

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literacy and Development

Edited by

**Kaushik Basu, Bryan Maddox
and Anna Robinson-Pant**



Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literacy and Development

The links between literacy and development have been the focus of research conducted by both economists and anthropologists. Yet researchers from these different disciplines have tended to work in isolation from each other. This book aims to create a space for new interdisciplinary debate in this area, through bringing together contributions on literacy and development from the fields of education, literacy studies, anthropology and economics. This book extends our theoretical understanding on the ways in which people's acquisition and uses of literacy influence changes in agency, identity, social practice and labour market and other outcomes. The chapters discuss data from diverse cultural contexts (South Africa, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Peru, and Mexico), and from contrasting research paradigms.

The contributors examine the significance of culture and socio-economic contexts in shaping such processes. As such, they contribute to our understanding of the role of literacy in processes of poverty reduction, and its importance to people's capabilities and wellbeing.

This book is based on the special issue of the *Journal of Development Studies*.

Kaushik Basu is C. Marks Professor of International Studies, and Chairman of the Department of Economics, Cornell University. He is also the Director of the Center for Analytic Economics at Cornell.

Bryan Maddox is Senior Lecturer in education and development in the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia. An anthropologist and educationalist by training, he has supported adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh and Nepal.

Anna Robinson-Pant is Reader at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia. As a development planner, teacher educator and researcher with various international aid agencies, she has spent much of her working life in South Asia.

This page intentionally left blank

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literacy and Development

Edited by Kaushik Basu, Bryan Maddox and
Anna Robinson-Pant

First published 2009 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2009 Edited by Kaushik Basu, Bryan Maddox and Anna Robinson-Pant

Typeset in Times by Value Chain, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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

ISBN 10: 0-415-46879-5
ISBN 13: 978-0-415-46879-4

Contents

1. Introduction: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literacy and Development: An Introduction and Review of the Field	1
<i>Kaushik Basu, Bryan Maddox & Anna Robinson-Pant</i>	
2. 'Why Literacy Matters': Exploring A Policy Perspective on Literacies, Identities and Social Change	11
<i>Anna Robinson-Pant</i>	
3. Literacy Sharing, Assortative Mating, or What? Labour Market Advantages and Proximate Illiteracy Revisited	29
<i>Vegard Iversen & Richard Palmer-Jones</i>	
4. Externality and Literacy: A Note	71
<i>S. Subramanian</i>	
5. Literacies of Distinction: (Dis)Empowerment in Social Movements	81
<i>Dorothy Holland & Debra Skinner</i>	
6. Literacies and Discourses of Development Among the Rabaris of Kutch, India	95
<i>Caroline Dyer</i>	
7. Mail that Feeds the Family: Popular Correspondence and Official Literacy Campaigns	112
<i>Virginia Zavala</i>	
8. 'Making Things Happen': Literacy and Agency in Housing Struggles in South Africa	124
<i>Catherine Kell</i>	
9. The Roots and the Growth of Women's Writing in a Peruvian Village	145
<i>Mercedes Niño-Murcia</i>	
10. Literacy Partnerships: Access to Reading and Writing through Mediation	165
<i>Judy Kalman</i>	
11. Models and Mechanisms: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Literacy and Development	179
<i>Bryan Maddox</i>	
12. Afterword	193
<i>Brian V. Street</i>	
Index	197

This page intentionally left blank

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literacy and Development: An Introduction and Review of the Field

KAUSHIK BASU, BRYAN MADDOX & ANNA ROBINSON-PANT

The concept of literacy has an important role in theories of social and human development. The development studies literature has consistently described illiteracy as a pervasive characteristic of poverty and human vulnerability, and literacy as a necessary component in poverty reduction and wellbeing. Illiteracy, as Amartya Sen has argued, is a '*focal feature*' of capability deprivation and social injustice (Sen, 1999: 103). This argument is supported by an extensive literature which observes a strong correlation between literacy and other determinants of wellbeing such as income, women's labour-force participation and health (Sen, 1999). The perceived importance of literacy in human development is illustrated by the central position of adult literacy rates in the Human Development Index and in wider measures of wellbeing. Despite this, there are a number of unresolved problems in the field of literacy studies. While literacy has an important evaluative position in theories of development, there is no 'theory of literacy' that can adequately capture and predict its complex role in processes of social change, and account for the role of literate (and illiterate) identities and practices in shaping social relations, capacities and aspirations. Such an understanding is however required if we are to make sense of the pervasive role of the literate in globalised material, institutional and bureaucratic cultures (Riles, 2006), in conceptions of schooling and citizenship, and in the analysis of inequality.

This edited collection attempts to develop new understandings of the relationship between literacy, identities and social change through a process of interdisciplinary dialogue. This locates the study of literacy beyond individual attributes, at the nexus of institutional and material practices and textual cultures, instrumentality, and the production of agency and identity. Drawing on both differences, and shared understandings of literacy and development in economics and anthropology, we build on what Jackson (2002) describes as the 'creative tensions' of interdisciplinary research. Disciplinary traditions in literacy research have largely developed in isolation. There are radical epistemological and theoretical differences in the way that economists and anthropologists view literacy and its relationship with wider aspects of development and human welfare. Tensions over 'validity criteria' and enumeration (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007), contextual specificity and comparison, thick descriptions and thin generalities are not atypical of the wider difficulties encountered in mixing qualitative and quantitative research in development studies. Anthropological accounts typically view literacy as a set of social practices whose significance is revealed through contextually situated analysis (Gee, 2000). Ethnographic studies describe the complex interaction between literacy practices, textual politics and the formation and expression of personal and social identities. They question the construction of literacy as an individual state of being though an emphasis on the social mechanisms of collective practice and literacy mediation.

