

What is the Development of Literacy the Development Of?

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Research on literacy teaching and learning has often focused on the identification and support of cognitive processes and strategies in the reading of printed texts. Another line of literacy research has centered on understanding how contexts, learning environments, social interactions, cultural practices, and cultural tools inform and shape reading *and* writing – which are also conceived ever more broadly to include a range of technical platforms, modalities, and symbol systems. This work is sometimes called “the New Literacy Studies” (Gee, 1999; Street, 2003) and most recently it has been informed by research that centers on understanding the impact of digital media and the Internet on how literacy is defined and practiced (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2009; Gee, 2004; New London Group, 1996).

“Sociocultural” studies typically refer to *practices* rather than to processes. According to Scribner and Cole (1981), in an old but durable study that shifted the conceptual vocabulary of much literacy research, a practice “consists of three components: technology, knowledge, and skills Whether defined in broad or narrow terms, practice always refers to socially developed and patterned ways of using technology and knowledge to accomplish tasks” (p. 236). Thus literacy practices are uses of the tools of literacy (e.g., texts, paper and pencil, digital media) in combination with the decoding and encoding processes of reading and writing (often now extended to include the processing of images and multimodal and interactive texts), informed by knowledge of genres, modalities, media, registers, styles, and grammars. It follows then from a practice approach that *literacy* can be helpfully conceived as *literacies*. Sociocultural research has documented a range of literacies across communities, societies, and institutions, including schooling, where academic language represents a specialized form of literacy and where reading and writing requirements vary according to knowledge domains and disciplines (Blommaert, Street, & Turner, 2007; Lee & Spratley, 2006; Moje, 2007, 2008a; Street, 2003). The Common Core Standards are in effect an attempt to change the kinds of literacy practices that are taught and valued in school. These Standards privilege the construction and comprehension of extended logocentric informational texts, following research that argues for the importance and prevalence of such texts in post-secondary schooling and work.

In what follows we juxtapose relevant findings from socio-cultural research on literacy to the Common Core agenda, hoping to support the successful curricular and pedagogical implementation of the standards for all students, including ELLs, and simultaneously, to broaden the conception of literacy, learning, and associated pedagogies that will constitute that implementation. In a nutshell, we will suggest how literacy, rather than only being about the development of particular kinds of print-based skills, can helpfully be conceived as participation in a range of valued meaning-making practices, and that these practices are themselves nested within particular activity structures that index desired purposes, roles, and identities (cf. Gee, 1996; Holland et al., 1998; Moje & Luke, 2009).

First, we present some background on socio-cultural perspectives on literacy. The implications of conceiving of literacy as multiple, and as sets of practices, are actually quite far-reaching.

Practices are often taken for granted to the extent that they are almost invisible. Thus, when people's practices do not fit the norm, as is often the case for children, youth, and adults whose social, cultural, and economic circumstances diverge from the mainstream, then those practices may be deemed inappropriate or problematic, or they may be ignored (Coleman, 1990; Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Sarroub, 2004). As a result, in many sociocultural studies, literacy and language are viewed as forms of "capital" (Bourdieu, 1982; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that give advantage to those who possess it. That is, power and access stem from the ability to engage in valued language and discourse practices (de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1980). From such a perspective it is also important to examine how those who are socially, economically, or politically more powerful typically determine the kinds of literate practices that are valued, who has access to tools and texts of power, and who is taught to become literate in the most potent ways (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Luke, 1995). It goes without saying that the Common Core represents collective wisdom and the field's best intentions regarding what constitutes the most powerful literacy practices today. But it will also be important to keep in mind, particularly as we implement the standards, that they represent a particular version of literacy, one that is being elevated no doubt for good reasons. Yet other versions of literacy do exist, and more importantly, are being created (literacy practices and tools have never changed more rapidly than now), and will exist in sub-rosa or open competition with societal- and school-sanctioned varieties. Conversely, our goal is to insure that the powerful literacies associated with the Common Core are accessible to the full range of our student populations.

