Literacy practices are intimately connected to the economic, social, cultural, educational, and intellectual dimensions of our lives; and similarly so, even the most ordinary events of our daily lives involve literacy practices. We argue that if schools are going to prepare young people to participate in and contribute to a diverse, complex, and democratic society, then literacy education must begin with recognition of the diversity of ways that written language is used by people across social institutions, communities, and social situations, with recognition of how people adopt and adapt extant literacy practices to new situations and needs, with recognition of how literacy practices connect people and social institutions with each other and with local, national, and global contexts, and with recognition with how literacy practices construct social relationships among people and provide social identities.

In order to understand multiple literacies, one has to start with local geography and how people move through their daily lives. We begin where we live, Columbus, Ohio.

Near the geographic center of Columbus is the county government building; from its upper floors one can see nearly all of Columbus. To the west, just over the river, is the science museum, a large building marking the boundary between downtown and a working-class neighborhood called Franklinton. As one looks out over Franklinton, one can see wood frame houses, churches, warehouses, a few stores, a few small manufacturing plants, a cemetery, a minor league baseball stadium, and empty fields. To the south lies the Brewery District and German Village. Their names reflect their history, and their involvement in gentrification, with lavishly renovated brick
houses and restaurants. Looking to the southeast is a broad area called the South Side. Much of its population is poor and working class, African American and White, some of whom derive their heritage from Appalachia or the South. A few large manufacturing plants dot the area, small stores, churches, schools, a few parks, small businesses, and a mixture of meticulously kept small, wood frame homes and yards, with occasional vacant houses and empty lots. A major highway, a hospital complex, and the concrete campus of the local community college form a border between the south and north sides.

To the northeast is the downtown business area, retail stores, the State of Ohio legislature, museums, and cultural institutions. Just beyond downtown lies the Mount Vernon Boulevard area, with some large and some small wood frame houses. Once the thriving center of the African American community in Columbus, it is now experiencing difficult economic times with few stores, some homes and buildings in need of repair, along with some White gentrification. Further northeast are diverse neighborhood communities; some predominantly African American, some integrated White and African American, some White, some working class, and some middle class. Some of the stores, churches, community centers, and neighborhoods reflect a history of settlement and community participation among international ethnic and linguistic heritages: Somali, Mexican, Central American, and others.

To the north of the County government building is the Nationwide Insurance complex, Short North (an area of restaurants, art galleries, and shops), the gentrified area known as Victorian Village with its large brick houses, the Ohio State University campus, and the predominantly White and middle class communities of Clintonville and Beechwold. Like islands, to the north one can see the independent, predominantly White and upper middle class municipalities and school districts of Upper Arlington, Grandview Heights, and Worthington, wholly surrounded by Columbus. And similarly to the east, is the municipality of Bexley.

Looking out on Columbus, some might be inclined to see economic progress; a thriving business center; a government center; a community that is increasingly diverse ethnically, linguistically, racially, and economically; and a locus of cultural and educational institutions—from churches to art galleries to music halls to museums to universities—enriching the daily lives of Columbus citizens. Others might see a community still divided by race and class, trenchant poverty abutting opulent wealth, the substitution of local enterprise with national branding, and the home of a state government more recently known for corruption and incompetence than service. Both views may be correct.

But as we look out at Columbus, we see all of these activities, geographies, movements, developments, and troubles as mediated by diverse literacy practices. Stated simply, people use written language to make their daily lives, to earn a living, to operate their businesses, to provide and receive public service, to educate, to create joy and to create pain, to segregate, to promulgate justice and injustice, to impoverish, to pray and promote spirituality, to create caring relationships, to marginalize and dismiss others, and to move from one part of Columbus to another. If we are to understand Columbus, Ohio, then we have to understand the diverse literacy practices that enable and constrain its economic, social, cultural, political, and educational life. Reciprocally, to understand literacy practices, we have to understand Columbus—not as static geography, but as complex activities and movements through place and time.