2 Introduction

Economists tend to take schooling participation rates as a proxy for literacy rates; ethnographers make a distinction between ‘schoolled’ and informal literacies. The economic literature has yet to engage significantly with concepts of literacy as practice. The enumerative categories of ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ prevent deeper analysis of literacy practices and identities and their role in processes of development and change. Economic analysis appears to offer greater insights into questions of scale and distributional inequality, from intra-household levels to regional, national level analysis and international comparison, and explore relationships of correlation that are unavailable, or unacceptable, in ethnographic analysis (Hamilton, 2001). It is tempting, therefore, for ethnographers to view such differences as the inevitable outcomes of contrasting disciplinary orientations, and give in to what Kanbur and Riles describe as the ‘disciplinary urge [of anthropologists] to “critique” economic models, to expose their contingency or cultural specificity and demonstrate again and again that the “realities on the ground” are far more “complex” than such models would suggest’ (2004: 12). While this thesis offers certain attractions, it seems to impose unnecessary limits on the types of dialogue and collaboration that are required for further progress in the field of literacy and development.

Our response, then, is not to advocate disciplinary purity and isolation, but to explore the possibilities for dialogue and collaboration around mutual areas of interest. This offers scope to enrich and inform research agendas. The chapters in this volume discuss shared disciplinary concerns on themes such as literacy mediation, the implications and externalities that are shared between households and communities, and the significance of literacy practices and abilities in identity formation and social participation. They begin to map new terrain for research, for example on communities of practice and collective capabilities, on textually mediated entitlements and resources, and the externalities of literacy. The essays also suggest the need for a more substantial and sustained process of interdisciplinary research on the integration of a practice-based model of literacy in economics, and the socio-economic impacts and dynamics of literacy inequalities. Such collaboration seems to be necessary in order to resolve the existing difficulties in measurement, comparison and attribution, which are evident in the field of literacy and social policy.

Literacy and Anthropology

What does it mean for an individual to be literate? What part does literacy play in shaping a society? How do different cultural groups produce and engage with written texts?

Questions such as these lie behind many anthropological studies of literacy and continue to influence research on the relationship between literacy and social change. Recognising earlier anthropologists’ concern with the ‘great divide’ between traditional and modern ways of life, Goody and Watt (1968) suggested that this was due to the introduction of writing as a technology, causing a major historical change from a ‘nonliterate’ (or oral) to a ‘literate’ society. Writing acted as “a technology of the intellect” (Goody, 1986) enabling individuals and cultures to expand the range of their activities’ (Goody, 1999: 31). Anthropologists documented the different ways that people used and processed information in oral as compared to written cultures, analysing the consequences of literacy for individuals in terms of the development of abstract thought (Ong, 1982), and for societies in relation to their more complex political and legal systems. Through ethnographic research on reading and writing texts in a variety of settings – not just inside educational institutions - this early work illuminated some distinctions between schooling (or education) and literacy, and

offered methodological tools for researching reading, writing and oral texts in relation to different cultural groups (see Scribner and Cole, 1981).

The body of anthropological work now known as the 'New Literacy Studies' grew out of a critique of the research described above. Those researchers had drawn on an 'autonomous' model of literacy, Street (1984) argued, which

'treated literacy in technical terms, as an independent variable that can be separated from social context. It is treated as 'autonomous' in the sense that it has its own characteristics, irrespective of the time and place in which it occurs and also in the sense that it has consequences for society and for cognition that can be derived from its distinctive and intrinsic character. (Street, 1999: 35).

In contrast to these assumptions about a single neutral literacy with universal consequences for individuals and society, the 'ideological' model of literacy recognised a continuum rather than a divide between literacy and illiteracy, between oral and literate societies, and drew researchers' attention to multiple literacies and languages. Researchers within the New Literacy Studies – which Gee (2000: 180) saw as 'one movement amongst many that took part in this social turn' away from individualism and behaviourism – shared an approach to the study of literacy 'not as a measurement of skills but as social practices that vary from one context to another' (Street, 2008: 3). A major contribution of the New Literacy Studies over the past twenty years has been this 'shifting away from literacy as an individual attribute' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000: 13) and the exploration of how the 'uses and meanings of literacy are always embedded in relations of power' (Street, 1999: 37).

'Literacy events' ('activities where literacy has a role' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000: 8)) and 'literacy practices' ('the particularity of cultural practices with which uses of reading and/or writing are associated in given contexts' (Street, 1999: 38)) have remained central concepts in the New Literacy Studies, challenging researchers to analyse the relationship between written and oral texts and explore the relative dominance of certain literacies (particularly marginalisation of vernacular literacies in relation to 'school' literacy). Through research into literacy practices in everyday situations (for instance, Prinsloo and Breier's (1996) account of taxi drivers and farm workers' literacy practices in a South African township), in classrooms in schools, adult literacy programmes and universities, and development programmes, anthropologists have developed understanding of how literacy is viewed and practised in specific social contexts. These insights have focused not just on the differences, but also on the relationships, for instance, between 'school' literacy and 'home' literacy practices. By researching the perspectives of participants, planners and implementers of literacy and development programmes, terms such as 'motivation' and 'drop out' have been problematised. Methodological and theoretical innovation within this field of literacy studies has increased, partly due to the recognition of the need for multi-modal analysis in the 'post print era' (Brandt and Clinton, 2006: 256). Alongside ethnographic approaches, researchers conduct discourse analysis of texts, including cultural artefacts, photographs and computer media. Recognising the growing importance of different modes and new technologies, Street (2008: 13) calls for the development of an 'ideological model of multimodality' to avoid 'mode or technical determinism'.

