



1 Based on your research in the field of literacy in society and literacy development, can you briefly describe the research project, study or investigation you think provided the most significant insights into the nature of literacy and/or literacy development?

What were these insights?

What impact/s did the project have?

2 What prompted you to research in this context/area of literacy, for example, a previous study you found inspiring, or a particular social concern or problem?

I need to answer the first two questions together, because, for me, they really cannot be disentangled. I will take as my example my first paper on literacy, a paper called “What is Literacy”? The paper was delivered as a talk at a very small Mailman Foundation Conference on Families and Literacy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in March 1987. After I had presented it, I got a request to publish it in a journal I had never heard of and which I think went out of business soon after it started. The journal was: *Teaching and Learning* (2: 3-11, 1987). The paper has since been republished a great many times in many different forms. It was foundational to my first book *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* (1st Edition, 1990; Fifth Edition, 2015), a book which has been continuously in print for 25 years and was one of the foundations of the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) and, in fact, helped name that field.

Here is the story behind the paper: I began my academic career forty years ago as a linguistic studying the structure of language (“grammar”). At that time, thanks to the seminal work of Noam Chomsky, the fashionable thing to study was the basic design properties of language, the core grammatical properties that all human languages shared (Chomsky 1957, 1986). There was much less interest in meaning and in language in use. The study of language was then a pretty abstract affair.

Thanks to the “accidents” of life—mistakes made, lessons learned—years later I found myself employed in an applied linguistics program. The program happened to be in a School of Education at Boston University (later the program moved out of the School of Education—had that happened before I went, I would not now be me as an academic). I knew absolutely nothing about education then. Early in my time there the Dean of the School of Education came up to me and asked me to attend a meeting about applying for a grant to research adult literacy.

As a generative (Chomskian) linguist I believed that only oral language was real language. Literacy was only a derivative and relatively trivial “code”. After all, oral language arose in humans long ago (Pinker 1994). It is a good part of what separated humans from their primate relatives. On the other hand, literacy is a relatively recent cultural invention (Olson 1996). Writing has been invented independently only a few times in history. All human groups have had oral language, but not all cultures have had literacy and not all have it today. In the not too distant past, in fact, literacy was rare within societies and across the world.

When I attended the meeting, I was surprised to find out there were any adults in the United States who were “illiterate”, let alone the supposed millions I was told were so or close to it. Since everyone in the U.S. went to school, how could this have happened? I assumed schools gave everyone an equal chance and at least ensured that everyone learned to read and write.

When I attended the meeting, I was as naïve as I could be. I thought that surely literacy would be a simple, straightforward topic of little depth (I should have known better, since many languages in the world do not even have a word for “literacy”). Surely, literacy was just a practical matter of no theoretical interest. It was not something real academics would study,

As I studied literacy the whole topic seemed stranger and stranger. Simplicity turned to complexity. Paradoxes abounded. Because I had been “coerced” to work on literacy and was trying to get any help I could, I ended up meeting Sarah Michaels, then working at Harvard and now at Clark University. My colleague David Dickinson (now at Vanderbilt) introduced me to Sarah.

Sarah showed me data she and others had collected on first-grade “sharing-time” sessions in schools. Sharing-time is something teachers of very young children tend to do to start off the school day. It is sometimes called “rug time” or “show and tell”. At the time I could not have imagined anything seemingly less important.

Sarah and her colleagues had found that some African-American children gave sharing-time turns that were different from those of the white children in the classrooms (Cazden 2001;

Michaels 1981; Michaels & Cazden 1986; Michaels & Cook-Gumperz 1979; Michaels & Collins 1984). These African-American children told what Sarah called “topic-associating” stories, while the Anglo children (and some of the other African-American children) told “topic-centered” stories.

Topic-associating stories were ones that appeared to move from topic to topic with no overt theme. The unifying theme had to be supplied by the listener. Topic-centered stories were ones that focused on and developed one unitary explicit topic. These were usually, in fact, not, in really stories, but reports, such as an “event cast” of a trip to a swimming pool, or procedures, such as the steps involved in making a candle.

The African-American children’s sharing-time turns were not well received by their teachers. The teachers thought the children were rambling on and not making sense. The teachers in these classrooms had instituted a rule that each turn had to be about “one important thing” and felt the African-American children often violated this rule.

The teachers, it turns out, could seamlessly interrupt and interact with the white children and the African-American children who told topic-focused stories, though not with the topic-associating African-American children. In a sort of interactive dance the teachers helped the topic-focused children produce a piece of language that, while spoken, was explicit and topic-focused in the way we later expect school-based writing to be.