Historically, sociocultural studies of literacy have highlighted how differences in cultural practices between home and school shape students' success in learning and shape teachers' perceptions of whether and how well students can learn. These studies have helped to shift conceptions of *deficits* among learners to *differences* traceable both to cultural practices and structural inequalities. Some sociocultural research has focused heavily on the nature of the system, activity, or learning environment in which learning occurs. Such research is explicitly concerned with the social group functions and cultural norms in which human mental functioning or cognition is embedded, but also attempts to understand the leading role of particular *activities* and *activity systems* in shaping and motivating mental functioning (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1987; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). In general, the value of these perspectives is that they draw attention to how cognition is shaped by culture, context, and social interaction. One implication in terms of the Common Core is the importance of the larger implementation context for standards – at once ideological, pedagogical, and institutional.

Research conducted from a sociocultural perspective has often operated from qualitative or ethnographic data because the study of practices generally requires close examinations of invisible, taken-for-granted norms. However, mixed methods work has been conducted (see especially, Au & Mason, 1983; Lee, 1993; Palincsar & Magnusson, 2001; Scribner & Cole, 1981) to allow for the testing as well as generation of theory. To better address the efficacy of educational research, there has been a goodly amount of work done from a design research perspective. Design studies require intensive and long-term collaboration involving both researchers and practitioners and are iterative, interventionist, and theory-oriented (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). Examples of design research endeavors are well represented across the fields of literacy, mathematics, science, and technology (Hoadley, 2005; Moje et al., 2004; Steffe & Thompson, 2000), and may be a useful approach for documenting and advancing the implementation of the Common Core.

Among the key findings that derive from sociocultural perspectives on literacy are the following:

1. *Literacy learning is situated in and mediated by social and cultural interactions and tools.* This finding stems from the highly influential work of scholars such as Vygotsky (1978; 1986), Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983), Street (1984), and Engeström (1987), who each demonstrated that literacy learning – and indeed, learning is general – is shaped by and shapes (a) *the cultural practices* of the group, which are often taken for granted; (b) the *social interactions* of the group in which learning occurs; (c) the *available tools* for sense-making (whether physical/material, linguistic, semiotic, discursive, or conceptual tools); (d) the particular *activities and activity systems* in which literate activity occurs; and (e) the institutions in which these activities and systems are embedded. This lists goes some distance in suggesting the complexity that lies in implementing particular versions of literacy, such as those represented in the Common Core.
2. *Literacy learning occurs via a range and blend of explicit and implicit teaching, usually guided by interaction with a more knowledgeable other over time.* Drawing on the tenets of Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and learning theorists who followed in his wake (e.g., Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1991), researchers and educators have extracted pedagogical principles from basic tenets of sociocultural theories. These include constructs such as the *zone of proximal development* (Griffin & Cole, 1984; Rogoff & Wertch, 1984); *communities of practice/learners, legitimate peripheral participation, and apprenticeship* (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 1998; Rogoff, 1993, 1995; Rogoff & Lave, 1984); *responsive teaching* (marked by teacher listening to student discourse and assessing existing knowledge in order to scaffold the development of new knowledge; cf. Schultz, 2003); and *dynamic assessment* (Lidz & Peña, 1996). It is noteworthy that few formal institutions of schooling provide opportunities to learn through a mix of implicit and explicit instruction, in communities of practice, over extended periods of time.
3. *Across the age range and from all social/cultural groups, people learn and practice literacy outside of school, often with high degrees of proficiency.* As robustly documented in sociocultural research, people engage in literate practices across multiple domains, with a range of systems, and for multiple purposes (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Blackburn, 2005; Fisher, 2007; Heath, 1998; Hicks, 2004; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Jocson, 2008; Knobel, 1998; Leander & Lovvorn, 2007; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Moje, 2000, 2008b; Moll, 1994; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2003; Noll, 1998). In fact many theoretical advances in sociocultural perspectives on literacy have come from examining literacy practices outside of schools, where certain kinds of literacy flourish and abound while literacy achievement within school is, for many youth, a continuing struggle (cf. Hull & Schultz, 2001). Moje (2000) for example documented the strong literacy skills of youth who identified as members of street gangs, but who were failing in school, in large part because they were considered unable to master conventions of literacy, but also because they were viewed as unmotivated to participate in the conventional practices of schooling. It is worth pondering that contrast, which cannot always be accounted for with reference to schooling's more complex or extensive literacy demands.
4. *To learn literacy well, students need meaningful purposes for engaging in literate practice and opportunities to use literacy for a broad range of life activities related to goals and desires beyond the moment of instruction.* Some of the most provocative research to come lately from sociocultural studies of literacy demonstrates students' deep engagement in popular cultural activities such as gaming (e.g., Martin & Steinkuehler, 2010; Steinkuehler & Johnson, 2009), some of which have quite high informational literacy demands and provide

a sophisticated motivational context for participation. (Gee, 2003) This is not to say that literacy instruction must always be based on popular cultural activities, but that a sense of the purposefulness of literacy is key for learning.