Many consider that the major contribution of the New Literacy Studies lies in the in-depth insights into literacies and literacy practices in local contexts, which had previously

been overlooked by planners and researchers investigating the macro-level impact of literacy. However, this attention to documenting local literacies has also been regarded as a serious limitation – both in terms of the knowledge produced (the dangers of romanticising the local and that ‘it is impossible to describe local literacies without attention to global contexts’ (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006: 5)) and the difficulties of using such research to engage with policy and practice. Similarly, the emphasis on ‘the social’ within the New Literacy Studies has been criticised for understating the significance of individual agency and capabilities in the engagement with such literacy texts and practices, and in processes of individual and social change (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Brandt and Clinton, 2006; Maddox, 2007b). The questions posed by policy makers around measuring the impact of literacy on various development indicators, particularly health and fertility, are rarely answered by the ethnographers whose agenda is to document, rather than evaluate, change.

Whilst policy makers have often conflated the effects of schooling and literacy, for instance, using literacy rates as a proxy for ‘education’, the New Literacy Studies has helped to clarify the distinctions between literacy practices in school and outside. However the New Literacy Studies’ resistance to reifying a universal ‘Literacy’ and valuing multiple literacies instead has presented the challenge of defining the distinction between ‘literacy’ and ‘knowledge’. The term ‘literacy’ has often been used in a largely metaphorical sense to mean any area of skill or knowledge, no longer necessarily related to reading, writing or decoding. Brandt and Clinton’s (2006: 256) plea ‘to bring the “thingness” [or material technology] of literacy into an ideological model’ has provided food for thought for many anthropologists in this field, as the chapters in this volume illustrate. They draw our attention to institutionalised practices of literacy, and how their scale and pervasiveness affect power-relations and social identities in multi-lingual and multi-literate environments (Collins and Blot, 2003).

These debates have particular significance for our attempts to strengthen and develop interdisciplinary dialogue between literacy researchers. The New Literacy Studies has already moved beyond anthropological studies of literacy in local communities to explore the methodological implications of researching development policy processes, multi-modal literacies and numeracies. From what could be seen as an initial ‘oppositional’ stance to the dominant discourse on literacy and development, researchers have now begun to look, for instance, at how the driving concept of ‘causality’ (does literacy have certain consequences?) could be replaced with that of ‘mediation’ and discursive ‘crossings’ (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006). The early focus on combining discourse or textual analysis with ethnographic approaches – the recognition that a text should be analysed in relation to how it is used – has led researchers to analyse in more depth ‘how literacy relates to more general issues of social theory regarding textuality, figured worlds, identity and power’ (Street, 2003: 13). Bartlett (2007) discusses how cultural artefacts can be analysed at two levels (the inter-personal and the intra-personal) in relation to identity. Her definition of identity as ‘an ongoing social process of self making in conjunction with others through interaction’ (Bartlett, 2007: 53) contrasts with the notions of a fixed and static identity, common within the dominant literacy and development paradigm.

Literacy and Economics

The economist’s interest in literacy is much more instrumental. It is literacy that provides the foundation for acquiring human capital, and human capital is, in turn, the mainspring of

sustained economic growth and the enhancement of wellbeing. The arrival of new growth theories, with human capital as the pivot, has raised the status of literacy and education in mainstream economics (Romer, 1986; Lucas, 1988). With the economist's interest in dynamics, what caught the attention of the profession was the fact that the impact of enhanced education of a person or a couple carries over from one generation to another. And conversely illiteracy and the lack of education can also go cascading down generations. Illiteracy in one generation means poverty for that generation, which in turn means an inability to educate the children, thereby giving rise to another generation of illiterate adults and the cycle is ready to be repeated, trapping a whole dynasty in low human capital (Galor and Zeira, 1993). There is evidence that the proneness to child labour (which in most situations is synonymous with child illiteracy) tends to run along dynasties. A detailed empirical study using Brazilian data shows that child labour, like a legacy, gets handed over from parents to their children (Emerson and Souza, 2003).

These are important directions of inquiry but they limit the value of literacy to that of an instrument. A small literature which tried to place literacy on a more central pedestal - as worth striving towards because of its innate worth, for what it is or does to us directly, by enriching our lives and enhancing our capabilities - began with Sen (1985), echoing prominent writers of the nineteenth century, notably, John Stuart Mill, and has grown in importance.

Given the significance of literacy, instrumental or otherwise, and the recognition that this is one area where human beings may not be able to judge the full worth of it to themselves, economists of all hues tend to agree on the need to have some state or community intervention to encourage the spread of literacy. But there is another reason for this, to wit, the externalities of literacy, namely that one person's literacy can have an impact on another's welfare. Hence, an individual's computation of the costs and benefits of literacy may not capture the full social value of it. This recognition has in turn given rise to important questions concerning how literacy ought to be measured and the channels through which these externalities traverse.

It is the latter that has given rise to an occasion for interaction between economists and anthropologists. Whereas much of the economics literature has been content to treat the externalities as material benefits and confined to the household, this new research has naturally led to troubling questions about the precise nature of the benefits and the routes - the capillaries of kith, kin and community - through which the benefits travel from one person to another. These issues have been investigated in a small recent literature (see, for instance, Basu and Foster, 1998; Basu et al., 2002; Dutta, 2004; Gibson, 2001; Valenti, 2002; Subramanian, 2004), represented in the present volume by the papers of Vegard Iversen and Richard Palmer-Jones, and of Subramanian.

