

# An Introduction to the New Literacy Studies

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## 1. Early origins

The underlying epistemology of the New Literacy Studies, (NLS) is social constructivism. A central figure of social constructivism, Vygotsky, connected learning, through dialogue and interaction between learners in the learning process (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 14) with its sociocultural context (Veer, 2007, p. 21). This foregrounded the social element of literacy and its application in educational contexts.

The early origins of a shift in the social approach to literacy has been documented by various figures. According to Bartlett, this began with the pioneering work of Freire (1970), Giroux (1983) and Bordieu (1977) (2003, pp. 67-68). This was a time when analysis of the ‘close relationship between literary and ordinary language’ in written and spoken discourse was receiving more attention (Tannen, 1982, p. 4). Freire identified the uncritical approach to education, arguing that the traditional ‘banking approach...will never propose to students that they critically consider reality’ (2005, p. 74). Central to Freire’s ideas was that learners and teachers need to engage in reality with individuals being re-creators and not just spectators (p. 75). This set the background for an engagement with conceptions of literacy and the necessity of context.

Also in the early 1980s, analysis of everyday language worked on the assumption that data collected was ‘the result of active processes’ (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 23), containing the behaviours of speakers and with explicit reference to the context in which communication took place<sup>1</sup>. Education, in general, needed to be understood ‘within the broader historical, social, and economic conditions that characterise the wider society’ (Giroux, 1983, p. 234).

In 1980, Scollon and Scollon made the distinction between types of literacy including ‘more pragmatically grounded literacies’ of everyday life, ‘deeply contextualized in the situation’ with known participants (1980, p. 26), indicating that literacy was taking a central role in research into understanding communication. Also, other findings revealed patterns of language use acquired in the home in some groups of children was not always valued in the formal school context (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 164).

NLS in particular has been described as originating from Giroux (1983), Willinsky (1990), Bloome and Green (1992), Gee (1990), Barton (1994), Baynham (1995), Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983) and Street (1984) (Barton, 2001, p. 93). Also a wider range of developments contributing to NLS are outlined in Gee (2000), including work in the areas of ethnomethodology, conversation analysis (CA), ethnography of speaking, sociohistorical psychology and post-structuralist theory.

The figure below attempts to outline the relationships between epistemologies, theoretical perspectives and approaches to NLS.