5. *Learners require, and literate ability now consists of, facility with composing, interpreting, and transforming information and knowledge across various forms of representation.* These include numeric symbols, icons, static images, moving images, oral representations, graphs, charts, and tables. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the information revolution on the transformation of literacy practices, as suggested by the following statement from the *Handbook of Research on New Literacies* (2009), a compendium devoted to an exploration of changing literacies in our digital and global age: “No previous technology for literacy has been adopted by so many, in so many different places, in such a short period, and with such profound consequences. No previous technology for literacy permits the immediate dissemination of even newer technologies of literacy to every person on the Internet by connecting to a single link on a screen. Finally, no previous technology for literacy has provided access to so much information that is so useful, to so many people, in the history of the world. The sudden appearance of a new technology for literacy as powerful as the Internet has required us to look at the issue of new literacy with fresh lenses” (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, pp. 2-3; cf. Haas & Witte, 2001; Kress, 2003).

Sociocultural perspectives on literacy have been especially concerned with issues of equity and diversity and with providing a rationale for “second chance” opportunities for learners who may struggle with or fail at school-based goals the first time around. Attention is given then to the range of ways that learners require specific literacy interventions, usually dependent on shifting contexts or the demands posed by different cultural, language, or discourse communities. A number of successful literacy learning projects, which draw broadly on sociocultural perspectives on learning, have been developed and implemented in K-12 or afterschool/out-of-school time settings, all with the goal of developing powerful literacy practices and/or bridging from out-of-school to school-based literacies. They provide examples of the purposes, participant structures, and conceptions of literacy in which Common Core standards could be embedded. The threads running through them are these: building upon learners’ existing knowledge and cultural practices; demystifying academic language and literacy; and situating literacy learning within a larger motivating activity and/or purpose.

- a. *Funds of Knowledge.* This work illustrated the effectiveness of drawing explicit and substantive connections between familial and community resources – “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2004, pp. 72-73) – and classroom curricula and activities. (Moll, 1994; Moll, Veléz-Ibañez, & Greenberg, 1989; Moll & Whitmore, 1993).
- b. *Kamehameha Project.* This project demonstrated improved literacy learning among Hawaiian children when Hawaiian “talk story” practices were integrated into reading instruction (Au, 1998; Au & Kawakami, 1994; Au & Mason, 1983).
- c. *Third Space.* Literacy research that seeks to build “third spaces” rests on teachers’ facilities for hearing, seeing, and incorporating children and youths’ literacy and language practices into academic literacy and language instruction in an attempt to build connections from home to school discourses. Ethnographic studies demonstrate the capacities of able teachers and the learning of their students (Gutierrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez,

Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Moje, Ciechanowski, et al., 2004; Moje, Collazo, Carrillo, & Marx, 2001).