While the measurement literature confined attention to externalities of one member in the household on another, ethnographic studies quickly showed up other routes through which the externalities of literacy could course. For an illiterate married woman in Bangladesh it can be important whether or not her brother happens to be literate (Maddox, 2007a). The measurement of the effects of literacy may be a preserve of economics but the *routes* of externality clearly belongs to the anthropologist. To leave both tasks to either discipline is to forgo the benefits of specialisation. To leave the two tasks to the two groups to work on in isolation is to lose out on the benefits of cross-fertilisation. The chapters in this volume are meant to get this conversation going.

The Terrain and the Agenda

In both the terminology and concepts highlighted in its title (literacies, identities and social change), this collection could be seen as setting an anthropological agenda for researchers from other disciplines. This edited book originated in an international research seminar held by the Literacy and Development Group at the University of East Anglia in April 2006. The interdisciplinary seminar linked leading researchers in literacy from the fields of education, economics, anthropology and linguistics. The aim of the seminar was to extend theoretical understanding about the ways in which the acquisition and use of literacy impact on agency, identity and social practice. As well as formal presentation of papers, the seminar included workshops on some of the cross-cutting themes which appear in this volume: methodological challenges in literacy research, gendered identities and multi-literacies and multi-modality. Several of the papers explored the meanings given by anthropologists to the terms in the title of this volume (literacies, identities and social change) as a basis for engaging with researchers of literacy from other disciplines. A challenge for both the seminar and this book is to begin to develop a shared language or at least an understanding of how these key terms are used within other disciplinary discourses.

Several chapters – by both economists and anthropologists – are concerned with the assumed link between literacy and social change. Whereas within the economic discourse the focus is on the mechanisms and relationships influencing benefits and externalities, anthropologists are more interested in the processes of change as these relate to literacy and/or education. Through an analysis of how ‘the benefits of literacy’ have been conceptualised within the recent UNESCO Global Monitoring Report on Literacy, Anna Robinson-Pant looks directly at the interface between economists and anthropologists in the field of literacy and the implications for incorporating ethnographic research into a policy context. Recognising that the economists’ predominantly instrumental approach – where literacy has been discussed in terms of its direct ‘benefits’ - has had enormous influence on education and development policy and programmes, she suggests that ethnographers need to consider how policy makers can draw on their more complex understandings of multiple literacies and identities.

Continuing this focus on the benefits of literacy, the chapter by Vegard Iversen and Richard Palmer-Jones shows that who benefits whom depends a lot on who chooses whom, since marriage does not occur between randomly matched individuals, but is a matter of deliberate choice. So some of the externalities described in the earlier literature can have very different interpretations. They argue that the causation suggested by Basu (1999) casts some doubts on the causes suggested by Basu et al., (2002). Needless to add that the Basu in the latter paper is one of us and Basu (1999) is another person. Iversen and Palmer-Jones show, using household data from Bangladesh, that marriage selection can confound the study of benefit-sharing between husbands and wives in intriguing ways.

Subramanian’s chapter takes us away from the usual economist’s focus on material benefits to psychic externalities. This can turn the nature of externality around in interesting ways. Another person’s illiteracy can now enhance an illiterate person’s satisfaction through a ‘shared solidarity in the experience of a common predicament’. Subramanian then goes on to suggest some new approaches to measuring literacy, which are distribution-sensitive, and tracks the relation between vertical equity and psychological externality. This ‘cultural’ perspective suggests new insights into the dynamics of literacy sharing, and contextually

specific differences between different societies. It adds further economic relevance to the ethnographic sensitivity of context.

In the next part of the book, we look in more depth at the different dimension that an ethnographic perspective can offer in terms of unpacking, and perhaps complicating, the commonly assumed literacy–development equation. The chapters by Holland and Skinner, Zavala, Dyer, Kalman and Niño-Murcia explore processes of social change and challenge the policy perspective that participation in formal literacy and educational activities is unproblematically ‘empowering’ for all. Dorothy Holland and Debra Skinner discuss new literacy practices associated with the traditional songs sung by women at the Tij festival in Nepal. Taking the concept of the Tij songs as ‘cultural artifacts’ associated with literacy and education, they show how these ‘open up figured worlds’ for the women who sing of their hopes for the future. The introduction of new ‘rajniti’ (political) songs based on published texts, however, led to division between educated and non-educated women within the social movements, as non-literate women felt increasingly disempowered by the changes taking place.

From a starting point that how literacy ‘intersects with notions of development’ is more complex than generally perceived, Caroline Dyer gives an in-depth account of how ideas of development are changing in relation to schooling and adult literacy in a nomadic community in Western India. Through analysing the increasing influence on the Rabaris of the dominant local discourses around development as sedentarisation, Dyer shows how their preferred forms of education both reinforced and reflected their ideas about what development is: experimental mobile literacy programmes were seen as keeping them ‘in the jungle’ whereas schools carried more symbolic status, being sedentary and associated with ‘being educated’. Like Holland and Skinner, Dyer demonstrates how those with access to ‘schooled literacy’ (in this case, the community leaders) begin to dominate decision-making processes which then marginalise the uneducated.

Catherine Kell draws on ethnographic research with communities involved in struggles around housing in South Africa to explore questions around literacy mediation and agency. Rather than assuming that the site of literacy mediation is the household – or even across households – Kell looks at mediation across wider social units. Her account reveals how the groups involved in this social movement viewed literacy as a ‘distributed capacity’, and that meaning making took place not just through written texts such as memos and plans, but through ‘a wider range of mediational means like physical occupations of sites’. This discussion of textually-mediated and practice-mediated resources suggests an alternative approach to that often taken by economists for conceptualising how ‘literacy benefits’ are distributed and negotiated within and between groups.

