

Recently, largely because of opportunities created by the Festival of Literacies, an innovative program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), I have found myself involved in some interesting discussions between researchers and literacy workers in Ontario about the New Literacy Studies.

(This article was peer-reviewed.)

by **Guy Ewing**

The NEW Literacy Studies:

a point of contact
between literacy
research and
literacy
work

"New Literacy Studies" is a name given to a line of research that has been developing in the last twenty years or so. Most of this work is in the tradition of ethnography, an approach to anthropological research designed to learn about social and cultural behaviour through unobtrusive, unstructured observation. Psychologists and linguists, as well as anthropologists, have been involved in this work. Some widely read examples of this work, which I list at the end of this article, are Heath (1983), Street (1984), Prinsloo and Breier (1996) and Barton and Hamilton (1998).

To a literacy worker like myself, this is exciting work, because it is research that a literacy worker can relate to, read and discuss. A literacy worker can relate to this research because, for the most part, its methodology focuses on unstructured, unfolding situations, not structured experiments. This methodology respects the integrity of social situations, creating a picture of adult literacy learning that we can all recognize. The research is readable, because it is about actual learning situations. It can be discussed because its assumptions are familiar to literacy workers, and shared by many who work in the literacy field. The two main assumptions that underlie this work are not strange to the discourse of literacy workers. The first assumption is that literacy practices are socially embedded, and so cannot be understood in isolation. The second shared assumption



follows from the first: that the object of literacy studies is "literacies" in their various social situations, not an unrealized abstraction called "literacy".

If literacy is a set of practices within a social network, a community, then it must be learned within a community.

That literacy practices are socially embedded is a familiar, recurring theme in the discourse of literacy workers. Here, in an article by Jean Connon Unda, is a recent incarnation of this view.

Take, for example, an accident report form. It is part of Canada's Workers' Compensation system. Being able to fill out this form entails much more than simply decoding the words on the page and writing words in the blank spaces. In fact, to really grasp the significance of the accident report form, workers need to know quite a bit about how the Workers' Compensation system works. For example, we need to know what specialized terms mean within that system; what the procedures and rules are, and the nature of our rights and obligations. Only then can we complete the form effectively and gain access to our rights in the system. *Our Times*, August/September, 2001.

Recognizing the diversity of literacy practices entails letting go of fixed notions of good reading strategies and bad reading strategies.

Similarly, the assumption of "literacies" is familiar to literacy workers. This assumption gets validated by the multiplicity of ways in which adult literacy learners integrate written language into their lives. For some learners, literacy means being able to work in an office. For some, it means being able to write letters to their children. For some, it means being able to sign their names. Working with people who are discovering how to integrate written language into their lives, literacy workers will not be surprised by the idea that literacy cannot be generally and abstractly defined.

So the New Literacy Studies have given us research that literacy workers can relate to, read and discuss.

We can discuss this research among ourselves. Even more exciting, we should be able to discuss this research with the researchers themselves. There are differences between how researchers and literacy workers use language to talk about adult literacy learning, and differences of purpose in talking about adult literacy learning, but, given the methodology of the New Literacy Studies, and assumptions that are recognizable and sensible to literacy workers, it should be possible to overcome these differences.

Given the real possibility of dialogue between literacy workers and New Literacy researchers, literacy workers will be able to use the New Literacy research to clarify and further develop models for literacy work. New Literacy researchers will, in turn, benefit from accounts of literacy learning by literacy workers and from ideas by literacy workers about how the New Literacy Studies might apply to their work.

I would like to engage in this dialogue here by discussing models of literacy work that I think are supported by the New Literacy Studies. I will discuss three features that I think such models will have.

Further dialogue

Future issues of the journal will include sidebars like this one, which will attempt to further dialogue between research and practice. These sidebars will include:

- links to further information about the issue being discussed,
- commentaries which help to interpret the ideas or practices described in the article, or
- invitations to participate in on-line discussions about the topic.

When we printed this issue, our on-line version of the journal was not finished. We will have on-line discussions linked to articles in the fall of 2003. In the meantime, visit our web site to join our discussion of what "counts" as research. Here is our web site: www.literacyjournal.ca.

More...

If you would like to read more about the ideas in this article, try "Sustainable Literacies and the Ecology of Lifelong Learning", by Mary Hamilton. It is available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/lifelong-learning/papers/index.html>.

