

Literacy across the curriculum

Connecting literacy in the schools, community and workplace

Social literacies

Is learning to speak the same as learning to read and write? Does the move from the oral to the written involve a move across a great cognitive divide as many respected literacy theorists have claimed? Does literacy have predictable social consequences?

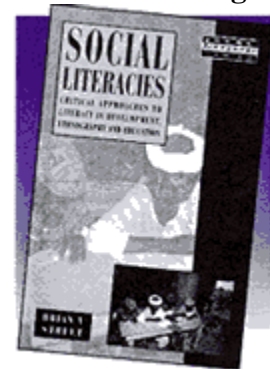
A more recent school of ethnographic literacy research which studies how people use reading and writing in real situations calls into question many traditional assumptions, including the idea that there is only a single neutral "Literacy." They argue instead for the concept of many literacies, specifically what they have dubbed social literacies.

Brian Street, the British scholar whose recent collection entitled *Social Literacies* won the NCTE's David Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English, is a well-known spokesperson for this branch of research. Their basic premise is that people use reading and writing in different ways for different purposes and that social and cultural contexts are the determining factors of those uses.

The implications of this research are profound both for school based literacy teaching and for international adult literacy assessments, campaigns and provision.

For example, one assumption about the difference between oral and written language is that spoken language has more diversity and complexity, that it is more interactive and more dependent on context.

Street and others argue that the differences between oral and written language are not given universals, but features of culture specific conventions. Writing actually involves many features that are equivalent in some ways to the gesture, facial expression, and intonation of spoken language; these include the choice of type of script, ink colour, and publishing signs such as hard cover, which all signify meaning



beyond word choice and grammatical structure.

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