Sarah and her colleagues argued that these sharing-time sessions were early practice at literacy or literate language for children who could not yet read and write very well. This was not necessarily the teachers' conscious plan, but it seemed to be the underlying goal in their practice.

When I looked at the sharing-time data, a number of the African-American stories stood out. They were long, robust, well-organized poetic stories. Unfortunately, the researchers had thrown these stories out of their data, concentrating on the shorter ones told by the African-American children. They did this in order "control for length", since the white children's sharing-time turns, in particular, were relatively short (because they were so concise).

It appeared to me that some of the shorter African-American turns were cases where children had been stopped by the teacher and told to sit down (for not talking about one important thing). Or they were cases where the child had started a story, but for one reason or another did not choose to finish it. The stories that were clearly finished seemed thematically based, but not loosely structured. While they were not like early versions of the sort of explicit, concise language we later expect in reports and essays, they were "literate" in the sense of being early versions of the literary language we expect in poetry and other forms of literary art.

In my early work I showed that some of the African-American children in the sharing-time research were giving the teacher a quite recognizable linguistic performance ("oral literature"). Their performances were rooted in a long history of African-Americans going back to Africa. They are a type of performance once prevalent in many other cultures, though done in somewhat different ways in each. They are also a type of performance that, via figures like Homer and

Chaucer, is the foundation of Western written literature. Of course, these were young children and, thus, early in their apprenticeships to this cultural verbal style, though obviously well on their way.

One thing that went on in these classrooms was in was that children some of the African-American children were misled by the ways in which teachers (and many academics) use the word “story” to cover both narrative verbal texts with plots and oral texts more akin to reports or the news (e.g., going swimming or making candles). In fact, following the original sharing-time terminology I have continued this unfortunate tradition here.

Some of the African-American children thought the teacher really wanted a story and gave her a culturally-embedded version of one. But the teacher was actually after a news-like report through which she could scaffold early school-based literate language in the “expository” style (i.e., linear, sequenced, concise, explicit, non-poetic, non-literary, expository language). All children need practice in many different styles, of course. But such a lack of clarity about goals, practice, and what language means creates a fundamental unfairness.

These children were being seen as deficient when they were enacting a culturally known, important, and impressive way of being, making meaning, and using language. They were not being seen as an African-American storytellers. Furthermore, they were not being helped to recognize the ways with words the teacher expected. The teachers assumed the children already all knew what they, the teachers, wanted—what the “rules of the game” were—and, thus, did not tell them. Many of the “mainstream” children (white and black) in the classrooms had engaged

in sharing-time like reports to their parents at dinner time, another now well-studied phenomenon.

A deep problem here is that these were very young children. They were being told by an authority figure, as part of their early socialization into schooling, that they did not make sense. This is not because the teachers were bad people. It was because they did not know that these African-American children were using ways with words that had come from their early socialization into their own home-based culture, a culture tied to the historical legacy of oral literature. This sort of “cultural misunderstanding” (misrecognition, missed opportunities for recognition) can and often does alienate children from school and school-based language and literacy. It can force such young children to choose between family and school in terms of who makes sense.

All these issues were in my mind as I remembered in a busy day that I was due in a few hours to go over from Boston University to Harvard to give my talk. I realized, with a panic, that I had not really prepared the talk and so sat down to write it out (by hand, in those days). All the confusions, discussions, and interactions that I had been having over literacy with colleagues and texts (outside of and far from theoretical linguistics) all of sudden jelled. The paper just poured out of me with no revision. When I delivered it, the respondent got up and said “All I can do is ask him to read it again”, he liked it so much. During questions after the talk, a Harvard graduate student said, with trepidation, “I liked the talk, but Jeanne is here, and I would guess she would not have liked it”. She was referring to Jeanne Chall, perhaps the greatest reading scholar of the

20th Century, and a woman feared by some (ok, many). Jeanne thought for a minute and said, with a sound of surprise, “I can’t think of anything I disagree with in the paper”.

This was how my (second) career as a literacy scholar in education—and no longer a syntactician in linguistics—started in earnest. Though I have long hoped it would happen again, no paper ever again leapt so effortlessly from pen (or keyboard) to paper (or screen) as did the first. I think my work in this area has had impact, but that is not for me to say.

3. What approach, conceptual framework and/or methodology did you adopt for the project and why?

The paper was almost entirely theory building with examples from the research I was doing on the sharing-time data. I adopted this approach because of my training in generative linguistics. Generative linguistics is based on taking the word “language” and giving it a specific definition in terms of a theory about what its core properties are taken to be. The theory does not cover all aspects of language, nor does it cover the everyday meaning of the term. The theory singles out one core meaning of the word and uses the theory to explicate and explain the properties that language has in that core sense. The proof, then, becomes whether interesting results and discoveries follow from the theory. I approached “literacy” in the same spirit.

