

More Than Meets the Eye: Why Context Matters in Literacy Studies



Rachel Hagerman

Language surrounds us. From making a post on social media, to looking up directions to a friend's house, or to sending an email to coworkers, we are regularly engaged in language acts. Tied to this notion of language is the elusive term, "literacy," which is a concept so familiar to our everyday routines and yet often debated in academia. Theorists from the field of literacy studies approach this relationship between language and literacy in varying ways. While many scholars have general agreements about language and literacy, other scholars' ideas clash strongly. After examining scholarly research in this field, I've found—time and time again—that when scholars acknowledge social and cultural contexts in their research, it allows them to better address the relationship between language and literacy. Recognizing these contexts enables scholars to build a better understanding of real-world literacy events. In short, context is a crucial component of any study on literacy.

To begin, it's important to look at the foundations of the field's investigations of both orality and writing: two topics that shine light on the relationship between language and literacy. For example, Geoffrey Sampson is a prominent scholar who addresses both topics in his research on Sumerian script, which is the earliest known writing system. His research traces Sumerian script's transition from a non-phonetic based system—where symbols indicate ideas (also known as semasiographic systems)—to one that uses symbols to visibly represent spoken-language *sounds* (also known as glottographic systems). That is, his work follows the script's progression toward a writing system that represents speech (61). Sampson also explains how Sumerian writing customs evolved based on context. More specifically, he examined how the written script changed based on the tools available to the writers of the time. He also notes how scribes altered the appearance

1 Generally speaking, "literacy" refers to an ability to read and write, but it is important to understand that literacy is much more complex than this simple definition suggests. Especially within the academic community, there are a number of understandings about what the abstract word, "literacy," entails. As Knoblauch explains, even the "labels literate and illiterate almost always imply more than a degree of deficiency or skill. They are, grossly or subtly, sociocultural judgments" (74). In summary, though many define literacy as a competence in reading and writing, it captures a much more complex and nuanced meaning than we can express in a dictionary definition.

2 Here, I refer to scholars of literacy studies, a field that emerged in the 1980s and seeks to understand literacy and literacy events.

3 To demonstrate the difference between these two writing systems, Sampson explains that a semasiographic system would convey the idea of "four sheep" by depicting four "sheep" graphs. Of course, when we speak about four sheep, we don't say the word "sheep" four times. We have an adjective-noun combination to express this. Similarly, in a glottographic script, which represents spoken language, we would see a single graph (or group of graphs) that means "sheep" and a single graph (or group of graphs) that represents "four" (50). Glottographic systems mirror the sounds of spoken language, while semasiography focuses on depicting ideas and is not directly connected to spoken language.

of written symbols over time, making symbols that were “easier to form legibly” to “simplify their labor” (52-53). This suggests that the writing system evolved not randomly, but in order to make writers’ lives easier. To put it concisely, real-world context and orality play an important role in the evolution of writing systems.

Interested in this same topic of orality and literacy, Denise Schmandt-Besserat offers a more radical historical look at the origin of writing. She explains that ancient peoples used tokens to keep track of goods, creating the first code which “paved the way for the invention of writing” (29). This discovery is interesting as it suggests that writing arose out of necessity; ancient people had to create a sort of writing system because they needed to count and tell others how many goods they owned. The invention was born out of a social need. It was not a random act. This phenomenon demonstrates how “symbolic meaning emerges as cultures evolve to a point that such forms of manifesting meaning are needed and valued” (25). In other words, Schmandt-Besserat’s literacy research, just like that of Sampson, teaches us that orality, as well as social and cultural contexts, influence the development of writing over time.

Dennis Baron, another prominent scholar of literacy studies, looks at the relationship between writing and orality differently: he reveals that writing has the ability to influence orality. This provides an alternate but not necessarily conflicting understanding of the orality-writing relationship that Sampson and Schmandt-Besserat identify. Baron explains that “people begin to reject traditional pronunciations in favor of those that reflect a word’s spelling” (76). In this quote, we see that writing has the ability to impact orality. Again, Baron must acknowledge the social and cultural contexts to arrive at this discovery about evolving pronunciations. Between Baron’s research and that of Sampson and Schmandt-Besserat, there are cases for both orality influencing writing as well as writing influencing orality. Thus, there is a clear connection between both types of language, and we see the two impacting each other in various ways.

