Learning to read from a social practice view: Ethnography, schooling and adult learning

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Abstract This paper looks at some issues around “learning to read” from the viewpoint of a social practice concept of literacy for both child and adult literacy. This calls for an ethnographic approach that, although increasingly common in the field of adult literacy, is less common in the policy and practice of schooling; there, a more decontextualized approach predominates, seeing one form of literacy as a universal norm to which all adult literacy learning needs to conform. And—on the whole—in literacy education, schooling predominates, although there are signs in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of increasing awareness of the importance of a wider approach to adult learning for the achievement of the SDGs. This will increase the need for an ethnographic approach to both children’s and adults’ literacy-learning programmes.

Keywords Learning to read · Social practice · Schooling · Adult literacy · Ethnography · Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Challenging the dominant approach to learning to read

It now seems to be widely acknowledged that the dominant approach to learning to read (and write) is to see literacy as a basic skill that an individual either has or does not have. The result is that the world can be divided simplistically into those who are illiterate and those who are literate. In this view, learning literacy brings with it automatically cognitive benefits and, with these, economic, social, and cultural benefits. Learning “literacy” is seen

Brian Street left this paper in an advanced state of preparation; with his consent, Alan Rogers has edited and completed it. It is substantially as Brian would have finalized it.

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to be essential not only for “development” but for all forms of modern living. And there are standardized ways of teaching reading (and writing): cognitive psychology approaches that place an emphasis on classroom practices and see systematic letter sequences, phonics, or syllabic construction as essential for all learners, especially children. This view, that literacy in itself has consequences irrespective of context, has tended to dominate educational thinking, a view I have described as an “autonomous” model of literacy (Street 1984). As with many people working in the field of literacy in international contexts, I find myself challenging this dominant perspective, put forward by many agencies, which we might characterize as a “skills approach”.

An alternative perspective shifts the focus from schools and from children and instead sees reading and writing as always taking place in some specific sociocultural context. One is never “learning to read”; one is ever only “learning to read some specific text or other in a specific context”. It is this sociocultural context and the practices that take place within it that give reading (and writing) its meaning.

A number of literacy projects in recent years have, in fact, taken a more social view of literacy and of learning than has been evident in the dominant policy perspectives. This social view emphasizes 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; Prinsloo and Baynham 2013).

Researchers trained in fieldwork methods and sensitized to ways of discovering and observing literacy practices on the ground have conducted studies into these everyday practices and their relationship to the programmes designed to alter them. Programme planners at times now include these findings in projects from the earliest stage (Prinsloo and Breier 1996; Yates 1994) and feed them into the campaign design and development. Many others in different parts of the world, such as Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (2000) and Papen (2005) in the UK, and Kell (1996) and Kalman (2005) in South Africa and Mexico, respectively, have written extensively on this issue. They all confirm the importance of taking context into account in the planning and implementation of literacy and numeracy learning programmes. In this issue of *Prospects*, for instance, Negassa, Rogers, and Warkineh write that, whilst “there is an individual cognitive component to learning (see Abadzi in this volume) ... there is also a social element; the learning process ... always takes place in ‘situated activities’”. Without the social interaction, the cognitive would not take place; and the form that the cognitive process takes is shaped by the ‘situated activity’ of which it is a part”. All this work, then, emphasizes the social dimension of learning to read.

Literacy as social practice

The term “literacy as social practice” (LSP) has, to some extent, replaced the earlier term “new literacy studies” (Gee 1990; see Street 1993, 1995b) on the grounds that it switches the focus of attention away from the products of academic research to the many and varied users and contexts of literacy. The concept of LSP refers to the nature of literacy in use. It leads to quite new ways of understanding and defining what counts as literacy—an approach that has profound implications for how reading and writing are learned and taught. If literacy is a social practice, then it varies with social context and is not the same, uniform thing in each case. LSP recognizes the plurality of literacies—that there are different literacy practices that carry with them different values and affordances. This

means that LSP has implications for policy, both in current national approaches to literacy learning and also in such international perspectives as are expressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see below and Street 2016). Whereas the UK National Literacy Strategy, for instance, sees what it calls “the basics” as the key focus for literacy education—involving such surface features of language and literacy as rules of grammar in the traditional sense and rules for phoneme/grapheme relations—the LSP approach shifts from such narrow views to the larger social and ideological contexts (Street 1995a). By addressing these conceptual issues, I hope to engage practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in reflective debate.

