RESPONSES

Challenges to NLS
Response to "What's 'new' in New Literacy Studies"

Joyce Kim
Teachers College, Columbia University

In the past twenty years, 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS), with its socio-cultural approach to examining literacy as it is acquired and used by members of various cultures in relation to structures of power and authority, has become one of the major theoretical frameworks in literacy research. Street's seminal ethnography, Literacy in Theory and Practice (1984), marked the shift in the field of literacy studies from an ethnography of communication to a more perspicacious examination of power relations. In that book, Street exposed the autonomous model of literacy, which posits literacy as a decontextualized set of skills with universal application, as just another literacy ideology--one tied to specific views of the world and relations of power. This insight revolutionized the field of literacy studies. More recently, scholars have expanded the field by developing new, fruitful concepts, such as literacy ecologies (Barton, 1994), Discourses (Gee, 1996)[ ], and multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). In addition, refusing to privilege school-based literacies, they have emphasized the ways in which literacies are embedded in and constitutive of family and community relations (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Clark & Ivanic 1997; Hull & Schultz 2002; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996). As NLS undergoes rigorous academic and theoretical scrutiny, critiques of its comparability and transferability concerning the relevancy of NLS for practitioners and policy makers have emerged. Street, in this volume, aptly addresses the issues of comparability regarding the theoretical foundation of NLS. However, a careful critique of transferability, in the realm of policy in general, and in the realm of education practice in particular, though laudable, remains elusive.

Comparability, which requires the use of standard terminology and analytic framework across ethnographic research studies (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), lies at the heart of "the limits of the local" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) and related arguments (Collins & Blot, 2003). In his paper, Street addresses this issue by stating that NLS focuses on the "hybridity" of local and school literacy practices, and refers to the great strides made by scholars (see Bartlett & Holland, 2002; Maybin, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Pahl, 2002a & 2002b) in the development of conceptual apparatuses, linking ethnographies of local literacy practices to broader theories. In his presentation of the paper presented in this volume, Street mentioned "textuality", "figured worlds", "identity" and "power" as generalizing concepts. As fascinating as these recent developments are, perhaps there should be an analytic framework of some kind of mapping, a typology if you will, of these conceptual apparatuses concerning different but related issues stemming from literacy practices such as: multilingualism, biliteracy, social theory, text/power/identity, and discourse. A common typology or mapping of present and past NLS research will guide further research, thereby fostering the use of standard terminology and framework for comparability of fruitful epiphanies.

Transferability begs the question: how can NLS apply its theoretical concepts and empirical studies to pedagogical practices and policy making, especially when the autonomous model of literacy has served as the basis for policy and pedagogical practices for a number of years? While Street offers a critique of the 'scientific methods' found in the positivist model so imbued in policy and research funding, and notes the valiant efforts among NLS scholars (see Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002), the ways in which NLS can achieve legitimacy in the arena of educational policy seem steeped in contested political and academic wills with no clear step-by-step process for NLS to gain a valued place in education policy.

A final, and serious, limitation of New Literacy Studies is its evasion, in many cases, of concrete suggestions for literacy practitioners, especially classroom teachers. Understandably, those working within this ethnographic framework seem to prefer description and analysis to prescription, and Street posits that NLS engage in educational practice through their advocacy for "dynamic dialogue" of understanding and appreciation for different literacy practices. Teachers may be convinced by the insights of NLS, but they must work within the increasingly narrow constraints of the school system. Teachers might wish to include the at-home literacy practices of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in school domains, but they are limited by the constraints of standardized tests and time to bridge the home-school divide. Special educators must often use quantitative instruments to 'document' literacy deficits before students can get the services they need; how are these teachers to subscribe to New Literacy Studies? Although the resources of insightful ethnographies (see Hull and Schultz, 2002) are valuable, teachers seeking to encourage hybridity of local literacy practices and school practices still remain without guidelines and administrative support.

While sociolinguists argue that varieties of literacy are structurally equal and practice theorists decry the arbitrary dominance of one form of literacy over others, practitioners must decide whether and how to teach dominant literacies without becoming complicit in the reproduction of power. In his talk, Street addressed this conundrum of the teachers who want to bridge the home-school divide by encouraging and challenging teachers to be good ethnographers of their classrooms, as well as their students' local and school literacy practices. He charged educators with the responsibility of finding out what knowledge the students bring to the classroom and to build upon that knowledge in the Vygotskian sense. Because it is only at this junction of critical language awareness and a politically charged educational environment that the theory gets refined and practice becomes feasible, we must now ask ourselves: how can the field of education develop teachers to be mindful of students' local practices while honing students' school literacy skills? And what kind of school infrastructure needs to be in place for such successful practice?

Notes

1 It must be noted, however, that many of these Third World intellectuals were educated in developed countries. Ul Huq himself was a Yale graduate, and Amin received his training in Paris.

2 This point was made most effectively by Bernard Cohn (1996) in Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India. Cohn points out that the British were able to maintain control of this vast territory by invading not only its physical space but also its epistemological space. T. M. Luhrmann (1996) has examined this dynamic in relation to Bombay's Parsi minority, providing a detailed account of their aspirations and delusions of sharing the colonizers' civilized knowledge.

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