

Why Research Multiple Literacy Practices?

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The concept of multiple literacies is currently being debated in development circles (cf Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1993; Rogers, 1994). In this brief piece, I would like to describe why I took on research in this area, as a way of answering the larger question of what I take to be its implications for both research and practice.

My personal answer, as with many researchers, is given in my own research history (Street, 1984). I went to Iran during the 1970s to undertake anthropological field research. 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 Koranic school; in the new State schools; and amongst 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, 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, 1997) whilst on the ground ethnographic and literacy-sensitive observation indicates a rich variety of 'practices' (Heath, 1983; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). 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 of the campaigners? In many cases the latter 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. 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, 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 my research, teaching and writing, both in the research community and in the public arena. Following through its implications for programme design, including pre-programme research on local literacy practices and for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment/evaluation are major tasks that require first a more developed conceptualisation of the theoretical and methodological issues involved in understanding and representing 'local literacy practices'.

References

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