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The Social Basis of Literacy

- **An integrated view of literacy**

- Practices and events
- Literacies and domains
- Roles and networks
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An integrated view of literacy

Starting out from everyday activities involving literacy, in the first chapter I began to list the things which an integrated theory of literacy needs to include. To bring them together this approach starts out from three areas of enquiry: the social, the psychological and the historical. These are separate directions which people have come from in their work. They need to be interwoven in order to get an overview of what is involved in literacy. When bringing them together it soon becomes obvious that these are not really separable or distinct areas. For example, seeing literacy as a symbolic system immediately forces one to straddle the social and the psychological; it is a system for

representing the world to ourselves – a psychological phenomenon; at the same time it is a system for representing the world to others – a social phenomenon. To give another example of how these areas are interlinked, an integrated historical notion of literacy has an individual sense of a person's history along with the social sense of history as the development of the culture: bringing together these two senses can shed light on the process of learning.

The aim is to be able to say similar things when talking about literacy in relation to areas such as adults, children, history and different cultures, and when evaluating what parents, politicians and newspaper editors say about the topic. At the moment these areas remain separate and if they were to make contact, people in these different areas would realize that they often have contradictory ways of talking. Introducing the ecological metaphor also raises a new set of questions; I hope that it will provide new insights and suggest new and unexpected links.

To repeat, this approach starts from people's uses of literacy, not from their formal learning of literacy. It also starts from everyday life and from the everyday activities which people are involved in. It is important to stress that education has not been used as a starting-point, and by the time the discussion gets to schools and learning there will be a different view of what literacy is and what learning is. The examples I will be using in this chapter are mainly taken from a study of reading and writing in Lancaster, England which I have been involved in. It is entitled the Literacy in the Community Project, and has been a four-year study of the role of literacy in people's everyday lives, carried out mainly through interviews and detailed observation (for more information see Barton and Hamilton 1992a, 1992b). Now I will give an outline of the approach, grouped under a set of eight headings. This view of literacy starts, then, from everyday events. We need a social view of literacy which situates literate activities:

- 1 Literacy is a social activity and can best be described in terms of the literacy practices which people draw upon in literacy events.
- 2 People have different literacies which they make use of, associated with different domains of life. Examining different cultures or historical periods reveals more literacies.

- 3 People's literacy practices are situated in broader social relations. This makes it necessary to describe the social setting of literacy events, including the ways in which social institutions support particular literacies.
- 4 Literacy is based upon a system of symbols. It is a symbolic system used for communication and as such exists in relation to other systems of information exchange. It is a way of representing the world to others.

A literacy event is also embedded in our mental life; it forms and is formed by our awareness, intentions and actions. We need a psychological view of literacy:

- 5 Literacy is a symbolic system used for representing the world to ourselves. Literacy is part of our thinking. It is part of the technology of thought.
- 6 We have awareness, attitudes and values with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values guide our actions.

Any literacy event has a history, both at the personal and at the cultural level:

- 7 Literacy has a history. Our individual life histories contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards which the present is built upon. We change and as children and adults are constantly learning about literacy.
- 8 A literacy event also has a social history. Current practices are created out of the past.

In the remainder of this chapter I will go through this list in more detail, explaining it and making it more tangible with examples. I will deal with some of the topics here and point out where other longer ones form the basis of the later chapters.

- 1 Literacy is a social activity and can best be described in terms of the literacy practices which people draw upon in literacy events

The two terms **literacy practices** and **literacy events** need to be explained. The first basic unit of analysis is that of event; there are all sorts of occasions in everyday life where the written word has a role. We can refer to these as literacy events. Talking in terms of literacy events is necessary to describe how literacy is actually used in people's everyday lives. An obvious example of a literacy event is when an adult reads a story to a child at night. This is an interesting literacy event in that it is often a regular event with repeated patterns of interaction. Such events are important in understanding children's and adults' learning of literacy. The term is broader than this though and includes any activity which involves the written word; for some events, especially within education, the explicit purpose is learning, but for most literacy events this is not so. In people's everyday lives they can be involved in a wide range of literacy events. One man we worked with in the Lancaster study went fairly quickly from discussing the contents of a newspaper with a friend, to organizing his shopping, and taking a telephone message for his son who does not have a telephone — three quite different literacy events.