Through the case study of a bilingual Quechua- and Spanish-speaking woman in Peru, Virginia Zavala reveals the gap between the kind of everyday literacy events that people like Rosa participate in, and the types of literacy promoted by the state programmes. The National Literacy Program takes a deficit approach to adult learners – assuming that once they have learned to read and write, they will be better able to participate in development activities. By contrast, Zavala describes how women strengthen family bonds with their daughters who have left home by sending *encomiendas* (a package of food with a letter and notes reminding them how to use the various foodstuffs). The letters play an important part in sustaining relationships with distant relatives, even if the sender or recipient has to rely on others to actually read or write them. Zavala’s chapter gives a clear insight into how the dominant literacy–development discourse (see Robinson-Pant’s critique of its ‘instrumental’

nature) influences practice and promotes very different uses of literacy, as compared to the *encomienda* and its association with ‘affect’.

Still in Peru, Mercedes Niño-Murcia’s ethnographic research offers us an insight into gendered literacy practices in a community in the high Andes. Whereas women have always been involved in writing in the domestic environment, it was only with the development of non-kinship-based organisations that they were able to challenge the traditional assumption that, in the public domain, literacy was ‘not for women’. Niño-Murcia analyses the ‘new space of literacy’ offered by women’s organisations such as the Mothers’ Guild. Drawing on the notion of gender performativity, she analyses the women’s oral and written texts to explore how their agency has been expressed and transformed through this collective action. Niño-Murcia’s account of the interaction between changing gender ideologies and literacy practices within this community ends with a strong argument against the tendency to regard identity as fixed and static and to essentialise women’s and men’s differences, particularly in relation to language.

The chapter by Kalman also contributes insights into vernacular literacy practices, providing an in-depth discussion of literacy mediation in Mexico. The chapter adopts a situated perspective, noting the role of literacy mediators as ‘partners’ in literacy learning and practice. Like the chapter by Subramanian, Kalman’s chapter highlights the significance of cultural and institutional values and practices in influencing not only the literacy environment, but people’s access to literacy. Her discussion of *convivencia* in the Mexican context describes the significance of human relationships in processes of literacy mediation. This, as Kalman argues, has implications for how we research and evaluate classroom-based literacy learning and wider conceptions of competence.

Finally, an effort to bring the methods of economists and ethnographers together to answer some key questions that neither discipline is able to respond to on its own occurs in the chapter by Bryan Maddox included in this volume. Take the critical question of causality between literacy and poverty reduction and other kinds of social and economic change. Economists with their large data sets usually do not manage to go much beyond establishing correlations. Anthropologists and ethnographers, on the other hand, find it difficult to go beyond their specific case studies. Maddox argues that combining insights from both disciplines does enable us to go further and allows us to claim that literacy is not merely a concomitant of social and economic change but has ‘causal capacity’. Maddox’s chapter also discusses how literacy is used in multiple ways across different cultural and institutional contexts, and the critical role of literacy in the production of identity and agency. Given the new interest among economists with questions of identity and the deep implications this has for the very foundations of methodological individualism, this is a topic that can potentially play a role in promoting multi-disciplinary social science and help us gain new insights.

Street’s closing ‘Afterword’ points to some of the ways in which future policy could valuably reflect the debates and concepts interrogated in this book through the interaction of economists and anthropologists.

Taken as a whole, then, this book combines disciplinary strengths and interdisciplinary collaboration to suggest ways to develop a more rigorous and extensive theory of literacy and development. To that extent the book ought to be viewed as not so much a statement of concluded research as an outline of a research agenda.

References

- Bartlett, L. (2007) To seem and to feel: situated identities and literacy practices. *Teachers College Record*, 109, (1), pp. 51–69 (Columbia University).
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (1998) *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (Routledge: London).
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (2000) Literacy practices, in: D. Barton, M. Hamilton and R. Ivanic (eds) *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context* (London: Routledge).
- Basu, A. M. (1999) Women's education, marriage and fertility in South Asia: do men really not matter? in: C. H. Bledsoe, J. B. Casterline, J. A. Johnson-Kuhn and J. G. Haaga (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press).
- Basu, K. and Foster, J. (1998) On measuring literacy. *Economic Journal*, 108(451), pp. 1733–1749.
- Basu, K., Narayan, A. and Ravallion, M. (2002) Is literacy shared within households? Theory and Evidence from Bangladesh. *Labour Economics*, 8, pp. 649–665.
- Brandt, D. and Clinton, K. (2006) Afterword, in: K. Pahl and J. Rowsell (eds) *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of Practice* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters).
- Collins, J. and Blot, R. (2003) *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Dutta, I. (2004) Generalized measures of literacy. *Mathematical Social Science*, 48, pp. 69–80.
- Emerson, P. and Souza, A. (2003) Is there a child-labor trap? Inter-generational persistence of child labor in Brazil. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 51, pp. 375–398.
- Galor, O. and Zeira, J. (1993) Income distribution and macroeconomics. *Review of Economic Studies*, 60.
- Gee, J. (2000) The New Literacy Studies: from the 'socially situated' to the work of the social, in: D. Barton, M. Hamilton and R. Ivanic (eds) *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context* (London: Routledge).
- Gibson, J. (2001) Literacy and intrahousehold externalities. *World Development*, 29(1), pp. 155–166.
- Goody, J. (1968) *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Goody, J. (1986) *The Logic of Writing and the Organisation of Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Goody, J. (1999) The implications of literacy, in: D. Wagner, R. Venezky and B. V. Street (eds) *Literacy: An International Handbook* (Colorado: Westview Press).
- Goody, J. and Watt, I. (1968) The consequences of literacy, in: J. Goody (ed.) *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Hamilton, M. (2001) Privileged literacies: policy, institutional process and the life of the IALS. *Language and Education*, 15, pp. 178–196.
- Jackson, C. (2002) Disciplining gender. *World Development*, 30 (3).
- Kanbur, R. and Riles, A. (2004) And never the twain shall meet? An exchange on the strengths and weaknesses of anthropology and economics in analyzing the commons. Working Paper for the project on 'Conversations between Anthropologists and Economists', Cornell University.
- Kanbur, R. and Shaffer, P. (2007) Epistemology, normative theory and poverty analysis: implications for Q-squared in Practice. *World Development*, 35, (2), pp. 183–196.
- Lucas, R.E. (1988) On the mechanics of economic growth. *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 22, pp. 3–22.
- Maddox, B. (2007a) Worlds apart? Ethnographic reflections on 'effective literacy' and intrahousehold externalities. *World Development*, 35(3), pp. 532–541.
- Maddox, B. (2007b) What can ethnographic studies tell us about the consequences of literacy? *Comparative Education*, 43(2), pp. 253–271.
- Ong, W. (1982) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen).
- Pahl, K. and Rowsell, J. (2006) Introduction, in: K. Pahl and J. Rowsell (eds) *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of Practice* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters).