That literacy is a social practice is an insight both banal and profound. It is banal in the sense that, once we think about it, it is obvious that literacy is always practiced in social contexts. Even school, however artificial it may be accused of being in its reading and writing teaching methods, is a social construction. The site of learning (whether at school or within adult-literacy programmes) has, like other contexts, its own social beliefs and behaviours into which its particular literacy practices are inserted (Street 2005); whether in school or adult-literacy groups, what is being learned is not the same concept in each circumstance.

In contrast with the dominant “skills” view, I have posited an “ideological” view of literacy, in which I argue that literacy not only varies with social context and with cultural norms and discourses (regarding, for instance, identity, gender, and belief)—what might be termed a “social” model—but also that its uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power. It is in this sense, I suggest, that literacy can be seen as ideological: it always involves contests over meanings, definitions, boundaries, and control of the literacy agenda. For these reasons, it becomes harder to justify teaching only one particular form of literacy, whether in schools or in adult programmes, when the learners will already have been exposed to a variety of everyday literacy practices (Street 2016). If we see literacy simply as a universal technical skill, the same everywhere and for all people, then the particular form being taught in educational contexts (where formal schooled literacy is often treated as the only kind of literacy there is) becomes the universal standard, which naturalizes its socially specific features and disguises their real history, ideological justifications, and practices, and which delegitimizes all other forms of literacy. On the other hand, if we see literacy as a social practice, then that history and those features and justifications need to be spelled out, and students need to be able to discuss the basis for the choices being made in the kinds of literacy they are learning—particularly who decides what they should learn.

The ideological model of literacy, then, offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. Knowledge is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market, a particular religious culture, or a particular educational context, and the effects of learning a particular literacy will be dependent on its particular context. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, regarding both its meanings and its practices; hence, particular versions of it are always “ideological” in that they are always rooted in a particular worldview and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others (Gee 1990; Street and Besnier 1994). The argument about social literacies (Street 1995b) recognizes that how 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 positions in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that literacy can be “given”

neutrally and then its social effects only experienced afterward. I argue below that many of the policy statements about literacy that we see in the public domain fail to take account of the social practices embedded in different contexts for learning and using literacy.

Research in the field of Literacy as Social Practice (Barton et al. 2000; Pahl and Rowsell 2006; Robinson-Pant 2004; Street 1995b, 2005) has addressed issues of how literacy is learned in many different contexts, of which school is only one. By engaging in reading and/or writing in contexts such as communities and workplaces, learners come to terms with a variety of issues that they are not necessarily conscious of learning explicitly. As Negassa, Rogers, and Warkineh state, in this issue, “The current interest in ‘lifelong learning’ has directed attention to ‘informal learning’—the learning that takes place throughout life *outside* of formal and nonformal educational and training programmes”. These are terms that we may have to learn and develop in order to elaborate on the social practice perspective and its implications for learning.

Ethnographic perspectives

How, then, can we know about such social practices? I argue that an ethnographic perspective can be helpful in addressing the local uses and meanings of literacy—that is, in discovering what people are doing with reading and/or writing in specific social contexts (see Rogers and Street 2012).

In recent years there has been growing awareness of the value of qualitative, ethnographic approaches to educational research and the contributions these 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 1993)

I will then call on an ethnographic approach that is concerned with attempting to understand what actually happens in relation to reading and writing in their social contexts. The findings of the ethnographic approach to literacy may lead to different measurements of and claims for outcomes, and to different curricula and pedagogies from those employed in many traditional programmes.