The notion of a literacy event has its roots in the sociolinguistic idea of speech events (this goes back at least to the work of Dell Hymes 1962). It is used in relation to literacy by Anderson et al. (1980) in a study of young children at home. They define a literacy event as being an occasion when a person 'attempts to comprehend or produce graphic signs', either alone or with others. Heath develops this, referring to literacy events generally as being 'when talk revolves around a piece of writing' (1983 p. 386). Elsewhere she defines literacy events as communicative situations 'where literacy has an integral role' (1984, p. 71). This is important in demonstrating that literacy has a role in so many communicative activities. In bringing up children at home and in teaching them in school there are often regular repeated events involving the written word, and it is useful to focus on these literacy events in order to understand more about how children learn to read and write. I will explore this in more depth in chapter 10, which is concerned with children's early literacy and in the

chapters following it. We will also see that in fact it is quite difficult to pin down what is and what is not a literacy event.

The point here is that in order to understand literacy it is important to examine particular events where reading and writing are used. Focusing on the particular is an integral part of an ecological approach; this is different from other approaches which place an emphasis on broad generalizations. An ecological approach to literacy is very cautious of the broad generalizations often associated with reading and writing. It starts out from a belief that it is necessary first to understand something within a particular situation before looking to generalities. This approach suggests certain research methodologies, such as ethnography, and rests on a particular theory of what knowledge is. Literacy is not simply a variable.

The second term which is useful is that of *literacy practices*. What do people mean by practices? There are common patterns in using reading and writing in a particular situation. People bring their cultural knowledge to an activity. It is useful to refer to these ways of using literacy as literacy practices. The term 'practices' is used in several disciplines and several researchers have applied the term directly to literacy, including the studies by Scribner and Cole and by Street which have been mentioned already. Scribner and Cole see the idea as central, and they discuss how practices can be seen as ways of using literacy which are carried from one particular situation to another similar situation (1981, pp. 234-8). Another way of thinking about it is to start from more general notions of social practices and to view literacy practices as being the social practices associated with the written word. This can help one to see how social institutions and the power relations they support structure our uses of written language.¹

Together, events and practices are the two basic units of analysis of the social activity of literacy. Literacy events are the particular activities where literacy has a role; they may be regular repeated activities. Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in a literacy event. For instance, in the example mentioned earlier of a man discussing the contents of the local paper with a friend, the two of them sitting in the living room planning a letter to the newspaper is a literacy event. In deciding who does what, where and when it is done, along with the associated ways of talking and the ways of writing, the two participants make use of their literacy practices.

- 2 People have different literacies which they make use of, associated with different domains of life.
These differences are increased across different cultures or historical periods

There is not one way of reading and writing, there is not one set of practices. An adult at home may be helping a child with homework, trying to understand a tax form, scanning through a local newspaper, writing a telephone message. Each of these involves very different literacy practices. To take a particular example, a man in our research is involved in a range of different sorts of literacy: he writes shopping lists and telephone messages; he uses the local library; he reads and discusses the newspaper. At the library he participates in many different practices: as well as reading books he flicks quickly through the newspapers, sometimes renews books for friends he has recommended the books to, but claims never to read the notices in the library. He sometimes looks up old newspapers to read about himself and people he knows. In his home he has few books but he does have a collection of books on local history, which he seems to use regularly. Involving quite different practices from a different domain of life, he is asked to write the occasional letter of reference for former work colleagues in the fire service.

Where these different practices cluster into coherent groups it is very useful to talk in terms of them as being **different literacies**. A literacy is a stable, coherent, identifiable configuration of practices such as legal literacy, or the literacy of specific workplaces. In multilingual situations different literacies will often be associated with different languages or different scripts.