Each of the activities and the different social institutions in which they take place requires different ways of using written language. If one is to participate in those activities, one has to know how to appropriately use written language in that activity and how to adapt those literacy practices to new situations, to changing situations, and to new personal and group goals. It is not enough to know the sounds that correspond to the letters, and then simply render a text into oral language or visa versa. To be informed, active, and effective in Columbus, one has to know which written texts are appropriate and needed in which situations; what can be accomplished by those texts (and what cannot be accomplished); who can use those texts and who is excluded from such uses (excluded by law or by
tradition); how such texts are to be used (e.g., read aloud, filed, written upon, read silently, followed literally, interpreted loosely); how such texts are related to other texts; what assumptions are required to interpret a text; where a text can be obtained and where it needs to be stored; what texts guide and frame the evaluation of social interaction, when, where, how, and for whom; and which texts can be used appropriately across different activities, situations, and institutional contexts.

If schools are going to prepare young people to participate in and contribute to diverse and complex geographies such as Columbus, if schools are going to prepare young people to participate in a democratic society with all of its opportunities and troubles, then literacy education must begin with

- recognition of the diversity of ways written language is used by people across social institutions, communities, and social situations;
- recognition that students must understand both how to adopt extant literacy practices and how to adapt them to new situations and needs;
- recognition that students must understand how literacy practices connect social institutions with each other, local contexts with national and global contexts; and,
- recognition that how literacy practices are structured and how they provide meaning constructs social relationships among people and social groups, as well as provides social identities to individuals.

**Breakfast in Columbus and a Definition of Literacy Practices**

Recently, we met for breakfast at Jack & Benny’s, a local Clintonville restaurant. When we sat down, the waitress asked us if we wanted coffee and then gave us menus. Dave glanced at the menu to insure that his favorite breakfast item was still there, Pat took more time and then looked at the specials that were posted on sheets of paper on the walls. We told the waitress what we wanted when she returned; she followed up by asking how we wanted our eggs cooked. This was a literacy practice, a way of using written language within a specific type of social setting. Regardless of the restaurant, we can expect to find a menu and to use that menu to identify the set of items from which to select what we want to eat. We also expect to be asked what our selection is, although we understand that certain aspects of the ordering will not be represented in the menu.

The shared expectations people have about how to use written language in a specific type of social setting are material; which is merely to note that different kinds of texts, physical arrangements, and ways of communicating and interacting are implicated in different kinds of literacy practices. In a restaurant, people use menus, tables and chairs, and counters and stools. At a bank, there are forms located on counters with no chairs; tellers stand on the other side of a wall as you stand waiting for them to complete their literacy practices. The texts in a law office contain legal rulings, legal briefs, and similar writings; and what lawyers do is translate the issues their clients bring to them into legal texts using written language practices they acquired in law school and through their experiences in the legal system. In church, there are prayer books and pews arranged to face forward toward the pulpit. In school, there are textbooks, worksheets, lined paper, desks, and chairs, organized into rooms by grades and specialized services.

**Coffee and Literacy Practices at Starbucks in Columbus**

Even within a specific type of social setting, such as a restaurant, there can be systematically structured variation in literacy practices that corresponds to social, cultural, political, and economic variation. And these variations can make a huge difference in structuring boundaries among people, constructing geography, and in creating differential privilege.

For example, consider the literacy practices that occur and are promoted at Starbucks Coffee houses. One orders coffee using terms from foreign languages posted on a wall menu (e.g., Cinnamon Dolce Latte), with numerous permutations. There is printed information explaining Starbucks’s
philosophy of coffee roasting and service to the community. There are areas for sitting and reading, and almost all have wireless connections so that patrons can connect to the Internet with their laptop computers. Unlike ordering coffee at Jack & Benny’s, the local donut shop, or Speedway Gas Stations, one cannot simply order “Coffee to go, black” and get change back from two dollar bills. Although there are no legal or business restrictions, one is unlikely to find too many patrons at Starbucks wearing work boots or company uniforms.