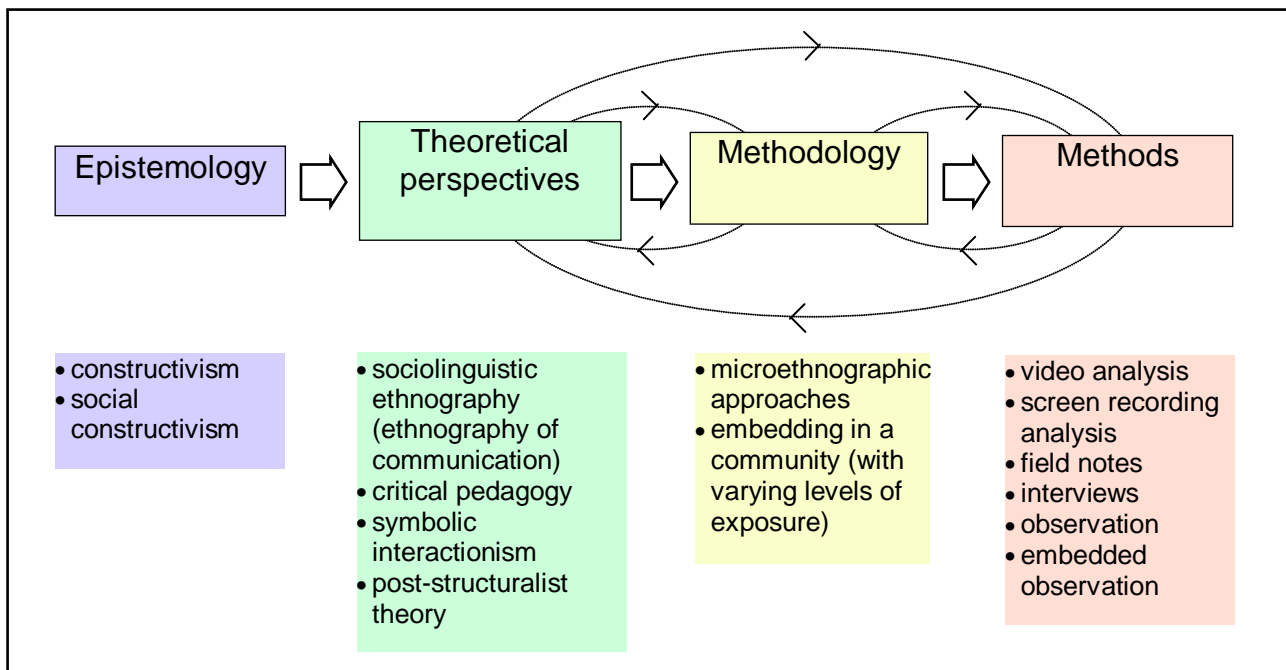


Figure 1. Summary of relationships between approaches to New Literacy Studies (adapted from Crotty,(1998, p. 5)).

## 2. Literacy as a social practice

Being ‘based on over-simplistic psychological models’ and making ‘prior assumptions about the needs and desires of beneficiaries’ (Barton, 2001, p. 93), it was important to ‘understand the literacy practices that target groups and communities are already engaged in’ (Street, 2001, p. 1). This was a significant change in direction of literacy, as it placed attention on local context and emphasised the ‘social’ aspect of literacy, arguing that there were multiple, socially embedded literacies’ (ibid.). NLS takes the ‘ideological’ model of literacy, ‘implicating power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices’ (Street, 1995, p. 1). The ‘ideological’ model positions literacy as a social practice, which varies depending on context. Therefore, its practices and meanings are always contested; ‘they are always rooted in a particular world view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others’ (Street, 2003, pp. 77-78). This is in opposition the the ‘autonomous’ model, which assumes literacy is a ‘uniform set of technical skills’ (Street, 2001, p. 2).

The ideological model is therefore a more culturally sensitive approach, as practices are context-dependent (Street, 2003, p. 77), and there is a focus on the importance of texts and examining the various roles texts have in interaction (Barton, 2001, p. 99). The physical presence of texts are of interest to NLS (Barton, 2001, p. 98), stressing not just the practices, but the situation in which communication takes place, or in Halliday’s words, ‘the environment of the text’ (Halliday, 2001, p. 190) is important.

### 2.1 Literacy events

Within literacy practices is the situation where people interact with the mediating texts. This was termed the ‘literacy event’. The term literacy practices refer to broader conceptions of ways of ‘thinking about doing and reading in cultural contexts’ (Street, 2001, p. 11). This ties literacy to the broader social and cultural context. Street (2003) claimed the term’s first use in literacy was operationalised by Anderson, Taeale & Estrada as ‘any occasion upon which an individual alone or in interaction attempts to comprehend or produce signs’ (1980, p. 59) <sup>ii</sup>. According to Street (2003, p. 78), further clarification of the term is given by Heath as ‘any occasion in which a piece of

writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' (1982a, p. 93).

Literacy events serve as the context of situation where communication (or interaction) takes place where a mediating text is present. This is significant, as NLS embraces the position that 'nearly all everyday activities in the contemporary world are mediated by literacy and the people act within a textually mediated social world' (Barton, 2001, p. 100).

Such situations are firmly rooted in everyday life, as Heath further elaborates that such literacy events include 'reading cereal boxes, stop signs, and television ads...' (1982b, p. 50). This emphasises the shift from an autonomous, context-free model of literacy, which is conceptualised primarily in terms of school-based literacy, to culture- and situation-specific instances of communication where a mediating text is present. Importantly, the definition of a text was broadly defined, similar to Halliday's social semiotic definition of a text as 'any instance of living language that is playing some part in a context of situation' (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 10).