These literacies are configurations of practices and it is worth saying a little here about how they relate to each other. There is not a single dimension on which they can be placed from simple to complex or from easy to difficult. It is important to move beyond the idea often implicit in literacy programmes for children and for adults of there being a simple dimension from basic to complex forms of literacy. Literacies do not exist on some scale starting with basic or simple forms and going on to complex or higher forms. So-called simple and complex forms of literacy are in fact different literacies serving

different purposes. They do not lead on from one to the other in any obvious way.²

Secondly, there is not a neat list of literacies. Although we do not want to end up with a closed taxonomy of literacies, it is nevertheless useful to identify different categories. Various suggestions have been made, and although they are often presented in pairs, such categories in fact are not usually polar opposites. To begin with, literacies are not equally valued. They vary in what purposes and whose purposes they serve. One distinction is between imposed uses of literacy and self-generated uses of literacy (see Barton 1991). This emphasizes the importance of purposes: sometimes these purposes are self-generated; at other times, such as filling in official forms, they are imposed from the outside. This relates to a distinction used by Brian Street (1993) between dominant literacies and vernacular literacies. Dominant literacies originate from the dominant institutions of society. Vernacular literacies have their roots in everyday life. Another possibility is indigenous versus imported literacies, used by Irvine and Elasser (1988) in their study of literacy teaching in the Caribbean. A different sort of dimension is that some literacies are creative, allowing possibilities for the writer, while others, like filling in forms and checking lists are constrained literacies, although in fact all literacies probably have creative and constraining aspects. A further possibility is Freire's distinction between domesticating and empowering uses of literacy mentioned earlier. There is no one clear set of categories for the recurrent configurations of written language. We will return to this when examining examples of texts in the next chapter.

Literacies are identified culturally as such. Different literacies are associated with different domains of life, such as home, school, church and work. There are different places in life where people act differently and use language differently.³ In the ecological metaphor there are ecological niches which sustain and nurture particular forms of literacy. To take the example of home, school and work, typically people wear different clothes, talk differently, take on different roles, have different purposes. The social rules underlying people's actions in these three places are different. The physical spaces – buildings, etc. – are typically different and time is broken up differently. These are different domains and they give rise to different practices – meaning both the general social ways of acting and how people individually act on particular occasions.

The point of departure for detailed examination of literacy practices is to realize that literacy may be different in different domains and that school, for example, is but one domain of literacy activity. Other domains may be just as significant. The home is a particularly important domain in that it is the site for a wide range of activities and it is where children typically first encounter literacy events. The home is 'the centre from which individuals venture out into other domains' (Klassen 1991, p. 43). Within a domain such as the home one can look in more detail and examine the wide range of activities involving different literacies. I will return to this when discussing children's emergent literacy.

Having been precise about the link between literacies and domains, I must now point out that the reality is more fluid. When starting out on the Literacy in the Community research project, we found it useful to identify home, school and work as separate domains with their own distinctive practices giving rise to particular literacies. What we found in fact is that home is a site, a physical location, for all sorts of activities. Different sorts of reading and writing from many sources, including school and work, are carried out in the home. The practices leak from one domain to the other and there is much overlap. Nevertheless, home and school remain separate domains where certain literacy practices are sustained, nurtured and legitimized, while others are not. The same event might be valued very differently in the two places and have very different meaning to the participants.

As another word of caution, terms like *domain* seem to be flexible in size. *Genre* and *discourse*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, are other examples. They seem to lack a clear definition. How big are they? Are there three or four domains or are there hundreds? I am afraid the idea of literacies is also like this too. It is important not to lose sight of this when discussing a literacy.

