The Limits of the Local-‘Autonomous’ or ‘Disembedding’?

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New Literacy Studies (NLS) is an approach to the understanding of literacy that starts from the premise that literacy is a social; practice (Gee, 1991; Barton et. al., 2000; Street, 1984; 1993). NLS researchers and practitioners ask what follows if we consider literacy as a social practice rather than a decontextualised skills (as in many approaches to reading acquisition), or as a metaphor for competence (as in the phrases ‘political literacy’ or ‘palpatory literacy’), or an embracing all channels of communication (as in the notion that each modality or channel is a ‘literacy’- hence ‘visual literacy’, ‘gestural literacy’ and even ‘oral literacy’). NLS in contrast focuses on the uses and meanings of literacy in different cultural and social contexts, leading to the recognition of ‘multiple literacies’. On this basis, a number of researchers have begun to provide ethnographic style accounts of these multiple literacies as they are enacted in local contexts (cf Martin-Jones, M and Jones, K, 2000).

A major tenet of NLS has been that literacy is not an ‘autonomous’ thing, a skill that when learned has consequences that follow simply from the nature of the medium. Technological determinism has previously dominated the account of literacy, hence the term ‘autonomous model’ referring to the model of literacy that assumes the technology of literacy in itself had ‘impact’. This has led to claims that the invention of the printing press, or of the pen or latterly of computers will change the way we think and behave. The alternative, ‘ideological’ model of literacy would claim, rather, that it is the social construction of such technologies and their instantiation in specific social contexts that creates such ‘impact’ rather than literacy and its technologies in themselves. Whilst this may appear an obscure academic debate at one level, once we look to the social policies and resource allocations associated with literacy—whether in national schooling systems or in Development Programmes for ‘illiterate’ adults for instance-, we realize that these underlying ideas are immensely powerful at political, economic and ideological levels. Hence the importance of the current debate about the ‘impact’ of new communicative technologies. From an NLS perspective, this debate is in danger of adopting the same autonomous model that researchers have rejected with respect to print literacy. With regard to accounts of the nature and significance of new digital technologies, it sometimes appears that the analytic gains that followed from treating literacy as social practice are being lost as commentators revert to older determinist and reductionist accounts of the ‘impact’ of ‘new literacies’. In this paper, I will explore the thinking involved in such application of the autonomous model to contemporary literacy practices, including new digital technologies. I will draw upon two main sources that have provided some of the critical and analytic tools that can help such an endeavour: a critique by Brandt and Clinton of ‘the limits of the local’ in NLS; and an attempt by Giddens to characterize the communicative institutions of Late Modernity.
Brandt & Clinton (2002) have recently commented on “the limits of the local” apparent in many of the accounts provided by scholars in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) tradition. They argue that NLS ought to be more prepared to take account of the relatively “autonomous” features of literacy without succumbing to the autonomous model with its well documented flaws. This would involve, for instance, recognizing the extent to which literacy does often come to “local” situations from outside and brings with it both skills and meanings that are larger than the emic perspective favored by NLS can always detect. Whilst acknowledging the value of the social practice approach, they:

wonder if the new paradigm sometimes veers too far in a reactive direction, exaggerating the power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes. Literacy practices are not typically invented by their practitioners. Nor are they independently chosen or sustained by them. Literacy in use more often than not serves multiple interests, incorporating individual agents and their locales into larger enterprises that play out away from the immediate scene. (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 1)

They also point out the important and powerful role of consolidating technologies that can destabilize the functions, uses, values and meanings of literacy anywhere. These technologies generally originate outside of the local context; they cannot be undertood simply in terms of local practices Whilst the field has learned much from the recent turn to “local literacies”, they fear that “something [might] be lost when we ascribe to local contexts responses to pressures that originate in distant decisions, especially when seemingly local appropriations of literacy may in fact be culminations of literate designs originating elsewhere” (p.2).

I would agree with most of Brandt & Clinton’s characterization here of the relationship between the local and the “distant” and indeed it is the focus on this relationship, rather than on one or other of the sites, that characterizes the best of NLS. Brandt & Clinton’s account here provides a helpful way of characterizing the local/ global debate in which literacy practices play a central role. But, I would want to distinguish between agreeing with their caveat about overemphasizing “the local” and labelling the “distant” as more “autonomous”. The “distant” literacies to which Brandt & Clinton refer are also always ideological and to term them autonomous might be to concede too much to their neutralist claims.

