in a braggardly way about yourself, and yet at the same

INTRODUCTION

time you want to get your own way. So a variety of clever political discourses and conventions emerged. Kulick and Stroud discovered, when they looked at the texts being written, that people were using the same social linguistic conventions, the same discourse strategies as in this speech making. They were inserting the written into their oral. So instead of talking about impact, the researchers talk about taking hold; they talk about the way people have made use of literacy (Kulick and Stroud 1993). There are now many such examples from around the world which indicate how the communicative repertoire varies, from people simply taking literacy and doing with it what they had already done, to people discovering new functions for it which may be quite different from what the school teachers or the missionaries had in mind.

This alternative approach is termed an 'ideological' and not just a cultural model because it is important to attend not only to cultural meanings but also to the power dimension of these reading and writing processes. The example of the missionaries and of the teachers makes that clear. The concept of 'impact' then is not just a neutral developmental index, to be measured, but is already part of a power relationship. These are issues about power, assumptions about one particular set of ideas, conceptions, cultural group, being in some way taken on by another group. What is the power relation between them? What are the resources? Where are people going if they take on one literacy rather than another literacy? How do you challenge the dominant conceptions of literacy? It seems to me quite impossible to address the issue of literacy without addressing also these issues of power (Street 1996). A cultural model of literacy, particularly the reified view of culture rather than culture as process, leads one to fall back into the old reifications: a particular group of people become associated with a particular literacy; another group of people are associated with another literacy. The contestation over what counts as literacy and whose literacy is dominant gets lost. So it is called an ideological model of literacy in order to highlight the power dimension of literacy.

Instead of privileging the particular literacy practices familiar in their own culture, researchers now suspend judgement as to what constitutes literacy among the people they are working with until they are able to understand what it means to the people themselves, and which social contexts reading and writing derive their meaning from. Many of these people and others described in the accounts below might have been labelled 'illiterate' within the autonomous model of literacy and yet, from a more culturally sensitive viewpoint, can be seen to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts. These findings, we suggest, raise important issues both for research into literacy in general and for policy in Adult Basic Education and Training in particular.

This book, then, argues that it is important for those working in the field of literacy and development equally to engage in the theoretical and conceptual debates being described here and to challenge the dominant conception of literacy work which sees it as simply applied, obvious and not in need of such

theory. It is precisely the lack of such explicit attention to theory, I would argue, that has led to so many failures in development literacy programmes; behind the naturalisation of teaching and learning have lurked ideological pressures and political dogmas, often colonial but also urban/rural, or based on local ethnic conflicts and hierarchies. Making explicit our theoretical apparatus enables us to 'see' such biases and decide for ourselves whether we wish to accommodate or challenge them. On the other hand, academics have often failed to make explicit the implications of such theory for practical work. In the present conditions of world change such ivory tower distancing is no longer legitimate, if it ever was, as Barnett and his colleagues (1997) have made clear. I turn now, therefore, to some of the key concepts in the field of New Literacy Studies that I argue may enable us to overcome these barriers by applying these new conceptions of literacy to specific contexts and practical programmes: the concepts of *literacy events* and of *literacy practices*.

Literacy events and literacy practices

Barton (1994:36) notes that the term *literacy events* derived from the sociolinguistic idea of speech events. It was first used in relation to literacy by Anderson et al. who defined it as an occasion during which a person 'attempts to comprehend graphic signs' (1980:59–65). Shirley Brice Heath further characterised a 'literacy event' as 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' (Heath 1982:50). I have employed the phrase 'literacy practices' (Street 1984:1) as a means of focusing upon 'the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing', although I later elaborated the term both to take account of 'events' in Heath's sense and to give greater emphasis to the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (Street 1988). Barton (1991), in reporting on a study of everyday literacies in Lancaster, England, attempts to clarify what has been meant by literacy events and literacy practices. Baynham (1995) entitled his account of the relations between oral and written language use among Moroccans in London, *Literacy Practices*. Similarly Prinsloo and Breier's *The Social Uses of Literacy* (1996), which is a collection of case studies of literacy in South Africa, used the concept of events but then extended it to practices. My own recent book *Social Literacies* (Street 1995) tries to develop the concepts and clarify the different uses and more recently I have argued for a clarification of terminology as the field of New Literacy Studies becomes more generally known (Street 2000). So a literature is emerging that directly addresses the issue of the relation between *literacy events* and *literacy practices*. I would like to outline here my own view of these relations and their significance for the field of literacy and development.