- 3 People's literacy practices are situated in broader social relations. This makes it necessary to describe the social setting of literacy events, including the ways in which social institutions support particular literacies

In a day people may pass through many activities, each making different demands upon them. They might have to be a parent, spouse, neighbour, customer, patient. In doing this people draw upon different aspects of their identity. Someone may be black, female, middle-class, a mother and a student, and they will draw upon salient aspects of their identity in any situation. People are positioned by roles and the demands placed upon them, and in most situations they know a range of appropriate ways of acting; people generally know what to do if they are a parent, a patient or a customer. Nevertheless, roles are not fixed and unchanging things which people slot into. Rather, they are negotiated, accepted and sometimes challenged. In any situation people can have more than one role and there can be conflict between the demands of different roles. Given that many everyday activities can be literacy events, these ideas of roles and identity are a good place to start an examination of social variation in and constraints on literacy.

It is in certain roles that people need particular literacies and use literacy. A simple example of roles in literacy events is that of gender in the home. As a newspaper headline reporting a survey put it, 'Wives write Xmas cards . . . Husbands write cheques' (*Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1989). This sums up a common role division, which we have observed in our studies, that often women write in the personal sphere, keeping in contact with friends and relations, and writing and recording Christmas cards, birthdays and anniversaries, while men deal with the business world of bills, mortgages and house repairs (see Barton and Padmore 1991). These roles can be followed to the extent that men are unable to write a personal letter and women not know how to write a cheque. This is one of many examples we will come across where literacy activity is gendered, where men and women often act differently. However, this division is not by any means a hard and fast one, and the roles are not always obvious. The roles are negotiated and

can involve conflict and change. Difficulties with reading and writing, or particular skills, for example, can affect roles people have.

People's literacy practices do not reflect abilities in any straightforward way, but rather they are to do with what people feel is or is not appropriate. People learn that socially there are appropriate and inappropriate practices for specific roles. Viewing abilities like this represents an important shift in terms of how we think about literacy. The move towards describing people's actions as relative to the situation they are in is a significant step; it represents a move away from over-reliance on the idea of a set of fixed abilities which is common in much discussion of reading and writing. In addition, we should not lose sight of the fact that roles are related to power and that much literacy is learned in relationships of unequal power – those of parent and child, and teacher and student.

A second consideration when situating literacy practices within broader social relations is that in everyday life people act within various networks. These networks have broad functions covering work, child-rearing and other areas of social activity, and they are often networks of reciprocal support. Literacy activities are exchanged within these networks. For example, one person in our study, Harry, is part of several networks, including family, neighbours, and former work colleagues. His sister-in-law and his son provide a network of support for him. His sister-in-law does his shopping for him. His son helps him with official forms he has to fill in and also rewrites for him the odd reference he has to write for people in the fire service. This is a reciprocal relationship in that in turn he takes telephone messages for his son who does not have a telephone. I will return to discussion of these networks and literacy in chapter 13.

Throughout I am starting out from how literacy fits into individual lives, how people experience literacy. However, it is important to keep in mind the institutional framework which provides the context for people's actions. An alternative starting-point for a study of the social basis of literacy could be institutional practices around literacy, examining religion, capitalism, advertising etc. as social practices. It is important to see how the state, the church, multinational corporations use literacy to plan, record, control and influence, and how people participate in these practices. Human activities including literacy are embedded in and get their meanings from such human institutions.

One way of examining different institutional settings is to regard

them as different domains. For each of these domains there are particular institutions which support distinct literacy practices. Particular definitions of literacy and their associated literacy practices are nurtured by these institutions. Different institutions define and influence different aspects of literacy or different literacies; they become definition-sustaining institutions. School and the whole educational system, for instance, supports certain views of what literacy is and what it is for. Historically, different religions have developed distinct definitions of what literacy is and what it means to be literate. Taken together, the various institutions may support different literacies: for example, it may be that in a culture religion influences ritual aspects of literacy; the family has an effect on habits of personal communication; while work and school influence public and formal aspects of communication. It follows from this that domains are not equal, and to some extent the different institutions may be supporting conflicting literacy practices. In addition to this patterning, there are larger concerns such as gender or national identity whose influence cuts across different domains (see Street and Street 1991 on the influence of national identity).

