Literacies, Identities and Social Change: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literacy and Development

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EDITORIAL

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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 that 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, 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 literacy in globalised material, institutional and bureaucratic cultures (Riles, 2006), in conceptions of schooling and citizenship, and in the analysis of inequality.

This collection of papers attempts to develop new understandings of the relationship between literacy, identities and social change through a process of inter-disciplinary 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 the 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 through an emphasis on the social mechanisms of collective practice and literacy mediation. Economists tend to take schooling participation rates as a proxy for literacy rates, ethnographers make a distinction between 'schooled' 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 (2004) 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' (Kanbur and Riles, 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 papers 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 papers also suggest the need for a more substantial and sustained process of inter-disciplinary research on the integration of a practice-based model of literacy in economics, and the socioeconomic 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' concerns 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). By 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 or of skills but as social practices that vary from one context to another' (Street, 2008: 3). A major contribution of the New Literacy Studies during the past 20 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, such as Prinsloo and Breier's (1996) account of taxi drivers and farm workers' literacy practices in a South African township; classrooms in schools, adult literacy programmes and universities; and, development programmes, anthropologists have developed understanding 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 indepth 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 to 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 have 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 plea 'to bring the ''thingness'' [or material technology] of literacy into an ideological model' (Brandt and Clinton, 2006: 256), has provided food for thought for many anthropologists in this field, as the papers 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. 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 within dynasties. A detailed empirical study using Brazilian data shows that a child, 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 that tried to place literacy on a more central pedestal – 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 recent literature (see, for instance, Basu and Foster, 1998; Gibson, 2001; Valenti, 2002; Basu et al., 2002; Dutta, 2004; Subramanian, 2004) and is represented in the present volume by the papers from Vegard Iversen and Richard Palmer-Jones, and from 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 travel. 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 forego 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 papers in this volume are intended to get this conversation begun.

The Terrain and the Agenda

In both the terminology and concepts highlighted in its title (literacies, identities and social change), this special issue could be seen as setting an anthropological agenda for researchers from other disciplines. This collection of papers originated in an international research seminar held by the Literacy and Development Group at the University of East Anglia in April 2006. The inter-disciplinary 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 impacts 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 special issue: 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 special issue (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 special issue is to begin developing a shared language or at least an understanding of how these key terms are used within other disciplinary discourses.

Several papers – 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 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 paper 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. (2001). Needless to say 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 paper 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.' He 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 this special issue, 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 papers by Holland and Skinner, Zavala, and Dyer explore the 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 from 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 indepth account of how ideas of development are changing in relation to schooling and adult literacy in a nomadic community in Western India. By 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, this paper 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.

Through the case study of Rosa, 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 Programme 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 paper 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 encomiendas and its association with 'affect'.

Finally, 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.

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

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