



langue discours communication
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språk diskurs kommunikation
language discourse communication
sprache diskurs kommunikation
jazyk konverzace komunikace



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Literacy as social practice: future directions and new challenges

King's College, London, UK
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This one-day conference, which incorporated BALID's inaugural Brian Street Memorial Lecture in memory of our late President, brought together over 60 practitioners, students and others to discuss current issues in literacy from a social practice perspective. International issues presented included responding to cultural and socio-economic heterogeneity; increasing the success of youth language and literacy classes; the use of text in health initiatives; investment in mother tongue adult literacy programmes for indigenous minorities; and nascent andragogic writing practices in post-compulsory teacher education. A playlist of video shorts from the day is available [here](#).

As feedback from participants indicated, this was a most successful event enabling practitioners and researchers to explore more fully the insights into literacy which arise from the social practice approach. Participants appreciated insight into exemplar analytical frameworks, emerging literacy practices in distinct contexts, advocacy and project design implications, and the contribution of associated ethnographic, anthropological and other disciplinary fields. Immersion in rich and varied discussion with their peers was a particularly valued feature of the event.

The programme

The conference opened with a welcome from Constant Leung, Professor of Educational Linguistics at King's College, London, which kindly hosted the event. After an introduction from Dr Katy Newell-Jones, chair of BALID, participants shared in small groups their understanding and experiences of the social practice approach to literacy, interacting with quotes from the works of Brian Street. This was followed by the Brian Street Memorial Lecture chaired by Anna Robinson-Pant, Professor of Education at the University of East Anglia and UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation. At this point we were joined by over 30 PGCE students, taking our number to almost 100 in the room. The keynote speaker was **David Bloome, EHE Distinguished Professor of Teaching and Learning at Ohio State University**, a long-standing friend of Brian Street, who chose as his title '**Adaptation and Imagination in Literacy Education**'.

Professor Bloome paid tribute to Brian as a great conversationalist who was committed to bringing people together to exchange views and to learn from one another. In this spirit, the Literacy Research Association of the USA, from which Brian received a lifetime achievement award, has established a fund in his memory to enable students from outside the USA to travel to the Literacy Research Centre to present their work.

Professor Bloome remarked that there are various understandings of the concept of 'literacy practices' but they revolve around relationships between people and ways of practising reading and writing in cultural contexts. He and Brian took somewhat different approaches, with Brian particularly interested in drawing theoretical inferences about literacy practices from the observable literacy events, while he himself has always been more interested in examining the events themselves. Professor Bloome commented that some see literacy practices as discrete and countable while others regard the concept as a means of understanding how societies use literacy.

These perspectives have been debated in [*Rethorizing Literacy Practices*](#), edited by David Bloome, Maria Lúcia Castanheira, Constant Leung and Jennifer Rowsell (Routledge, 2018). An early text on literacy 'events' is [*Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*](#) by Shirley Brice Heath (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

As an example of a particular set of literacy events giving the opportunity to explore wider literacy practices, Professor Bloome presented a short video accompanied by a transcript of a 7th grade class in a school in an African American working-class area of the USA as they discussed a novel for young adults. He pointed out how the text was read by the students, how the teacher supervised the reading with an emphasis on accuracy and how the teacher's style changed when she was eliciting the students' reactions to the story. When the students were reading aloud in turn, the focus was on their manner of reading, with particular concern for accuracy in speaking the text, rather than on the meaning of the text. General comprehension was assumed. From a literacy practice perspective, students and teacher reflected a common understanding of 'proper' reading in any classroom situation. The teacher then led the students in exploring their understanding of the text. Professor Bloome suggested that their understanding of the text drew on their knowledge of wider social relations which involved an agreed standard of morality. In the third stage of this interaction, the text became the basis for the students to consider their lives and social issues in general.