Rather than appealing to large statistical data sources where the methodological validity rests on what Mitchell (1984) terms “enumerative induction” based in representative sampling, an ethnographic perspective is founded on “analytic induction”. Instead of looking for a representative sample, the ethnographer looks to another kind of inference involved when analytical statements are made:

What the anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable. From this point of view, the search for a “typical” case for analytical exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a “telling” case. (Mitchell 1984, p. 239)

Green and Bloome (1997) and others have pointed out that such a perspective need not be restricted to anthropologists. In fact, an ethnographic perspective is already evident in the work of many educationalists, linguists, and social commentators. Such ethnographic accounts of literacy, then, can, in Mitchell's (1984) terms, provide "telling cases" of what literacy means to different populations of users, focusing on the cultural and institutional locations of such meanings, using analytic induction, and avoiding the ethnocentrism involved in narrow, dominant approaches.

There have now been many very fruitful studies of literacy using ethnographic perspectives (Gebre, Rogers, Street, and Openjuru 2009; Nirantar 2007; Openjuru, Baker, Rogers, and Street 2016; Prinsloo and Breier 1996). And the results are impressive. Multiple forms of literacy can be seen—a literacy family, if you like, which includes religious literacies, many different occupational literacies, family/domestic literacies, bureaucratic literacies, academic literacies, etc. Of these, the formal literacy of the school taught to young people and to adults is simply one member of the family, and it is often different from the informal literacies that the learners, adults and children, encounter in their everyday lives (few people bother with punctuation or capital letters when writing shopping lists, and few feel incorrect grammar and spelling prevent them from understanding when reading graffiti). This gap between the taught and the everyday literacies is wide and hard to bridge. Ethnographic studies show that the world cannot be simply divided between literate and illiterate, and that everyone engages with literacy practices in their own way, mediation being particularly important; often they do not see their own practices as "literacy". These studies show empirically that there are multiple ways of learning to read: Rafat Nabi and colleagues' detailed studies (2009, pp. 65–97) show conclusively that some people do, in fact, learn to read through word recognition, however much educational psychologists may deny this possibility (Abadzi 2010). Ethnographic studies deny that there is only one literacy and one way of learning to read (and write).

The implications of this conclusion for the policy and practice of helping adults and children to learn to read are profound. Below, I note a few of the policy statements on education and literacy and cite some critiques from a social perspective that colleagues have made.

Learning to read, adults as well as children: The contribution of the Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration set out goals (MDGs) to be reached by 2015, the main focus of which was eliminating poverty, hunger, and disease. Because states did not reach the Education for All goals by the deadline (Convergence 2004), in 2015 new participants met to set up Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is here that we find more explicit attention to literacy and education than in the MDGs; for example, SDG-4 includes the statement, to "[e]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".

Again, however, the focus seems to be mainly on schools and children, although in the follow-up to the SDGs, adult learning has received rather more attention. For instance, a sustainable development framework was put forward at the World Education Forum held in Incheon, Republic of Korea, in November 2015. In this framework, given the title "Equitable and Inclusive Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All by 2030: Transforming Lives through Education" (UNESCO 2015), the participants "reaffirmed the

vision of the worldwide movement for Education for All initiated in Jomtien in 1990 and reiterated in Dakar in 2000". Indeed, they recognized that the previous policy had not entirely worked: "We recognize with great concern that we are far from having reached education for all" (UNESCO 2015). The reasons for this dilemma and the issues involved in the new policy are key matters for us to discuss here.

An international seminar held in the UK in April 2016 attempted to provide some answers to the question of why these previous policy positions seem not to have succeeded. The seminar linked this to a more precise question: Why have adults been marginalized in the past, and what needs to be done to bring adults more clearly into the mainstream? (see UppSem 2016).