Challenging this established association between orality and writing, Walter J. Ong argues that literacy and orality are cognitively distinct in his Great Divide Theory—a controversial but often-cited theory in literacy studies.

Ong’s Great Divide Theory explains that, “writing is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials” and there is a significant difference between non-literate (also called “oral”) and literate societies (23).

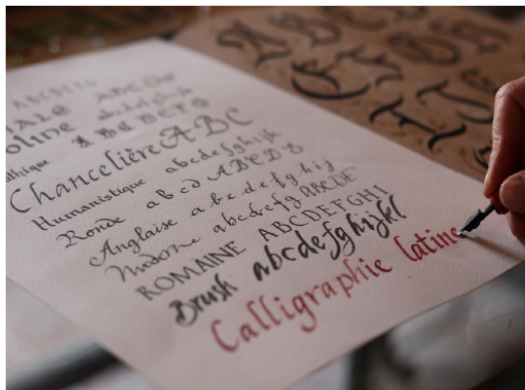
In this view, context is dismissed and there is a noticeable disconnect between orality and writing. He even goes as far to argue that writing is “a time-obviating, context-free mechanism” (31). Not only does this view ignore the relationship between orality and writing, but it also poses some ethical issues, making it a controversial hot topic. Ong’s theories assert that literacy (which he argues is distinct from orality) allows for a higher order of thinking. This posits a “primitive society v. civilized society” dichotomy that views oral cultures as cognitively inferior. Of course, many scholars critique this sort of thinking that belittles entire groups of people. Brian Street, a language professor at King’s College London, argues that Ong’s work does little to address “the rich variety of different cultures that he aggregates together as ‘oral,’” which poses serious logical problems to his overall argument (*Social Literacies* 155). Thus, as his critics would suggest, Ong’s research falls flat because he disregards cultural context.

As seen in these various explorations of orality and writing, the act of acknowledging social and cultural contexts is an essential tool to making discoveries about literacy. More specifically, in these context-rich studies, writing and orality appear to be intimately bound as they directly influence one another. On the other hand, as seen with Ong’s writing, when we dismiss context, we also disregard the complex relationship between language and literacy as established by a number of well-respected scholars, including Sampson, Schmandt-Besserat, and Baron, among others.

Even when looking beyond studies on the orality-writing relationship, we can find several case-specific studies that also indicate the benefits of acknowledging context. For example, Tamara Plakins Thornton analyzed colonial handwriting to reveal that different stylistic hands allowed the reader of the time to “evaluate the social significance of a letter” (65). That is, different types of handwriting styles held specific social meanings. Someone literate in colonial handwriting styles can

take one glance at a letter and understand if it was written by a man or woman, a gentleman or clerk, “simply by noting what hand it had been written in” (65). This sort of literacy is lost to modern readers who lack social understanding about the specific meanings of handwriting styles. In order to better understand the language of colonial letters, Thornton had to acknowledge the cultural context of the time. This new understanding of old letters demonstrates the benefit of taking context into account.

Looking at a community-specific example, Shirley Brice Heath’s ethnographic study of literacy in Trackton relies heavily on social and cultural contexts. Only through observing the contexts in person did Heath uncover how “reading was a social activity” (449) for the Trackton community. After understanding this context, Heath was able to determine that traditional schooling did not properly prepare Trackton residents for the sort of literacy they needed to thrive. Scholar Brian Street explains this sort of context-based discovery in a video interview about his work studying classroom behaviors and language: “if you take a ‘social practices’ view of literacy, you keep seeing things you hadn’t expected.” Again, looking at literacy as a social construct proves necessary in order to better understand the relationship between language and literacy.