Analysing this interaction from the perspective of literacy practices resembles a process of refraction as the features of the interaction are individually identified. In this example, there was evidence of the teacher and students following accepted norms (as in the reading of the text) yet also interrogating the text in the light of their own life experiences. Professor Bloome argued that literacy practices are constantly being socially constructed within particular contexts. Literacy events and literacy practices are intimately connected but represent different social spaces: literacy events feature 'particularities and tensions ... that produce adaptation and

imagination in written texts’, while literacy practices ‘contextualize the use of written language with an evolving stability’. A video of shorts from the keynote is available [here](#), and of the subsequent Q & A [here](#).

After the lunch break, which gave opportunity for the participants to connect with one another, the afternoon programme centred on three cameo presentations by PhD candidates currently studying at UK universities, followed by discussion in small groups on ways of taking forward the learning of the day.

Hélène Binesse (University of East Anglia) presented her ongoing research exploring communicative practices related to health and nutrition in Senegal. Coming from a background in language teaching with a view of communication based on the mastery of skills, she described how her studies had led her to realise that the meaning of literacy is specific to the particular context in which it is practised and that literacy has social and cultural dimensions.

Initially, she found that taking an ethnographic approach in her research was challenging as she did not have a predefined group of people in a learning situation to set boundaries for her work. Instead she was exploring how health-related literacy was worked out in the contexts of the home, an NGO, a women’s group, and a walking-for-exercise group. Apart from noticing the multimodality of literacy, she had been particularly struck by the way in which scientific medical information was reinterpreted according to local cultural understandings of spirituality.

Lorena Sánchez Tyson (UCL Institute of Education) discussed her research into the meanings, values and uses of literacy among indigenous people in Mexico participating in a bilingual literacy programme. She drew particular attention to how her interviewees valued their learning in various ways – for empowering them such that they no longer needed to rely on other people for help with literacy tasks, for enabling them to know their rights, for the personal confidence it gave them and for equipping them to be able to teach their children to read and write.

Rachel Stubley (Universities of South Wales and Lancaster) presented part of her research on academic writing in post-compulsory teacher education. She shared her study of dialogic practices in her own writing tutorials with mature student teachers. The tutorials illustrate some of the tensions between ‘normative’ and ‘transformative’ writing aspirations of tutors and students, where students (and their tutors) negotiate the conflicting demands of institutional norms and their own desires for meaning-making. She argued that student-tutor dialogue around writing is necessary for academic writing practices to support the development of professional identities, but that it is under threat in financially pressured educational environments.

A video of shorts from the PhD cameos is available [here](#).

In his closing remarks, Alan Rogers, Visiting Professor at the Universities of Nottingham and East Anglia, directed his comments to BALID, challenging members to consider whether they are implicitly reinforcing the dominant international discourse about literacy. The dominant

discourse sees literacy as essential for full functioning in society but in fact many adults are involved in development processes without being literate in the formal sense.

Evaluation

The conference once again reinforced the value of the social practice perspective on literacy, with its particular emphasis on understanding the meaning and significance of literacy within specific contexts. The social practice perspective recognises that literacy involves much more than decoding and encoding words on a page. The four presentations which concerned a teacher and students in the USA, the residents of a town in Senegal, indigenous literacy learners in Mexico and trainee teachers in a UK university demonstrated how the social practice approach illuminates processes which might otherwise remain hidden. This does not simply increase awareness but has practical implications for how literacy may be taught in instructional settings.

Invited to comment on the day, participants expressed positive responses to both the formal presentations in the morning and afternoon and the informal interactions between participants outside of the formal sessions. Professor Bloome's talk was a highlight for many. Some commented that they had received new insights into the social practice view of literacy and that their understanding had increased. There was also recognition of the value of ethnographic approaches in literacy research.

Some participants stated that they intended to take forward their learning from the day by exploring the subject more deeply, and by adapting their approach both to literacy and to the teaching of literacy, whether for young people or for adults.

Overall the event was much appreciated and clearly served to increase awareness among literacy practitioners and researchers of the value of the social practice approach to literacy, a perspective in which Professor Brian Street was a central figure.

Final remarks

BALID would like to express its thanks to King's College, London, for hosting the conference, and to the University of East Anglia for their participation.

In appreciation of Professor Bloome's gracious waiver of his honorarium as speaker, BALID has made a donation to the Brian Street Memorial Fund of the Literacy Research Association (USA).