- 4 Literacy is based upon a system of symbols. It is a symbolic system used for communication and as such exists in relation to other systems of information exchange. It is a way of representing the world to others

Literacy is part of communication, of reporting the world to others. The relationship of reading and writing to other forms of communication needs to be examined. Firstly, there is the relation to spoken language. Ideas about written language have moved on considerably from viewing it as 'speech which is written down'. Written language has different functions from spoken language, and any choice between written and spoken usually has other implications beyond a simple choice of medium. Writing enables us to go much further than with spoken language; we are able to fix things in space and time. Writing results in texts. Because it often is reproducible and open to inspection, written language can be a powerful form of language; we need to

examine how writing extends the possibilities of language. It should be clear then that any view of literacy is part of a theory of language and it is necessary to set out a view of language, or at least the parts which impinge on literacy. This will be done in the next few chapters.

Although they are very different, written and spoken language are not easy to separate. In fact they are closely entwined, and in daily life people participate in literacy events where reading and writing are mixed in with spoken language and with other means of communication. Literacy events typically involve a written text and talk around the text. In many ways written and spoken language are not separable in literacy events and some researchers would go so far as to blur any distinction between written and spoken and call all forms of public communication literate. There will be examples of these approaches in the chapter devoted to school views of literacy, but I think it more useful to keep them separate for the moment. Writing is based on speech in some very real ways: spoken language is the basis for most people's learning of written language, for instance, and the very form of written language gets its inspiration from spoken language. Still, it is important to stress that the roots of written language lie only partly with spoken language. Written language has a life of its own. I will return to this in the chapter devoted to written and spoken language.

Other aspects of communication come into play with written language. Most significantly, it is visual; it is laid out in some way or displayed. The importance of the role of design, layout and other aspects of the physical context should be self-evident, and they form part of what is meant by writing. An ecological approach to communication needs to be dynamic and interactive too. This is a different view of communication from standard functional models which see it in terms of transmitters and receivers of messages, with writing and other technologies simply amplifying what spoken language can do. The point is that with written language you can do things you cannot with spoken. It does not just amplify spoken language. It extends the functions of language, and enables you to do different things.

It can be very useful to consider literacy as a technology, although this needs to be done with caution. Also people need to realize that technologies are not neutral or autonomous. The idea of technology may seem to be bound up with a functional view which treats 'literacy', 'the individual' and 'society' as if they are independent

entities that meet at some points, and which does not allow for the dynamic and interactive nature of these relationships. However, it need not be viewed like this and it is fruitful to retain some notion of literacy as technology, and to find ways of examining critically what this implies about the role of literacy and of technologies generally in society and in human cognitive activities.

Different forms of technology have provided the possibilities as well as the constraints for written language. Written language involves technology in a way which straightforward conversational spoken language does not. Whether it is a simple paper and pencil, or a spray can on a wall, or a complex word processor, written language always utilizes some technology. (Of course, much contemporary spoken language makes use of satellites, loudspeakers, microphones, tape recorders and other technologies.) Literacy is a good example to use when exploring the social basis of technologies. It can be viewed as a communications technology concerned with the production and reproduction of shared meaning or knowledge. This is the perspective taken by Raymond Williams (1981).

5 Literacy is a symbolic system used for representing the world to ourselves

As well as communicating – representing the world to others – literacy is important in representing the world to ourselves. It is part of our thinking; it is part of the technology of thought. Language and literacy are used to define reality, not only to others, but also to ourselves. Literacy, then, has a role in the ecology of the mind.

Literacy is a symbolic system. Like other symbolic systems such as number it has both a cognitive and a cultural basis. As well as its external aspects, it contributes to the mind and to thinking; it enables people to do things which otherwise would not be possible. It is necessary to avoid the idea of the mind as fixed and given; at the same time we need to steer carefully round ideas such as that of there being automatic cognitive consequences of literacy. Like other aspects of human life, the mind is socially constructed within the physical constraints of being human. A practice account of literacy inevitably includes a practice account of thinking, covering how it is constructed and supported by social practices.