In response to this question, in a background paper to this seminar, Alan Rogers (2016) noted: (1) the relative absence of adult learning from the implementation of the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), despite statements in the policy documents as to the importance of adult learning; (2) the almost complete absence of adult-education practitioners from the discussions leading up to the formulation of the education goal SDG-4 (see for example, UNESCO 2014); and (3) the current prioritizing of children in many of the discussions on the implementation of SDG-4. He does, however, see some change, as have a number of colleagues, especially in the inclusion of adult-learning targets in almost every one of the 17 SDGs, either explicitly or implicitly. He notes that "since 1990 the concept of lifelong learning/education (LLL/E) has become more common in educational policy contexts in developing countries" (Rogers 2016). In support of this, he cites the recent IIEP statement that "[t]he new Sustainable Development Goals confirm the importance of ensuring life-long learning opportunities for all" (*IIEP News*, 14 January 2016). This leads him to ask whether the conceptualization of lifelong learning/education (LLL/E) as embracing both SDG-4 and the other learning targets would help to ensure a greater provision for adults. The questions this leads to, which are relevant to the debates in this issue of *Prospects*, are "How can we avoid this discourse being rhetorical? Can such a LLL/E agenda which covers both SDG 4 and the other learning targets be operationalised? And how can its learning outcomes be measured?" (Rogers 2016).

A number of those attending the Uppingham Seminar commented on Rogers's account (all quotations come from papers on the Uppingham Seminars website, UppSem 2016). Ian Cheffy agrees that "the learning needs of adults have received relatively little attention in the last 15 years", and offers an explanation from a psychological perspective: "Somehow I think that human survival instincts enter into this! Adults, especially parents, prioritise children since they are the 'hope for the future'. Parents want their children to have better opportunities than they had—and this spills over into public policy. Unfortunately it's hard to change human survival instincts!" (UppSem 2016). He does, however, also offer a more "social" explanation; namely, "the desire of the international community to focus on a limited range of specific development goals concerning many aspects of development and not education alone, as seen in the MDGs". And he takes encouragement from the new SDGs in that they do not reduce the focus on education to simply one of primary schooling but are now concerned with education at all levels—lifelong learning—a point that Anna Robinson-Pant in the same seminar also recognized. So, Cheffy states, "[T]he thinking about education for all ages which was a feature of the 2000 Dakar Education for All agenda has now been integrated (with updating) into the SDGs themselves". He concludes on a relatively positive note: "This at least opens up opportunities for international development efforts to pay attention to the needs of adults without in any way stepping outside what are now set up as the priorities". For instance, he assumes that "the Education

2030 Framework for Action document which was formally adopted at UNESCO in November (UNESCO 2015) will not be overlooked". This UNESCO statement amplifies the 10 targets within SDG-4 and gives a good deal of recognition to the needs of adults and an emphasis on lifelong learning for children, youth, and adults. It indicates that, within the lifelong-learning framework, "special measures are needed to address the needs of adult learners", particularly as concerns relevant skills for employment (TVET) and basic education.

There is, then, Cheffy argues, an important balance to be established here, between focusing, on the one hand, on the role of adults in relation to the schooling of children but also, on the other hand, on "the need to recognise the contribution which adult literacy makes to children's schooling, even if it concentrates simply on parents learning to read and write".

Another contributor to the discussions at the Uppingham Seminar on the adult-learning dimensions of the SDGs, Mari Yasunaga, also asks, "Why is adult education neglected?" She offers further explanations: "[S]ome funding is in fact made available beyond formal adult education contexts, for instance to communities, NGOs, the private sector and donors involved in grass-root level activities, workplace education, etc., about which a state and/or non-state actors may not have a complete picture". So, an important issue here might be to follow through on the funding streams and recognize that some support is being given for the adult level, even if it is not defined as "adult education" but as skills development, or women's empowerment, or health projects, etc.