Not only can we see that context proves to be a crucial component in these scholars’ many discoveries about literacy, but multiple scholars also argue that context is an important aspect of language itself. For instance, in his proposal to use ethnography to study literacy, John F. Szwed wrote, “definitions of reading and writing, then, must include social context and function (use) as well as the reader and the text of what is being read and written” (423). Because of this, he argues that today’s literacy studies must also address context and that ethnography (which draws attention to contexts) is a proper method to answer modern literacy questions.

Street’s work furthers Szwed’s concept by describing two models of literacy: an autonomous model, which works independent of social context and fosters problematic views of “non-literates,” and an ideological model, which links social and cultural context to literacy practices. He promotes the latter ideological model, explaining that it “opens up a potentially rich field of inquiry into the nature of culture and power, and the relationship of institutions and ideologies of communication” (437). In short, we must adopt an ideological model of literacy that acknowledges context.

Further, many “scholars have raised cautionary voices about transferring one’s own social and cultural realities onto others as if notions of oppression, liberation, and social reform were universal” (Goggin 4). This newer perspective advises modern researchers and theorists to consider literacy as a complex construct rather than assuming a single, universal literacy. This more modern approach to literacy studies is reflected in Ryan P. Shepherd’s dissertation on digital literacy, where he writes, “Literacies—all literacies—are highly complex, social, and dependent on context. They do not make sense and are not useful when divorced from that context” (66). Like Shepherd, multiple scholars argue that recognizing the context of language is crucial to learning about literacy practices.

By exploring different studies on language and literacy, we can see that context is a critical aspect to understand and investigate. Theories that embrace this contextual aspect not only understand language as intimately wed with literacy, but their acknowledgement of context is critical to discovering new elements of real-world literacy events. Meanwhile, theories that ignore this contextual aspect, such as that of Ong, divide language and literacy and thus miss an opportunity for further understandings of literacy. The shortcomings of the context-free view of language prove that we should be intentionally conscious of social and cultural contexts in order to better understand real-world literacy events. So—whether you’re a literacy activist hoping to bring positive change into a community or a literacy scholar striving to push the envelope in your field—ensure that context is at the forefront of your work; it is an essential component of any literacy event.

REFERENCES

- Baron, Dennis. "From Pencils to Pixels: The Stages of Literacy Technologies." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Cushman, Ellen et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, pp. 70–84.
- Goggin, Peter N. *Profession Literacy in Composition Studies*, Hampton Press, 2008.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. "Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-Shifting Oral and Literate Traditions." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Cushman, Ellen et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, pp. 443–466.
- Knoblauch, C. H. "Literacy and the Politics of Education." *The Right to Literacy*, edited by Lunsford, A. A. et al., Modern Language Association, 1990, pp. 289–306.
- Ong, Walter J. "Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Cushman, Ellen et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, pp. 19–31.
- Sampson, Geoffrey. *Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction*, Stanford University Press, 1985.
- Schmandt-Besserat, Denise. "Symbols in the Prehistoric Middle East: Developmental Features Preceding Written Communication." *Oral and Written Communication: Historical Approaches*, edited by Enos, R. L., Sage Publications, 1990, pp. 16–31.
- Shepherd, Ryan P. *Composing Facebook: Digital Literacy and Incoming Writing Transfer in First-Year Composition*. 2014. Arizona State University, PhD dissertation, repository.asu.edu/attachments/140792/content/Shepherd_asu_0010E_14297.pdf.
- Street, Brian. "Faculti – Professor Brian Steet – Rethinking English in Schools." YouTube, uploaded by Faculti Media, 27 November 2013, web.archive.org/web/20140601103001/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLfyM0NWEDY.
- . "The New Literacy Studies." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Cushman, Ellen et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, pp. 430–442.
- . *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education*. Longman, 1995.
- Szwed, John F. "The Ethnography of Literacy." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Cushman, Ellen et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, pp. 421–429.
- Thornton, Tamara Plakins. "The Lost World of Colonial Handwriting." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Cushman, Ellen et al., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, pp. 52–69.