Models for literacy work that are supported by the New Literacy Studies

(1) Bringing communities into programs

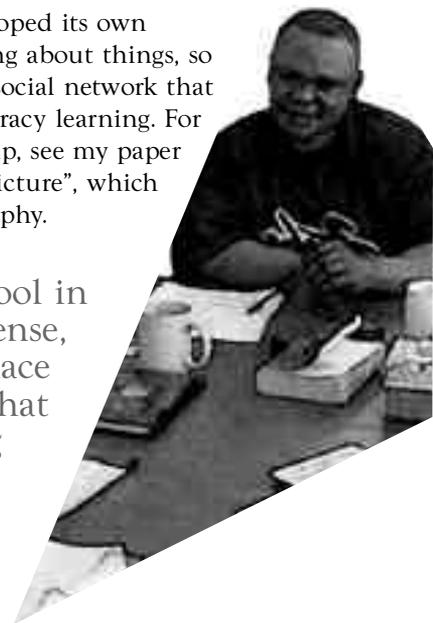
I think that literacy work supported by the New Literacy Studies will ensure that literacy learners are supported by a social network with its own uses of written language. If literacy is a set of practices within a social network, a community, then it must be learned within a community. A literacy program must be more than a place where one can learn the technical skills required for using written language. It must help literacy learners bring their communities into the programs, so that the uses of written language they are learning can be sustained by those communities. If a learner comes from an immigrant community, the cultural perspectives, daily realities and uses of language within that community must be welcome in the literacy program. If a learner comes from a social housing project in Toronto, where he has lived all his life, that reality must also be welcome. What the New Literacy Studies tell us is that bringing the realities of communities into literacy programs is not just a matter of tolerance, it is an essential condition for literacy learning.

The New Literacy Studies have given literacy workers research that we can relate to, read and discuss.

Because the environment in which I work, Toronto, is a multicultural environment, learners bring a variety of cultural perspectives and potential social networks to any given literacy program or literacy class. To some extent, literacy programs and literacy classes become meeting places for cultures. They also become places where communities are forged between people from different cultures, based on the Canadian social realities which they share. In the small group that I facilitated at Parkdale Project Read in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, we built our learning of written language on discussions about issues of health and housing, issues for the people in that group. The writing and reading that the learners did grew out of common understandings and common uses of language that came from the communities of the participants, but also through discussion in the small group. The small group allowed itself to be congruent with the communities of the learners, so that the uses of written language that were being learned could be supported by the realities of those communities. At the

same time, the group developed its own language and ways of talking about things, so that it became part of the social network that sustained each learner's literacy learning. For more detail about this group, see my paper "Small Groups in the Big Picture", which is included in my bibliography.

This was not school in the traditional sense, but a meeting place of communities that was also forging some common understandings out of its diverse realities.



In the literacy class that I taught in the Jane/Wilson neighbourhood in Toronto, the communities were different. The participants in the small group in Parkdale were people from the Caribbean, displaced Maritimers and people from Northern Ontario. In Jane/Wilson, the students were mainly from Somalia, Italy, South America, the Caribbean, West Africa and Northern Ontario. The "class" was a place of creative chaos. People talked with each other in their cultural groups, then came together for boisterous arguments about crime in the neighbourhood, war in the world and how best to help children cope with Canadian schools. The reading and writing that learners did revolved around these common themes. This was not school, in the traditional sense, but a meeting place of communities that was also forging some common understandings out of its diverse realities, and using written language (as well as oral discussion) to do this.

Bringing the realities of communities into programs is not just a matter of tolerance, it is an essential condition for literacy learning.

A visitor to either the small group in Parkdale or the class in Jane/Wilson might have thought that we were spending too much time talking, and that there was not enough order and direction in what we did. But, from the results, I know that the openness of both of these learning environments allowed for congruence between the learners' lives in their communities and

the development of literacy practices, including the most technical aspects of literacy practices, like spelling and sounding out words. The learners' achievements in both of these learning environments were astounding. Books were written, people took control of their health, people became community activists, people got jobs, and people went on to adult high school and community college.

The New Literacy Studies not only suggest some useful directions for literacy work, they also invite questions, challenges, and deeper analysis.

The New Literacy Studies provide an explanation for the success of this approach. By being open to communities, and by forging community alliances within learning environments, the small group at Parkdale and the class in Jane/Wilson facilitated the learning of literacy practices that were congruent with learners' lives in their communities. This allowed all of the wisdom and language of the communities to support their developing literacy practices. They were not just learning technical skills, they were learning literacy practices with their own social networks. These networks provided a constant support, or scaffolding, for their efforts as they struggled to master the technical aspects of putting their ideas and their language into written English.