Literacy is an ideal topic for linking the psychological and the social. Symbolic systems lie at the interface of social structure, technology and mind. A symbolic system such as writing **mediates** between individual cognition and social phenomena. I will return to the idea of mediation in the next chapter. What I mean by stating that writing is an individual system, is that it has a psychological basis and that any piece of writing is an external representation or outcome of internal cognitive processes. At the same time, writing is 'out there'; it exists along with other social artefacts of culture and forms part of a broader social context.

It is not just the study of literacy but the study of language itself which has the potential to link the social and the psychological. Language is a symbolic system linking what goes on inside our heads with what goes on outside. It mediates between self and society. It is a form of representation, a way of representing the world to ourselves and to others. Language is a remarkable communication system enabling us to think and to talk about the world around us. More than other communication systems, it enables us to talk about things which are not present, and about things which are non-existent, and to reflect upon, abstract and generalize our experience. We are even able to reflect upon our internal states and upon language: we can talk about talk.

Linguists and others have commonly seen language as being primarily for communication, the topic of the previous section, rather than for its creative role in thought: an information processing view of language underlies most positions. As Frank Smith puts it, language is seen as being for shunting information rather than for creating worlds. In one of his articles he lists a set of interrelated claims about language and communication which are contrary to everyday thinking on the subject. He then goes on to support each claim and to demolish cherished beliefs. In brief, his argument is that rather than information processing, much of the function of language is the creation of knowledge. He argues against the current paradigm of the brain as a repository of information, thought as information processing, learning as acquiring new information and language as the communication of information. Rather, he supports a view of the brain as a creator of experience, thinking as the creation of worlds, and language, especially written language, as a means by which these worlds can be 'manifested, manipulated, and sometimes shared' (Smith 1985,

p. 197). The function of language, then, is not just to communicate knowledge; language partly creates the knowledge.

Other metaphors which reflect the different functions of language which people give priority to are whether it is regarded as a tool – something actively used to get things done – or whether it is seen as a medium, which some people have assumed to be a more passive view. Another metaphor, the computing-inspired metaphor of language as an environment, is useful here and can shed light on the idea of language as a medium. Being an environment it can have both active and passive aspects: language is an environment we create and control, it is also an environment we are situated in and are shaped by. This is also true of the idea of language as a medium.

Psychological processes are usually thought of as being in people's heads. One way in which views on cognition or thinking have changed is that thinking has moved outside the head. Not only does the idea of processes change, but also what is meant by thought. The study of reading and writing should be part of a general shift of moving processes out of the head and *outdoors* to use Jean Lave's phrase (1988). A shift is taking place toward seeing cognition, thought and mental activities as residing in cultural activities as much as in the head. These are ideas associated with Jean Lave, Barbara Rogoff and others in areas such as problem solving, memory and everyday mathematics.⁵ The study of the processes of reading and writing can be fitted squarely into this approach. It can also help us see more clearly the 'effects' of literacy without falling down some great divide. All thought is socially constructed, and it is the social practices around literacy, not literacy itself, which shape consciousness.

6 We have awareness, attitudes and values with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values guide our actions

People make sense of literacy as a social phenomenon, and their social construction of literacy lies at the root of their attitudes towards literacy and their actions. Saying that literacy has a social meaning is going further than saying that there are social dimensions to it or that it exists within a social context. Literacy is embedded in institutional

contexts which shape the practices and social meanings attached to reading and writing. Within these social contexts, the act of reading or writing becomes symbolic. The very act of reading or writing takes on a social meaning: it can be an act of defiance or an act of solidarity, an act of conforming or a symbol of change. We assert our identity through literacy.