- Prinsloo, M. and Breier, M. (eds) (1996) *The Social Uses of Literacy: Case Studies from South Africa* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins).
- Riles, A. (ed.) (2006) *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press).
- Romer, P. (1986) Increasing returns and long-run growth. *Journal of Political Economy*, 94, pp. 1002-1037.
- Scribner, M. and Cole, S. (1981) *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Sen, A.K. (1985) *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North-Holland).
- Sen, A.K. (1999) *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Street, B.V. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Street, B.V. (1999) The meanings of literacy, in: D. Wagner, R. Venezky and B. V. Street (eds) *Literacy: An International Handbook* (Colorado: Westview Press).
- Street, B.V. (2003) What's 'new' in the New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, Summer.
- Street, B.V. (2008) New literacies, new times, in: B. V. Street and N. Hornberger (eds) *Encyclopaedia of Language and Education, Vol. 2, Literacy* (New York: Springer).
- Subramanian, S. (2004) Measuring literacy: some extensions of the Basu-Foster framework. *Journal of Development Economics*, 73, pp. 453-464.
- Valenti, P. (2002) Should we be concerned about the distribution of literacy across households? An axiomatic investigation. *CAE Working Paper*. Cornell University, October.

‘Why Literacy Matters’:¹ Exploring A Policy Perspective on Literacies, Identities and Social Change

ANNA ROBINSON-PANT

University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

I. Introduction

This article looks at the methodological implications of bringing what has been termed an ‘ethnographic perspective’ (Street, 2001a) on literacies, identities and social change, into the international policy discourse on education and development. Last year, I was part of a group commissioned to write a set of background papers on the ‘benefits of literacy’ for the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report (GMR) on Education for All 2006, *Literacy for Life* (UNESCO, 2005).² This experience gave us – as a group of ethnographic researchers – the opportunity to reflect on how and

whether ethnographic insights can be translated into a policy context. In writing this paper, I am aware that these debates are not new. Since the 1980s when anthropologists began to be employed by development agencies as ‘problem solvers’ (Mosse 1998: 14), there has been critical examination of the contribution of ethnographers to project appraisal (Pottier, 1993) and monitoring of impact (Mosse et al., 1998), as well as questions around their role as development actors within or outside (as consultants) aid institutions (Gardner and Lewis, 1996; Grillo and Stirrat, 1997). With the move away from project-based approaches to development, it has sometimes remained easier for anthropologists to work outside or to critique policy discourses than to focus on the challenge of integrating ethnographic approaches within development policy. Through analysing a recent policy document, this article explores ways in which ethnographic literacy researchers could engage more directly with policy discourse. My paper builds on insights from the 1990s literature cited above concerning the role of anthropologists in development but my focus differs from those analyses of anthropologists working within the bounded context of a project. I also draw on my own experiences of conducting ethnographic research on adult literacy in Nepal.

Mosse (2004: 641) distinguishes between two opposing views of development policy – the ‘instrumental view of policy as rational problem solving’ and the ‘critical view that sees policy as a rationalising discourse concealing hidden purposes of bureaucratic power or dominance, in which the true political intent of development is hidden behind a cloak of rational planning’. The polarisation of these two views has, in Mosse’s view, ‘blocked the way for a more insightful ethnography of development capable of opening up the implementation black box . . .’ (Mosse, 2004: 643). Mosse suggests that ‘the critical turn in the anthropology of development is also an ethnographic blind alley, which merely replaces the instrumental rationality of policy with the anonymous automaticity of the machine’ (Mosse, 2004: 644). Although my current paper is concerned more with the production of policy texts (including policy-commissioned research) than with the implementation of policy, Mosse’s model of ‘instrumental’ and ‘critical’ views of policy can provide a way of conceptualising the contrasting literacy research approaches discussed in this paper in relation to UNESCO’s *Literacy for Life* report. Whereas our group could be seen to adopt a ‘critical’ view on literacy, identities and social change – and might be accused by some of going down an ‘ethnographic blind alley’ (Mosse, 2004) – the UNESCO report writing team held a predominantly ‘instrumental’ view of literacy policy. This article looks at how policy makers and ethnographers could avoid adopting these polarised approaches to research and policy: aiming to open up a space for exploring how ethnographers can work more effectively within a development policy context in terms of contributing to literacy policy and practice.