### **3. The New Literacy Studies**

With the social constructivist epistemological base and the ethnographic theoretical perspectives and methodologies, New Literacy Studies addresses the analysis of communication (and therefore interaction). NLS researchers take the text as the defining element of communication, NLS offers an environment to analyse communication from the immediate situation to the analysis of social practices and communities. The implications for NLS are not fixed, but it is aligned with addressing social injustices. Street's ideological model of literacy underpins NLS, which states literacy is bound to society and power structures.

The goal was to address societal inequalities and highlight power as well as culture in social practices (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 9), addressing the previous model of literacy that was ethnocentric, context-free and built on the 'autonomous model' of literacy. The idea of literacy as tied to social practices, and embedded in literacy practices, understood through ethnographic approaches to literacy could contribute to empowering people and creating a critical, equal society<sup>iii</sup>.

The social agenda of NLS is broad and not just aimed at addressing inequalities. Street highlighted that even though work carried out by Heath (1983) sought to understand home and school literacy practices, the focus was on ethnically divided working class families. This served to reinforce the assumption that middle class family homes 'are closely aligned with school practice and ideas regarding literacy (1995, p. 104).

From a broader perspective, Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris (2005) defines NLS as involving 'an approach to research that foregrounds anthropological and sociolinguistic methods and that closely attends to issues of cultural, political, and economic ideology' (p. 233).

Another aspect of NLS is the role of mediation of texts and other means. Scribner and Cole identified the role of technology and its impact on communication:

As technology develops, human interaction with the environment becomes less direct; it is mediated in increasingly complex ways by the systems of tools that human societies devise (1981, p. 8).

This emphasises the role of tools in communication, illustrating the multitude of resources considered in NLS.

### **4. Multimodality**

Multimodality has received a lot more attention over the last few years, as technological developments have enabled the proliferation of digital media into everyday social practices. With

this has come research into multimodal representation and discourse in texts<sup>iv</sup>; and multimodal interaction analysis.

With this, Literacy Studies has been ‘embracing broader definitions of print literacy within larger multimodal conceptions of literacy practices’ for some time (Street, 2004, p. 327), bringing ‘the NLS argument about written language to new digital technologies’ (Gee, 2010, p. 127).

NLS also relates print literacy with multimodality (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2005, pp. 6-7; Heath & Street, 2008, p. 4; Street, Pahl, & Roswell, 2009). Significantly, multimodal analysis and literacy studies are acknowledged as complimentary methods in the analysis of literacy as a social practice (Stein & Slonimsky, 2006, p. 119). Both approaches also share a common understanding of literacy as a social practice ‘with an eye to the impact of new communicational systems on how we make meaning’ (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006, p. 1), further bonding the two areas.

#### 4.1 Analysing communication within NLS

How meanings are made, or social semiosis, is by its very nature multimodal; communication draws on various meaning-making resources. Interestingly, the Vygotskian definition of ‘signs’ includes the wider range of communicative modes to ‘anything that can communicate meaning’ (Langford, 2005, p. 43) including gesture, speech and even diagrams. In the situation of literacy events, the texts can be multimodal, multidimensional (such as a cereal box) and the communicative event involves multiple communicative modes.

The situated nature of NLS means the context and agency is central. Framed in the literacy event, the social actors, mediating text and other mediating tools act as the unit of analysis. Without a fixed method to research literacy events, NLS offers potential for different methodologies, such as microethnographic approaches and ethnographies, to examine and uncover literacy and social practices; communicative resource usage; and draw inferences on all levels of human activity.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> 'In summary, the discourse analyst treats his data as the record (text) of a dynamic process in which language was used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker or writer to express meanings and achieve intentions (discourse) (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 26).

<sup>ii</sup> Interestingly, the authors define reading and writing events separately, with verbal output classified as part of the 'writing event', which is different to the other definitions of literacy events as a 'mixture of written and spoken language' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 9) and involving 'verbalizing what they know from and about the written material' Heath (1982b, p. 50).

<sup>iii</sup> However, as Street cautions, learning literacy may not be able to liberate people from their socially embedded contexts and can be used to reinforce a different ideology and restrict a population from 'critical appraisal of their situation' (Street, 1995, p. 79).

<sup>iv</sup> Regarding the study of texts, Kress and Van Leeuwen stated: '...any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code is multimodal' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177).

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