Every person, adult or child, has a view of literacy, about what it is and what it can do for them, about its importance and its limitations. Everyone has a way of talking about literacy, they use a set of metaphors to do with literacy, they have what is in effect a theory of literacy. People can talk about reading and writing: their views are also expressed in their attitudes and their actions. To take some examples from everyday home practices, people often have strong views about reading at the meal table or writing in books. If they think reading at the meal table is socially reprehensible, they will forbid children to do it. Often books in themselves are thought to be of value, while magazines and comics are less valued. More generally, people's views of literacy are important in how and what they learn and a parent's attitudes and actions influence a child's behaviour at school. Attitudes are also at the heart of whether or not people think they have a 'problem' with reading and writing and whether or not they think it is appropriate to attend adult literacy classes.

Values are also clearly expressed in the relative importance attached to literacy as compared with other activities, such as practical and physical activities. Sometimes reading and writing are contrasted with work, at other times they are compared with leisure. An idea which we have come across repeatedly in our studies, is that people feel that it is better to be reading than to be doing nothing, but it is better to be doing some 'real' work rather than reading. We have examples of this in our study of people talking about literacy at the turn of the century (Barton 1988). We have further examples in our study of contemporary literacy. This ambivalence towards literacy seems to be a strong element in contemporary culture. As we can see, reading and writing are not just cognitive activities, feelings run through them.

Drawing attention to people's awareness and attitudes is also a way of bringing in human agency, bringing in intentions. An active view of literacy has people with intentions, meanings and values at its centre. The literacy practices, schooling and technologies we have today all

result from active human decisions based on people's values. Related to this, all literacy activities have a purpose for people. People do things for a reason. In general, people do not read in order to read, nor write in order to write; rather, people read and write in order to do other things. People want to know what time the train leaves or how a new watch or video works; they want to make sense of their lives, or keep in contact with a friend; they want to make their voice heard. Reading and writing can be part of these social activities. Sometimes, as when filling in a benefit form, the various participants associated with the event can have conflicting purposes.

In later chapters I will deal more with people's perceptions, how they make sense of life and the role of awareness. I see awareness as a foundation stone of human intelligence, and the ability to reflect on our activities as a crucial part of human activity. People's literacy practices are not necessarily obvious, and it is often those of other cultures which stand out and which are subjected to detailed examination. It was when examining reading and writing in different cultural groups that people such as Scribner and Cole, Heath and Street observed practices. It is generally accepted that the practices of another culture have to be discovered by detailed observation; this is no less true of cultures we are close to. Often this is a difficult point to accept; even Heath's study seemed to take the middle-class, mainstream practices more for granted. They are probably closer to her practices, to my practices and, maybe, to your practices. Nevertheless, we can reflect on our own activities and on those of people around us. We can become more aware of them, in order to understand and, if necessary, resist, challenge and change them.

7 Literacy has a history. Our individual life histories contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards which the present is built upon. We change and as children and adults are constantly learning about literacy

There are two senses of historical change: that of the individual's growth and development; and that of the whole culture over a longer time period. We need a way of talking about literacy which takes

account of these two notions and relates them, and which is dynamic and can deal with change. In both of them, current practices are created out of the past.

The first sense is the change in an individual person's life. Every person has a history, and for the discussion here, every person has a literacy history. This goes back to early childhood and the first encounters with literacy practices in home literacy events; it continues with involvement in community and school practices, and on into adulthood with its varying and changing demands. At any point in time a person's choices are based on the possibilities provided by their past experiences. Just as our view of literacy is dependent on our view of language, it is also dependent on our view of learning. Learning is something which takes place all the time; all activities involve learning; it is not limited to official sittings in a classroom, it is not something which only children do. We change throughout our lives, and as children and adults are constantly learning about literacy. This change is the key to learning.

There are several ways in which literacy is bound up with changes in people's lives. Firstly, people read and write at particular times in their lives. The demands of life change: there are times in people's lives when they need to read and write more, and times when they need to read and write less. New demands can result from changes at work, or they can arise from changes in people's personal lives; for example, parents may experience changing demands when their young children grow up and go to school. In addition, people want to make changes in their lives, and reading and writing can enable them to make such changes.