Literacy events is a helpful concept, I think, because it enables researchers, and also practitioners, to focus on a particular situation where things are happening and you can see them—this is the classic literacy event in which we are able to

INTRODUCTION

observe an event that involves reading and/or writing and can begin to draw out its characteristics: here we might observe one kind of event, an academic literacy event, and there another which is quite different—catching the bus, sitting in the barber's shop, negotiating the road—and the Lancaster research projects have made good use of this concept (Barton and Ivanic 1991; Barton and Hamilton 1998). But there is also a problem, I think: if we use the concept of *literacy event* on its own, it remains descriptive and—from an anthropological point of view—it does not tell us how the meanings are constructed. If you were to observe this literacy event as a non-participant who was not trained in its conventions and rules you would have difficulty following what is going on, such as how to work with the text and to talk around it. There are clearly underlying conventions and assumptions around the literacy event that make it work.

I now come to *literacy practices*, which I would suggest is the more robust of the various concepts that researchers have been developing within a social approach to literacy. The concept of *literacy practices* attempts both to handle the events and the patterns around literacy and to *link* them to something broader of a cultural and social kind. And part of that broadening is that it attends to the fact that we bring to a literacy event concepts, social models regarding what the nature of the event is, that make it work and give it meaning. Those models we cannot get at simply by sitting on the wall with a video and watching what is happening. There is an ethnographic issue here: we have to start talking to people, listening to them and linking their immediate experience out to other things that they do as well. And that is why it is often meaningless just to ask people about literacy, as in many recent surveys (OECD 1995; Basic Skills Agency 1997) or even about reading and writing, because what might give *meaning* to this event may actually be something that is not in the first instance thought of in terms of literacy. It may be, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, about religion (as Herbert and Robinson show with respect to the literacy programmes in Ghana), or about status (as Zubair demonstrates for women in Pakistan), or about the social relations within literacy projects themselves (as Maddox shows for Bangladesh). Heath found in discussing newspaper reading with urban adolescents in the US that much of their activity did not count in their minds as literacy, so that a superficial survey would have missed the significance of their actual literacy practices and perhaps labelled them non-readers, or more insultingly 'illiterate' as in much press coverage of this area (Heath and McLaughlin 1993). One cannot predict beforehand what will give meaning to a literacy event and what will link a set of literacy events to literacy practices. Literacy practices, then, refer to this broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts. It is on the basis of the above theoretical debates, and in particular the development of the concept of literacy practices, that the chapters in this book could be seen as case studies that both exemplify the new ways of thinking about literacy and the ways of developing practical programmes associated with them, and also help extend, critique and reformulate those approaches.

Problems associated with these approaches

Before outlining what these chapters contribute to that development, it is necessary to address some of the problems and the objections that have arisen with respect to these approaches. There have, for instance, been problems with the conceptualisation of multiple literacies which the ideological model of literacy employed to challenge the autonomous model. In characterising literacy as multiple it is very easy to slip into assuming that there is a single literacy associated with a single culture, so that there are multiple literacies just as there are, supposedly, multiple cultures. So when we find Gujarati culture and Gujarati 'literacy' in Leicester or in Pakistan, Hindi literacy and Hindu 'culture' in India, the two get put together in fixed lists. If we start instead from a plural conception of culture ('Culture is a Verb'; Street 1993b) then we recognise that culture is a process that is contested, not a given inventory of characteristics, and such easy links of culture and literacy are not helpful. A *claim* to culture is itself a part of the process rather than a given, as Aikman shows with respect to Peruvian Amazon peoples (this volume). So in that sense one cannot use the concept of 'multiple literacies' simply to line up a single literacy with a single culture.