4. Why do you think this project provided such insights?

Timing. At the time (in the 1980s) educational research was really changing. Lots of people from different disciplines, but not necessarily with degrees in Education, were beginning to find educational problems highly significant and ripe for new approaches. Such people—like myself, with a degree in linguistics but never having taken a course in education—were, in fact, usually welcomed warmly by Schools of Education and educators, at least in my experience. As I argued in *Social Linguistics and Literacies* lots of people in the 1980s were beginning to work on literacy from all different disciplinary angles, but converging on a sociocultural approach (e.g., Brian Street, Shirley Brice Heath, Harvey Graff, Michael Cole, Sylvia Scribner, Ron Scollon, Suzanne Scollon, Gunther Kress, Alan Luke, Jay Lemke, Colin Lankshear, Peter Freebody, Bill Cope, Mary Kalantzis, Sarah Michaels, Courtney Cazden, David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and others). My work saw and caught a wave.

5 In retrospect, what would you do differently? To address the same or a similar problem now, would you use the same or a different approach?

I have continued to work in the area and have repeatedly done things differently to improve the earlier work, I hope. In *The Social Mind* (1992), I sought to deal with the ways in which the mind is social and, thus, to think about how work on learning in situated/embodied cognition could be added to the New Literacy Studies work. In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), I sought to relate newer digital literacies and digital media

to literacy more traditionally conceived. In *The Anti-Education Era* (2013), I sought to embed literacy in the larger framework of today's global crises and the need for collective intelligence before we put the human species out of business.

There is a deep reason though why I would not have done "What is Literacy?" differently. I have never been able to write well about what I know too much about. When I know a great deal about an area, I find I can offer nothing very much other than cautious tales and quite limited and deeply hedged claims. The work might be factually "truer", but it is not very motivating for readers and does not lead to much real impact. When I know "too much", I move on.

6. What do you think other researchers could learn from this project and its approach?

What I have always thought fuelled my work, and whatever contributions I have made or impact I have had, was that I was always on the lookout for how melding a new area of interest with an old one could give rise to new ideas, even if the two areas seemed quite unconnected. It was relating new interests in distributed parallel processing ("connectionism") in psychology to old work on literacy that gave rise to *The Social Mind*. It was relating new interests in so-called "fast capitalism" in the business world to old work on literacy that gave rise to *The New Work Order* (1993). It was playing video games with my then six-year-old son that gave rise to *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. My recent book, *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, Reality, Virtual Worlds, and Video Games* (2014) was an attempt

to relate my interest in discourse analysis in linguistics to my interest in video games and both to my interest in literacy, an interest which was itself now moving to an interest in multi-modality.

The same sort of thing has been true of most of my books.

7. What further research do you think still needs to be done in this area?

Some of what I thought should be done, I did. Right now, in a world where the nature of diversity, inequality, risk, institutions, media, economies, and the global world is deeply changed from the 1960s, the world in which Baby-Boomers like myself (born in 1948) came of age, what I think we need most is new theories based on that changed world and all the new ideas that have recently proliferated in fields outside of Education. Young scholars today sometimes follow the lead of old ones and their theories and methods too slavishly. We need young scholars to create real innovation, albeit in a very high-risk academic world these days. This is beginning to happen in some areas where the tech-savvy nature of younger scholars is leading them to innovate, but it is not really happening in areas like learning, literacy, diversity, and schooling. In my view, more young scholars need to feel the need—and right—to engage in theory building.

8. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the project, and this or other areas of literacy research?

Here are ten things my journey from “What is Literacy?” to video games has taught me:

1. If something seems trivial, it probably isn't (study it)
2. If two things don't seem connected, they probably are (search for the connection)
3. Don't wait until you know all you need to know to join the discussion
4. From time to time, revisit long settled matters and reopen the “black box” and ask, “Why did we all agree on this?”
5. Never wait until a piece of work is “perfect”—that just stunts the conversation
6. The point is not for you or me to be “right”, it is for us all together to make things better
7. The point of academics is ideas, ideas which we hope will help
8. Learn something deeply and then find something new that you don't know much about and seek connections
9. There is no way to engage in any empirical work without a theory, so always ask yourself what your theory is and then work to make it better and clearer
10. Write to be read by others; make your writing as accessible as you can while still being fair to the content

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