A detailed analysis of how social scaffolding might work is outlined in a recent unpublished paper, "Literacy as Local Practices and Social Relations", by Richard Darville of Carleton University. The books listed at the end of this article also describe the variety of literacy practices supported in different communities. *Ways with Words* by Shirley Brice Heath describes the literacy practices in different groups in one part of the southern

United States: rural white people, rural black people, and townspeople, both white and black. *Literacy in Theory and Practice* by Brian Street describes two literacies supported by one community in northeastern Iran. *The Social Uses of Literacy*, edited by Mastin Prinsloo and Mignon Breier, presents studies of literacies in South Africa. *Local Literacies* by David Barton and Mary Hamilton describe the everyday literacy practices of working class people of Lancaster, in northern England.

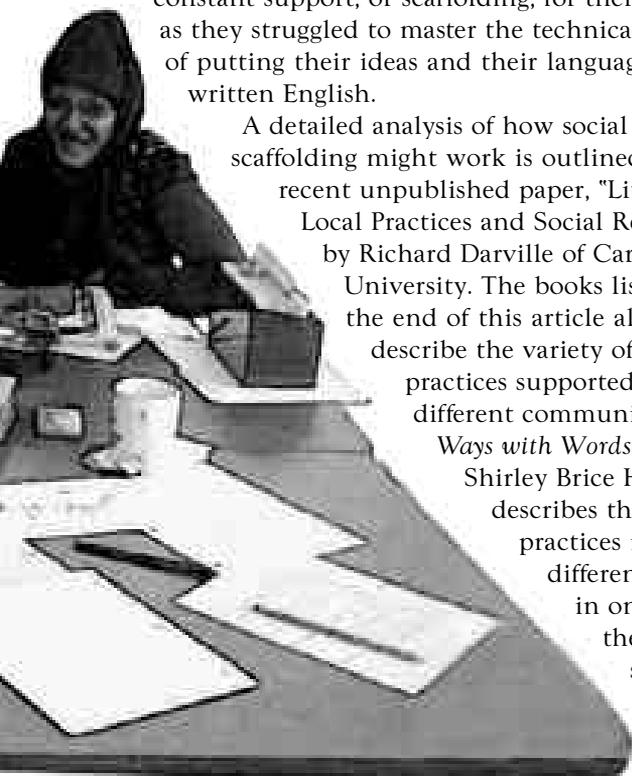
There are many ways of bringing this scaffolding into a literacy program. The point is not to have one model for doing this, but to develop various models. But the New Literacy Studies teach us that, if the scaffolding is not in place, literacy learning will be hard. There is a particularly poignant story in a paper by Catherine Kell, "Literacy Practices in an Informal Settlement in the Cape Peninsula", in *The Social Uses of Literacy*. Winnie Tsotso, a community activist who, in spite of her limited ability to decode words, had taught herself how to use written language to help members of her community in complex interactions with government agencies, decided to go back to school. There she sat, in a night school classroom, writing her name over and over again. The community that had sustained her literacy learning was gone in the classroom, and she was alone with technical tasks that did not build on her community experience, but which made her a child again.

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Like individuals and their
communities, it can adapt and grow.

(2) Encouraging people to invent literacy practices

A second feature of the kinds of literacy work supported by the New Literacy Studies is that they should encourage people to invent literacy practices. Clearly, Winnie Tsotso was not decoding all of those government forms in the standard way. She had developed her own strategies for deriving meaning from written language.

At various times, most adult literacy learners need to do this. Some, like Winnie, have needs for information that outstrip their ability to process written information in the usual way, so they develop methods of their own: for example, relying on position on the page, initial letters, key words. Some have learning disabilities that will make it



They were not just learning technical skills, they were learning literacy practices with their own social networks.

impossible for them to process written information in standard ways. They also develop methods on their own: tricks to make up for faulty visual memory, ways of using technology, like computer text readers, to support their use of written language. Many adult literacy learners develop temporary strategies that help them at particular points in their learning. For example, it is common for learners who are starting to learn how to sound out larger words to look for "words within words", small written words like *can* and *date* that appear as written and spoken syllables in larger words like *candidate*. Literacy workers often encourage them in this practice.

Several years ago, I was describing this practice of looking for "words within words" to a reading expert. She was horrified that this practice was being encouraged, on the grounds that this is not what skilled readers do. I tried to explain that adult literacy learners develop many practices along the way that may be non-functional for other readers, or that they will find to be non-functional as their reading changes. But recognizing the diversity of literacy practices, as the New Literacy Studies do, entails letting go of fixed notions of good reading strategies and bad reading strategies. Winnie Tsotso's reading strategies gave her literacy, something that, when she was sitting in night school learning standard practices, she temporarily lost. If a practice supports a learner's literacy needs and literacy learning needs, it should be supported by literacy workers. Only when it becomes a barrier to further learning can we think of this practice as limiting.