An additional theme worth highlighting, Yasunaga asserts, is the importance of "[m]aking the learning outcomes and benefits of adult education/literacy more visible". She suggests that some of the recent international reports do, in fact, show that "an evidence base regarding the multiple benefits of 'education' is expanding", citing the UNESCO report *Sustainable Development Post-2015 Begins with Education* (UNESCO 2014). Yasunaga adds that we need to take into account "the principles of family literacy that avoid separating adults and children". So, whilst the dominant policy perspective in the SDGs may be a general notion of "universality", in fact we may need to give more attention to recurrent education, or adult learning and education (ALE). It will take ethnographic approaches to the analysis of such programmes to reveal the extent of this provision for adult and intergenerational learning.

Anna Robinson-Pant, UNESCO professor of adult literacy and learning for social transformation at the University of East Anglia (UK), also commented on issues raised in the Uppingham Seminar. Her work leads her to explore the policy documents more closely, and she advises us to examine more deeply the language used to describe what is going on in the contexts under discussion. She pointed out some of the changes in the policy documents: "There are repeated statements in the 2030 Framework for Action where there is a strong emphasis on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls as cross-cutting the dimensions of sustainable development—for instance one heading states 'A world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality, and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed'". The (at least, rhetorical) commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in the 2030 agenda presents, she suggests, an important opportunity to look at what assumptions about learning and education could contribute to these aims. And here she draws on Rogers's (2014) distinction between informal learning and education to explore what kind of adult learning/lifelong education might support the targets in SDG-5 (to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). Adult learning (particularly awareness raising) seems to underlie most of the Goal 5 targets (e.g., "enhance the use of enabling technology") but is

not stated explicitly. Thus, she proposes that, once again, definitions and terminology need more refined attention.

However, the participants quoted here do not necessarily all agree; in this case, Robinson-Pant questions some of the more negative readings of the SDGs in relation to adult education expressed in some of the seminar papers. As she puts it, “[M]y reading of the SDGs (particularly as compared to the MDGs/EFA agenda) is much more positive ...—in that I saw only two of the Goal 4 targets (4.1 and 4.2) as focused exclusively on children and schooling. As I consider there is a reasonable emphasis on adult learning in the other targets, the issue for me is less around ‘the absence of adult education from SDG 4’ and more around ‘what kind of education or adult learning is envisaged within each target?’” Indeed, she notes that SDG-4.7 seems to mark a significant shift away from the 3Rs and formal skills/education, with the potential to support informal and nonformal learning around global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity, gender equality, and so on.

If, then, we are looking for explanations for why the dominant policy perspective has tended to focus on children rather than adults, we might look beyond narrow practical constraints and instead examine more closely some of the assumptions behind different forms of political commitment. Both children’s and adults’ education are often supported for reasons other than learning; spending money on children’s schooling rather than on adults has been seen by some, for instance, as a vote winner, since many adults have expressed a preference for the education of their children over that of themselves. It is here, once again, that ethnographic approaches are needed; it seems important to look at what the other agendas (subplots) might be. And there are issues here that we might need to pursue more closely in the global North as well as in so-called developing countries, as governments and NGOs attempt to develop policies that, at least rhetorically, respond to the UNESCO and SDG statements (Street 1995a).

Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that the dominant approach to learning to read (and write) is to see literacy as a basic skill that an individual either has or does not have, so that the world can be divided into illiterate and literate; that learning literacy automatically brings with it cognitive and other benefits; and that there are standardized ways of teaching reading (and writing) to both children and adults. I suggest that adopting a “literacy-as-social-practice” perspective on learning to read (and write) challenges these assumptions for both children and adults. Using ethnographic approaches, LSP shows that there are multiple literacies (Street 2015) and multiple ways of learning literacy—that a “single-injection” model of teaching literacy is less effective than a lifelong- and especially a “lifewide-” learning model. And I have argued that this helps us to see how adult learning of literacy has been relatively neglected in both policy and practice in favour of primary schooling, and that the new emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals provides an opportunity for redressing this imbalance.

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