II. Ethnographic Research in a Policy Arena: What is the Problem?

From an ethnographer’s point of view, the difficulties lie partly in the kind of data collected and how to make this accessible, yet still meaningful, in short policy documents. Pottier cites some of the commonly-heard complaints about anthropologists working on project appraisal: ‘they are too slow when writing up results or too elaborate on cultural issues; and they are at times unable or unwilling to

communicate their knowledge' (Pottier, 1993: 15). For researchers seeking to incorporate ethnographic data into a policy briefing document, this can translate into a practical dilemma around how to avoid simplifying lengthy ethnographic analysis into bullet points or generalising statistically from tiny unrepresentative samples. This can be illustrated by Oxenham and Aoki's paper, 'Including the 900 million plus' (Oxenham and Aoki, 2002) which attempted to extract data from small-scale ethnographic studies to make generalised claims for the effectiveness of literacy interventions across a range of continents. An alternative strategy was adopted by UNESCO's *Literacy for Life* report. Rather than trying to summarise ethnographic material, the report cites ethnographic studies in footnotes (see, for instance, the list of 'New Literacy Studies' research in note 29, pp. 205) as a source of evidence for the analysis, thus avoiding the need to extract specific findings or case studies from their original context.

However, the greater challenge for ethnographers lies in the different kind of questions that policy makers seek answers for.³ The danger is that by attempting to answer the policy/research question in a different way – for instance, presenting case studies of people who are 'illiterate' but have succeeded in community leadership roles or economic activities – the ethnographic researcher can end up by undermining literacy advocacy efforts in policy arenas. The starting point – and undisputed assumption – for many policy discussions is that literacy (or schooling) is a 'good thing' and the terms are often used synonymously with 'education' (Robinson-Pant, 2004).⁴ By problematising 'literacy' and presenting evidence that literacy (and schooling) interventions do not always lead to greater equality or positive social change (see Holland and Skinner, 2008), the researcher can be seen as the opposing voice in a policy debate that is polarised around evidence 'for' (or against⁵) literacy. A further dimension of adult literacy policy debates (unlike discussions about schooling) is that there is an additional 'either'/'or'. If adult literacy is not seen to be 'effective' as an investment for governments, the alternative is to continue prioritising children's education over adults, as happened in the 1990 Jomtien 'Education for all' meetings.

The title of the Global Monitoring Report, *Literacy for Life*, signals the instrumental view of literacy promoted by many policy documents. As Rogers has pointed out, the title 'seems to imply wrongly that one cannot have one (i.e. life) without the other (i.e. literacy)' (Rogers, 2006: 13). In the context of our group's commissioned background papers for the Global Monitoring Report – to synthesise existing research on the social, political, cultural, human and economic benefits of literacy – we found ourselves constrained by these initial assumptions of a simple correlation between input (literacy) and output (social, cultural, economic benefits). Though we were invited to amend the UNESCO terms of reference to some extent (for instance, to suggest that we could not treat 'social' and 'cultural' benefits as discrete but would aim to analyse the overlap between these categories), we found our greater challenge was how to problematise the whole concept of 'benefits' within a policy context which was framed by the notion of literacy (and education) as a common undisputed good. This became particularly apparent in relation to 'cultural' benefits where enhanced access to texts that opposed the dominant Western development ideologies could be classed as negative social change, rather than a 'benefit'.

In this article, I will look at how the argument, ‘Why literacy matters’⁶ has influenced the structure of *Literacy For Life* as a whole and made it difficult to incorporate evidence that sometimes literacy ‘doesn’t matter’. By analysing how the concepts of literacy, identity and social change are used in the report, I aim to explore how ethnographic understandings (not least of the plurality and dynamic nature of these concepts – ‘identities’ as compared to ‘identity’) could contribute more fully to policy debates, without undermining the report’s important advocacy role in terms of mobilising global support and resources for adult literacy.

III. Meanings of Literacy in *Literacy For Life*

Within the report as a whole, I identify tensions resulting from an acknowledgement of the wider meanings of literacy (and literacies) and the need to develop an unambiguous argument that ‘literacy matters’ in order to mobilise greater resources. In chapter 6, ‘Understandings of literacy’, the ‘evolution’ of conceptual meanings is mapped out, including ‘literacy as skills’, ‘literacy as applied, practised and situated’, ‘literacy as a learning process’ and finally, ‘literacy as text’ and then links these concepts to literacy policy developments in the ‘international community’ (UNESCO, 2005: 153). Although the report’s authors appear to support the understandings of literacy influenced by the New Literacy Studies (including multiple literacies, a continuum between literacy and orality, concepts of literacy events and practices⁷), there are indications of a quite different discourse within the same chapter.