(3) Helping learners to adapt and expand their literacy practices

A third feature of models of literacy work supported by the New Literacy Studies is that they should help learners adapt and expand literacy practices. Literacy need not be static; like individuals and their communities, they can adapt and grow. Brian Street provides an example in *Literacy in Theory and Practice*.

He shows how merchants in northeastern Iran created new literacy practices by adapting features of what he calls *maktab literacy*, the literacy taught in religious schools, the *maktab*. In these schools, people studied the Koran and commentaries on the Koran. People's time in these schools varied, and not everyone who attended the *maktab* learned to read texts in their entirety.

"For some students their experience of the *maktab* may involve no more than learning to recite by rote whole passages of the Koran, often without 'reading' in the sense of 'cracking the phonemic code'. They would not necessarily be able to relate letters or clusters of letters to sounds if they encountered them in new contexts. They might become so familiar with the appearance of the book from which they had been taught passages that they would recognise and recite sections according to such mnemonics as the position of the passage on the page, the layout and style of the book and the use of headings . . ." (p. 133)

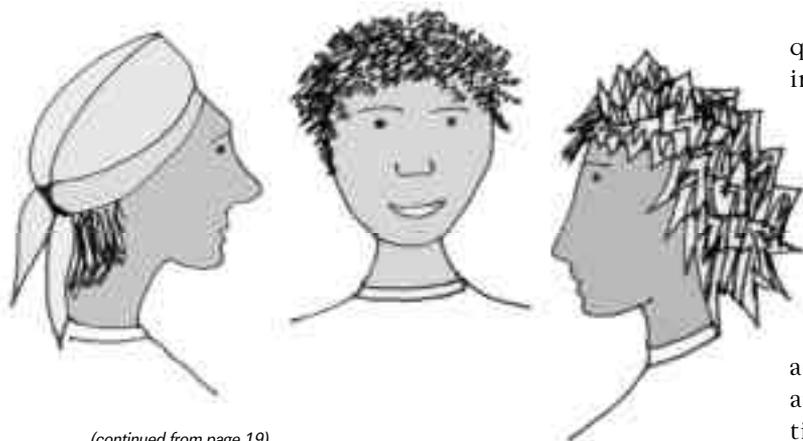
The position and layout were particularly important in the texts, as the Koran itself and the commentary on the Koran would be positioned differently on the page, and laid out differently. Position and layout also helped users retrieve particular passages as they thumbed through texts.

Building on the literacy practices supported by *maktab* literacy, merchants developed formats for recording and formalizing commercial exchanges that used position and layout to make

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information about quantities, prices, etc., clear to farmers and merchants alike. In this way, they created a whole new set of literacy practices that became essential to the economy of the area. Literacy practices had been adapted. The literacy practices of individuals had expanded. The society had changed.

The New Literacy Studies show us that once people learn a particular literacy they have tools to learn another. No literacy is limiting; all literacies are enabling. Like the people who had attended *maktab*, they have practices that they can use to new purposes. For example, a person may learn spelling and how to present ideas effectively by writing about her concerns about crime in Jane/Wilson, and presenting her ideas to a literacy class. She may then adapt those practices to writing business letters, and, more broadly, begin acquiring business literacy. (Or perhaps, like a literacy learner I once met, she may learn to write children's books.) Once a literacy has been learned, others can follow, and literacy workers can help learners grow through adaptation and further learning.

How literacy workers can contribute to the New Literacy Studies

As literacy workers refine and develop models of literacy work, they will encounter the stubborn details of what we mean by "literacies": how literacies are related to social networks in complex, multicultural settings; how individual practices can expand and reshape the shared practices of a social group; how a learner's knowledge of literacy practices is structured and restructured as new practices are learned; and how literacies combine and overlap, in individuals and in communities. These are just some issues that come to mind. The New Literacy Studies not only suggest some useful directions for literacy work, they also invite questions, challenges, and deeper analysis. These

questions, challenges and deeper analysis can be fueled, in part, by literacy workers as they try to understand how the assertions of the New Literacy Studies apply to their daily work.

There have been other times when it seemed that literacy workers and literacy researchers might work together, but these times did not seem as hopeful as the present time. At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the Festival of Literacies has brought literacy workers and researchers together to learn from each other, and has actually kept them talking for quite a long time now. A national literacy journal, bringing together literacy workers and researchers, is now a reality. It is a time of dialogue and mutual discovery, and the New Literacy Studies provide a good point of contact. ■

Guy Ewing is Executive Director of the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy. He has worked in the literacy field for twenty years, mostly as a front-line literacy worker. He is the author of *Don't Talk To Me About Vowels* and *The Reason I Joined This Program*, and has a long-standing interest in the relationship between knowledge and action.

Author's note:

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