Brandt & Clinton’s concern with the overemphasis on the local in some NLS accounts, their recognition that for many people the literacies they engage with come from elsewhere and are not self invented; and that there is more going on in a local literacy than “just local practice”, are all important caveats to deter NLS from over emphasizing or romanticizing the local, as it has been accused of doing (cf response by Street to McCabe, 1995 in Prinsloo & Breier, 1996). But this important debate can be continued without resorting to terming “distant” literacies as “autonomous”--as Brandt & Clinton imply in their attempt to address certain “autonomous” aspects of literacy without appealing to the “autonomous model” of literacy. The features of distant literacies are actually no more autonomous than those of local literacies, or indeed than any literacy practices: their distantness, their relative power over local literacies and their “non-invented” character as far as local users are concerned, do not make them “autonomous”, only “distant”, “new”, or hegemonic. To study such processes we need a framework and
conceptual tools that can characterize the relation between local and “distant”. The question raised in the early NLS work concerning how we can characterize the shift from observing literacy events to conceptualizing literacy practices does, I think, provide both a methodological and empirical way of dealing with this relation and thereby taking account of Brandt and Clinton’s concern with the “limits of the local”.

NLS practitioners might also take issue with the apparent suggestion that distant literacies come to local contexts with their force and meaning intact. As Kulick & Stroud (1993) indicated a decade ago in their study of new literacy practices brought by missionaries to New Guinea, local peoples more often “take hold” of these new practices and adapt them to local circumstances. The result of local-global encounters around literacy is always a new hybrid rather than a single essentialized version of either. It is these hybrid literacy practices that NLS focuses upon rather than either romanticizing the local or conceding the dominant privileging of the supposed “global”. In terms of practical applications, it is the recognition of this hybridity that lies at the heart of an NLS approach to literacy acquisition regarding, for instance, the relationship between local literacy practices and those of the school.

How, then, might we characterize the ‘distant’ in Brandt & Clinton’s account without employing the term ‘autonomous’ with all its flawed assumptions. A number of glosses on the point that literacy is not just ‘local’ were made by a Literacy class at the University of Pennsylvania eg ‘text has a life of its own’; ‘trans-contextualisation’; ‘global aspect’; ‘not invented locally’; ‘the original still exists’ (even when locals ‘take hold of and adapt an introduced literacy as in Kulick & Stroud’s account of New Guinea responses to missionary literacies). One way of characterizing these different ‘takes’ is to recognize that they differ depending on which frame the author adopts eg literary; anthropological; philosophical; educational; sociological. Having recently addressed the anthropological frame (Street, 2003) and anticipated the educational one (Street, forthcoming; cf also Pahl 2002), I would like here to consider Giddens’ broader sociological approach to these issues.

Giddens offers a set of analytic terms that raise similar issues to Brandt & Clinton and which might be helpful in capturing just what is ‘distant’ and what ‘local’ in literacy practices. In characterizing Late Modernity, he suggests that one of its main features is ‘Disembedding Mechanisms’. These

‘consist of symbolic tokens and expert systems (these together = abstract systems).
Disembedding mechanisms separate interaction from the particularities of locales ...
Symbolic tokens are media of exchange which have standard value, and thus are interchangeable across a plurality of contexts’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 20).

The classic example of symbolic tokens is money which operates as an abstract system across time and space. Likewise, ‘expert systems bracket time and space through deploying modes of technical knowledge which have validity independent of practitioners and clients who make use of them’ (p. 18). For Brandt, as I suspect for Giddens, literacy can be seen in a similar way to money, as an abstract system that operates across time and space and that calls upon expert knowledge beyond that of local practitioners. Indeed, Giddens does cite the development of literacy as a form of ‘mediation’ that has many of these features. But, as with Brandt’s account, we have to be careful here not to be drawn back into the ‘autonomous’
model as we attempt to characterize the features of literacy that operate across time and space as ‘disembedding mechanisms’ and as ‘expert systems’.

Giddens cites a typical exponent of the autonomous model, Walter Ong, in linking studies of speaking and writing to his accounts of modernity. Ong, he notes, believes that

‘oral cultures have a heavy investment in the past, which registers in their highly conservative institutions and in their verbal performances and poetic processes, which are formulaic, relatively invariable, calculated to preserve the hard-won knowledge garnered out of past experience which, since there is no writing to record it, would otherwise slip away’ (Ong, 1977 cited in Giddens, 1991, p. 24).