- d. *Critical Academic Literacies*. Similar to third space research, critical academic literacies engage youth in community and social action projects that teach history, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and academic literacy skills. Morrell and colleagues have experienced success with these projects as evidenced by the college-going rates of their participants (Collatos et al., 2004; Morrell, 2002, 2004; Morrell & Collatos, 2003).
- e. *Cultural Modeling*. Like the prior projects, Lee has developed interventions that employ home, community, and cultural discourse and literacy practices of youth as a tool for teaching conventional academic literacy practices, particularly in English language arts. Results of a mixed methods study demonstrated that youth learned to navigate high school English texts while also learning the main tools of conventional literacy criticism, in large part because these tools were already a part of their home discourses (Lee, 1993, 1995, 2001, 2007).
- f. *Inquiry/Project-Based*. These projects develop science, mathematics, and historical studies around driving or essential questions and engage students in real-world inquiry to develop answers to these questions. Numerous studies have demonstrated gains in student content learning as measured by conventional assessments (Blumenfeld, Marx, & Harris, 2006; Blumenfeld, Marx, Krajcik, Fishman, & Soloway, 2000; Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Fradd, Lee, Sutman, & Saxton, 2001; Geier, et al., in press; O. Lee, 1999; O. Lee & Fradd, 1998; Moje, Peek-Brown, et al., 2004). Less is known about the impact on students' literacy learning when literacy teaching is embedded in content projects but initial studies are promising (Bain, 2006; Moje et al., 2004; Gomez, Gomez, Kwon, & Sherrer, in press).
- g. *Disciplinary Literacy*. This kind of instruction seeks to make explicit the different reading and writing demands and conventions of the disciplinary domains, acknowledging that the disciplines are social constructions with particular ways of knowing and discourses/linguistic conventions used to represent those ways (Bain, 2007; Hynd-Shanahan, Holschuh, & Hubbard, 2004; Moje, 2007, 2008a; Schleppegrell, 2004; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).
- h. *Youth Media*. There is a long tradition through community-based and after-school programs or providing media-intensive and arts-based instruction, especially for marginalized youth, but in recent years the numbers of such programs have increased dramatically (e.g., Buckingham, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Halverson, in press; Hull & colleagues, 2006; Ito & Colleagues, 2009; Soep & Chavez, 2005). Often drawing on popular cultural forms including music, film, and digital media, they develop literacy-related skills and practices by immersing participants in language-rich and multimodal activities. Sometimes framed as providing alternative educational spaces where youth who are alienated from school can find re-entry points to re-engage with learning, most such programs do not measure success via academic literacy gains. However, research that has compared students who participate in these programs with non-affiliated youth has suggested superior academic and social performance (Heath, 1998). It would be interesting to consider how out-of-school and extra-school programs could become spaces for

implementing media-intensive projects that serve to implement Common Core standards.

As implementation of the Common Core proceeds, the process will assuredly be accompanied by myriad concerns. In the particular case of the standards for English Language Arts, changes in what counts as a valued literacy practice can be expected to evoke strong opinions. Nevermind that literacy practices have already shifted in our information and technology-saturated age, and that those shifts are in fact providing a ring-side seat for viewing the varied responses to the Common Core – at least for those with access to the tools of the Internet, the skills to negotiate its specialized reading and writing contexts, and the knowledge and disposition to participate in public blogging. In an recent article published on the website for the Core Knowledge Foundation (<http://www.coreknowledge.org>), a nonprofit founded by E.D. Hirsch, himself a prominent participant in debates about what constitutes literacy, one commentator summarized and lamented accounts of the piloting of the standards in New York City schools. A 10th grade English teacher asked her students to watch a filmed stage performance of *Death of a Salesman*, starring Dustin Hoffman as Willy Loman, before they read the text of the play. The teacher said she offered this assignment as a way to challenge students to “experience a classic in a different way” (Pondiscio, 2011) and saw it as a modification of her usual lesson plans that was in line with the goals of Common Core. The commentator “blanched” at this choice.

However what was most interesting were the comments posted by the readers of the blog. The first defended the teacher, pointing out that Arthur Miller wrote his play for the stage and that it therefore should be watched instead of read – but noted that there would indeed be a problem should the teacher ask her students to watch a stage adaptation of a novel prior to reading the book. Another worried that the film would implant images, preventing students from imagining characters on their own. A third found it silly that the teacher would be attacked for making her lesson entertaining and, presumably therefore easy, and confided that he as a “person and student” worked hardest on things that entertained him. Another was convinced that the teacher’s assignment didn’t actually follow from the Common Core, and what’s more, he suspected that the teacher’s previous assignments hadn’t adhered to the New York State standards either. And on and on. The commentaries illustrate how fervently we hold and closely we guard our own particular values and practices about print, literature, and pedagogy. We hope this paper has also suggested nonetheless that we are in the midst of a sea change in terms of how literacy is practiced in the world, and that a part of the implementation of the Common Core will be to help teachers successfully negotiate those changes in the context of standards (not to mention financial retrenchment). We hope it has also given a sense of how literacy practices derive their vitality from curricula and activities that connect to learners’ backgrounds, cultures, and communities; that capitalize on the social nature of learning; and that position young people to experience literacy as purposeful and themselves as skillful and confident makers of meaning.

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