Another problem that arises from work in New Literacy Studies and which the authors in this volume are addressing is the extent to which rejection of what I have termed the autonomous model of literacy can lead to a relativising of literacy in ways that have potentially dangerous consequences. For instance, it may be seen as celebrating local practices that are no longer appropriate in a modern, indeed 'postmodern' condition where 'empowerment' requires high communicative skills including formal literacy. It is also seen as leading to potentially divisive educational practice, in which the literacy of local groups is reinforced while those with access to dominant discourses and power continue to reproduce the literacy sources of their own dominance. Papen, writing of Namibia, is acutely conscious of the ways in which a relativised view of literacy in that context may carry echoes of the previous influence of South Africa's apartheid system, in which local languages and cultural practices were purportedly valued by being kept separate. Adults coming to literacy classes, whether in China, Pakistan or India, are wary of being denied access to the language and literacy of power. Likewise, parents of ethnic minority children in countries where 'multi-cultural' education and linguistic variation have been promoted, argue that their children are simply getting a 'second-class' education and being denied the genres of power (Leung and Tosi 1999).

Although the critique regarding 'relativism' may be levelled at the accounts provided in this book, in fact the authors are extremely sensitive to this possibility and have been very careful to think through its implications and expose its flaws. A problem with the critique, for instance, lies in its assumption that the present condition—the current genres and forms of literacy—are fixed, universal and given, where in fact they have been historically and culturally constructed. The argument about 'access' to dominant genres disguises the questions about

INTRODUCTION

how such genres became dominant and remain so, which will eventually determine how many others can in reality access them. For since the rules of dominant literacy genres are frequently quite arbitrary—based on surface features of language such as formal spelling rules, punctuation, pronunciation, etc.—they can easily be changed if too many people learn how to use them and thereby challenge the status quo. In that way, according to Gee (1990), those in power retain domination while appearing to provide access to the disempowered. A focus on transformation rather than on access leads to a different view. An ‘ideological’ model of literacy begins from the premise that variable literacy practices are always rooted in power relations and that the apparent innocence and neutrality of the ‘rules’ serves to disguise the ways in which such power is maintained through literacy. As Luke argues (1996), there are no ‘genres of power’ as such, only culturally based ways of knowing and communicating that have been privileged over others.

This argument also provides a second important retort to the ‘relativism’ critique: the ideological model of literacy only relativises literacy practices at an analytic level, enabling researchers and activists to recognise and describe variation where the autonomous model sees only uniformity, but it does not relativise literacy at the level of social power as the critique suggests—on the contrary, it is termed an ideological model rather than simply a cultural or pragmatic model precisely because it draws attention to the unequal and hierarchical nature of literacy in practice. Whereas many educators and policy makers see literacy as simply a neutral skill, the same everywhere and to be imparted (almost injected in some medically based discourses) to all in equal measure, the ideological model recognises that educational and policy decisions have to be based on prior judgements regarding *which* literacy to impart and why. The research described here, then, leads to the policy question of which particular literacy practices are important for, say, women in rural Mali or Nepal, school children in the new Eritrea or nomads in north India to learn. It does not suggest that they be simply left as they are on the relativist grounds that one literacy is as good as another. But nor does it suggest that they simply be ‘given’ the kind of formal, schooled literacy with which policy makers are familiar and which, in fact, many of them have already rejected. ‘Delivering’ such formalised literacy will not lead to empowerment, will not facilitate jobs and will not create social mobility.

This argument is supported not only by more than a decade of intensive research in different parts of the world, including that represented in this volume, but also by the low take up/high drop out rates on formal programmes (cf. Abadzi 1996) which indicate that people themselves see this more quickly and acutely than do planners. Formal schooled literacy practices and the autonomous model on which they are based may indeed have facilitated power for some: but they will not necessarily provide power for many, when the kinds of literacy needed in their specific contexts are often very different and, in a social sense, more complex. Developing policy and designing programmes to cater for this