Such a view of the ‘conservative’ nature of so-called ‘oral culture’ and, by contrast, the ‘disembodied’, ‘scientific’, ‘dynamic’, ‘flexible’ character of societies with writing, has been discredited by work within the social literacies field that, as we have seen, demonstrates the complex dialectic between local and global influences present in the uses of literacy across different cultural contexts (Street, 1984; Finnegnan, 1988). Giddens, to be fair, does attempt to tread more carefully than Ong across this terrain, citing Levi-Strauss, Innis and McLuhan as authors who ‘have theorized the impact of media on social development in a sophisticated fashion’. For instance, the latter two have emphasized ‘the connections between dominant kinds of media and space-time transformations’. At first the account seems to fall back into the determinism typical of the autonomous model:

‘The degree to which a medium serves to alter space-time relations does not depend primarily on the content or the ‘messages’ it carries, but on its form and reproducibility’.

As examples of the impact of form he cites Innis on the introduction of papyrus, the invention of the printing press, Brooker-Gross on the way the telegraph affected the mass circulation of newspapers and, latterly, the development of electronic communication. All of these media, Giddens suggests, altered the relationship between local and distant, as did television, films and videos.

However, Giddens proposes a subtler take on this potential media determinism than was apparent in the autonomous model or in some of the current ‘multi-literacies’ literature (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). His position suggests a balance between ‘expression’ and ‘instrumentality’:

‘Yet, like newspapers, magazines, periodicals and printed materials of other sorts, these media are as much an expression of disembedding, globalising tendencies of modernity as they are the instruments of such tendencies’ (p. 26).

There is more of a dialectic here between media and practices than is allowed for in the autonomous model. For instance, both newspapers and media offer ‘collage’ effects, in which ‘news’ and events from many different places and times are juxtaposed. This, however, is not just a chaotic jumble but involves ‘orderings of consequentiality’. Such orderings would be better characterized through the ideological model of literacy as social practices that take hold of media and its potentials than as in the autonomous model somehow instrumentally effecting particular social outcomes, such as disembedding. The disembedding depends on the uses of the media in specific local contexts: one might as well find newspapers and TV ‘news’ programmes embedded in local politics and stories as reaching out
to more global time-space relations, as any international traveler to the USA must quickly note. And even where their content does take account of more global concerns, it is often mediated by local interests. The global, then, remains embedded in the local-that is where it is enacted and the availability of new ‘forms’, new electronic media, does not in itself achieve ‘disembedding’.

Indeed, Giddens does recognize this feature of new media in his account of a further significant feature of ‘mediated experience’, namely ‘the intrusion of distant events into everyday consciousness’ (p. 27). For, whilst ‘many of the events reported on the news, for instance, might be experienced by the individual as external and remote’, nevertheless ‘many equally enter routinely into everyday activity’. Indeed, the familiarity generated by such mediated experience might lead to the strange inversion whereby real objects and events may seem less ‘real’ than those represented in media. It is the ‘local’ experience of such global phenomena, their familiarity, that makes them ‘real’. Summarising these complex arguments, Giddens appears to make his own implicit claim that this account of local/global and its relation to forms of communication media including literacy, should not be reduced to the autonomous model: ‘In conditions of modernity, in sum, the media do not mirror realities but in some part form them; but this does not mean that we should draw the conclusion that the media have created an autonomous realm of hyperreality where the sign or image is everything’ (p. 27).

Might it be possible, then, to take on board Brandt’s concern that social approaches to literacy should not over privilege the local (cf Freebody et al 2001) and that literacy can be seen as ‘distant’, not locally invented’ etc., without succumbing to the unwarranted claims of the autonomous model. Perhaps Giddens’ concept of ‘disembedding’ could be applied to the potential of all forms of communication, including literacy, electronic media etc whilst maintaining the ethnographic sensitivity to the local interpretation and mediation of such forms through local practices. Like money and other symbolic tokens and expert systems, literacy has both the potential to disembled, to ‘separate interaction from the particularities of locales’, and yet at the same time is always instantiated, its potential realized, through local practices.

**References**


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