A broad view of learning is needed which provides a way of connecting up pre-school literacy and adult literacy campaigns, and which also goes beyond these settings into everyday life. We need to account for how literacy is acquired, not just in schools and by children, but in everyday life; not just here and now, but in other cultures and in other times. It is important to link up learning by adults and learning by children and to have a clear idea of the importance and limitations of schooling. People learn in their everyday lives and not enough attention has been paid to this everyday or vernacular learning. The person I have mentioned already from our study, Harry, says that he could not read and write properly when he left school. He is not untypical in this. He learned new literacies at

work (for instance in the fire service, where he had to write regular reports) as he came across writing demands he had not met before. He also learned new literacies in his everyday life; he was secretary of the local workingmen's club for several years later in life, where he learned how to write such things as minutes of meetings and notices.

One implication of this view of learning is that children are not incomplete beings and adults complete. Literacy makes sense to anyone at any one time. Whether a four-year-old child, a person from another culture or another historical period, their literacy makes sense to them. Notions of incomplete literacy or restricted literacy are not useful within this framework. There are not component skills which can be added separately like building-blocks to make a complete building. Of course, it is still true that people may want to change and extend their literacies, and this can be equally true for teenagers, Adult Basic Education students and professional writers.

Finally, in this view learning comes from social interaction, but it is also built upon foundations which are part of our human endowment, our intelligence, our innate potentialities. An ecological approach is neither innatist or environmentalist; it is about the dynamic interaction of the two - how people fit into the environment, how they form it and are formed by it. I am definitely not putting forward a purely environmentalist position. The mind is socially constructed upon innate potentialities (I choose the word potentialities carefully, the word capacities would have been misleading).

8 Literacy events and practices have a social history

The second sense of history is that of change in the whole culture. With literacy this goes back five thousand years to the origin of writing. There have been many developments in this long stretch of time. As I hope it will become evident, the history of literacy raises many questions: about the scripts in existence today; about cultures without literacy; and about the relation of literacy and thought. It can provide some insight into areas as diverse as: the learning of literacy; levels of literacy in society; literacy and technological change; and literacy and power relations. Recent history should make it clear how current practices are based on the past, and how they are not

inevitable and unchangeable, but have developed out of past practices. Issues such as disputes about levels of literacy in schools, the importance of popular literacies, and the rise of elite notions of 'literature' and 'the literary' can all be illuminated by examining recent history.

We need to account for the origins of literacy in the distant historical past, as well as to understand the closer historical basis of contemporary literacy. It is important to integrate these ideas, bringing together learning with an understanding of cognition and historical change. The two notions of history, that of the individual and that of the whole culture, come together at several points - for example, when people pass on culture from generation to generation. In our studies of literacy in Lancaster we have compared different generations and we can see how practices are passed on from generation to generation. There are links with the past and with the future. Historically, there are connections with earlier generations of people, and in our contemporary study of everyday uses of literacy we have documented ways in which the people we have interviewed want life to be different for their own children (Barton 1988). These people are passing on a culture in a changing environment, and this is an important way in which the culture and its associated practices change.

Another situation where the two aspects of change and history come together is with current rapid social change, where new technologies and political changes are changing the demands on people. New social practices give different possibilities and constraints, so that in the new workplace people have to monitor their work and keep records in new ways, as well as changing the ways they communicate. Some social changes increase literacy demands, some reduce literacy demands.

Another example of this to do with modern technology is the choice between sending messages by mail or by telephone, or, where people have access, by fax, by telex or by electronic mail. The path to a choice in any particular instance is very complicated, involving availability, cost, technical ability, reliability and other factors. These possibilities are all changing the basis of communication in human relationships. Hopefully, examining examples from the past, such as the spread of printing, can illuminate current changes.