We need to bear in mind that the *Literacy for Life* report was written by a team, which could account for many of the contradictions and the absence of an explicit ideological stance in several areas. However, the report’s key role in ‘monitoring progress’ against the Education For All (EFA) goals, is also part of the reason why there has to be a push towards the ‘literacy as skills’ definition. Taking a ‘situated’⁸ definition of literacy would imply that we need to develop a more complex measure of ‘literacy’ than the literacy rates upon which the EFA goals are based. After theoretical discussion of the differing meanings of literacy and analysing their influence on the donor agencies (‘the international community’), the report moves on to relate these to the national country contexts. The report’s Table 6.1 (*Literacy for Life*, pp. 157) (see Figure 1) is entitled ‘National definitions of literacy and illiteracy’ and presents various countries’ definitions according to the following categories: ‘ability to read easily or with difficulty a letter or a newspaper’, ‘ability to read and write simple sentences’, ‘school attainment by increasing levels of attainment’ and ‘other definitions’. Rather than continuing the discussion about ‘understandings of literacy’, this table moves us into the conventional skills-based model and what we are looking at here is actually ‘understandings of being literate’.

The table is not actually about national definitions of literacy, but about how various countries define a ‘literate’ person as compared to an ‘illiterate’. The ‘great divide’ between literate and illiterate (see Goody, 1968), and the emphasis on quantitative measurement (particularly under the ‘school attainment’ definition) indicate that this table has been constructed around what has been termed an ‘autonomous’ model of literacy (Street, 1984). This is not surprising, given that most national literacy programmes are based on that model, and that the aim of the report

<p>'Ability to read easily or with difficulty a letter or a newspaper'</p> <p>Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Madagascar, Myanmar, the Republic of Moldova, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Suriname, Swaziland, Togo, Zambia</p>		
<p>Language criteria</p>	<p>Ability to read and write simple sentences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No mention of language: Algeria, Bahrain (illiterate: 'persons who cannot read or write, as well as persons who can read only, for example a person who studied the Koran'), Belarus, Bulgaria, Macao (China), Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Honduras, Lesotho, Malta, Mauritius, Mexico, Nicaragua, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan • Ability to read and write simple sentences in specified languages: Argentina, Azerbaijan (literacy is acceptable in any language having written form), Cameroon (in French or English, for those aged 13 and above), Lao PDR, Malawi, Mauritania (in the language specified), Niger, Sri Lanka (in Sinhalese, Tamil and English), the Syrian Arab Republic (in Arabic), Turkey (for Turkish citizens: in current Turkish alphabet; for non-citizens: in native language) • Ability to read and write in any language: Benin, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Croatia, Iran (Islamic Republic of) (in Farsi or any other language), Maldives (in 'Dhivehi, English, Arabic, etc.), Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestinian Autonomous Territories, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Saudi Arabia (with allowance for blind reading by Braille), Senegal, Tonga, United Republic of Tanzania, Viet Nam 	
	<p>Age criteria</p> <p>Thailand (over 5); Armenia, Guatemala, India and Turkmenistan (over 7); El Salvador (over 10); Seychelles (over 12); Bolivia and Jordan (over 15)</p>	
<p>School attainment (by increasing levels of attainment)</p> <p>Estonia</p> <p>'No primary education, illiterate' was recorded for a person who had not completed the level corresponding to primary education and cannot, with understanding, both read and write a simple text on his/her everyday life at least in one language.</p>		
<p>Age criteria</p>	<p>Lithuania</p> <p>Literate (no formal schooling) is a person who does not attend school but can read (with understanding) and/or write a simple sentence on topics of everyday life.</p>	
	<p>Mali</p> <p>Illiterate is a person who never attend school even if that person can read and write.</p>	
<p>Ukraine</p> <p>[Literate] 'Those who have a definite level of education. For people who do not have education – reading or writing ability in any language or only reading ability.'</p>		
<p>School attainment (by increasing levels of attainment)</p> <p>[illiterate] 'Data on the number of persons who do not have formal education.'</p>		
<p>Language criteria</p>	<p>[Literate] 'Population 10 years and above who have been to school in any language.'</p>	
	<p>'Persons not having completed the first grade of general (primary, elementary) school have been considered as illiterate.'</p>	
<p>Age criteria</p>	<p>'Illiterate are defined as people aged 15+ who have not attained Grade 2.'</p>	
	<p>'Persons having completed more than three grades of primary school were considered literate. In addition, literate was a person without school qualification and with 1–3 grades of primary school, if he/she can read and write a composition (text) in relation to everyday life, i.e. read and write a letter, regardless of the language.'</p>	
<p>Language criteria</p>	<p>[Literate] 'Population at least having primary school.'</p>	
	<p>'As illiterate are considered those who have never been in school (organic illiterate) as well as those who have not finished the six years of primary education (functional illiterate).'</p>	
<p>Age criteria</p>	<p>Data submitted were based on 7 years of schooling.</p>	
	<p>'Illiterate: Persons who are 14+ years of age and have completed at most seven or eight years of primary education.'</p>	
<p>Language criteria</p>	<p>'Literate: primary level + secondary level + post-secondary level and people who read and write. Illiterates: people who read but cannot write and people who can neither read nor write.'</p>	
	<p>Other definitions</p> <p>China</p> <p>'In urban areas: literate refers to a person who knows a minimum of 2,000 characters. In rural areas: literate refers to a person who knows a minimum of 1,500 characters.'</p>	
<p>Age criteria</p>	<p>Namibia</p> <p>'[Literacy] The ability to write with understanding in any language. Persons who could read and not write were classified as non-literate. Similarly, persons who were able to write and not read were classified as non-literate.'</p>	
	<p>Singapore</p> <p>Literacy refers to a person's ability to read with understanding, eg a newspaper, in the language specified.</p>	
<p>Language criteria</p>	<p>Tunisia</p> <p>Literate is a person who know how to read and write at least one language.</p>	

Figure 1. National definition of literacy/illiteracy. *Source:* Reproduced with permission from UNESCO GMR team. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006. *Literacy for Life* (Paris: UNESCO), Table 6.1, pp. 157