There are 53 Starbucks Coffee houses located in Columbus, and all are located in the northern half of the city, in the middle and upper class neighborhoods, except for one that is located in German Village, the gentrified middle class neighborhood just south of downtown (Retrieved November 6, 2005, from http://www.starbucksstore.com/guestassist/shcontus.asp). And although it could be argued that Starbucks locations simply reflect its likely customer base and those able to afford and willing to pay thee or more dollars for coffee, the literacy practices accommodated by and encouraged by Starbucks also align with that clientele. The accommodation to those literacy practices is a business strategy with implications for social identity. That is, getting one’s morning coffee at Starbucks and participating in its domain of literacy practices identifies one as a member of a particular social and economic class.

Of course, the literacy practices associated with Starbucks are not limited to those its patrons employ in ordering coffee or using its parlors. There are literacy practices used by its employees for making coffee and interacting with customers, recording and accounting the purchases, marketing to the local area, planning a national business strategy and marketing campaign, interacting with coffee brokers and shippers, and dealing with various financial institutions, etc. Although different people engage in, learn, and have expertise with the different literacy practices that make up Starbucks, one of the business strengths of Starbucks is being able to align and coordinate these various literacy practices, which result in a lucrative domination of the retail coffee shop market through branding (cf., Klein, 2000), and that have created a cultural icon and activity that has changed an aspect of the daily lives of those who live north of the County government building. At the same time, the domination of Starbucks and other corporations both economically and culturally has led to a series of literacy practices called *culture jamming*, satires that undercut the cultural aura of such corporations and their literacy practices (Klein, 2000; Lasn, 2000; see also *Adbusters* [www.adbusters.org]).

**Multiple Literacies in Schools**

Consider the beginning of a school day in one elementary school just north of downtown Columbus. Teachers travel to the school from their homes in the north, south, east, and west, and enter the school through the building’s front and side doors, often carrying coffee cups, perhaps from Starbucks. The coffee is possibly strong, maybe flavored, and sheathed in a brown coffee cup “sleeve,” which one iteration had printed, “The Way I See It #80/Anger is a vital life force. Channeled artistically or nondestructively, it has the power to move worlds. —Alanis Morissette Musician.” (print recorded in March 9, 2006). In addition to reading the print already encountered in the process of making the purchase, these coffee drinkers may have read about the health issues associated with caffeine. A cup of coffee appears to be an isolated object, but attached to it are health reports, financial and global economic analyses, marketing strategies, and international trade agreements that connect the daily lives of coffee bean farm workers in South America and Africa with teachers in Columbus. Many teachers, like adults working throughout the city, have accomplished one of the first tenets of literacy education that takes multiple literacies seriously: In purchasing coffee, reading about its effects, and considering its inclusion in their work lives, they have understood and made use of a diversity of ways written language is used by people across social institutions, communities, and social situations.

For the children at this elementary school, breakfast is signaled by the “Breakfast Door.” The school’s Web site instructs children and families
how the school day will begin for those eating breakfast in the building:

Breakfast Program

Students who purchase breakfast will be allowed to enter the building beginning at 8:40 AM using the “Breakfast Door,” which is the gym door on the south side of the building. Only students who are eating breakfast will be permitted to enter the building at this time. … No students are to enter the hallways and classrooms from the Breakfast Room unless accompanied by an adult.¹

Children’s entrance into the school building depends on specific boundaries of time and space intended to create order and predictability—boundaries created and communicated through a set of literacy practices. Once children enter the building, expectations for appropriate behavior and procedures for food distribution and consumption are reinforced by signs posted and by adult monitors.

Breakfast, distributed and eaten in the gym/cafeteria, usually consists of fruit-flavored drink and milk and a choice of cereal or pastry. The pastry and cereal are prepackaged and carry corporate symbols along with the required list of ingredients and nutritional values. Although the print is added to the packaging to insure informed choice for consumers, it appears that children, who are the consumers in this case, are not expected to read or question the value of their food. Unlike the adults who consider their breakfast choices, remembering the pros and cons of caffeine they had read about, children are not expected to use the available written texts to evaluate school breakfasts or how they are produced as they make their food choices. There are no choices to make anyway.

Yet, if anyone wanted to find out, a great deal of information about the school breakfast program is available via the Internet, although such information is barely visible to parents and children as it is unconnected to any of the literacy practices in which parents or children are likely to engage. The signs and material conditions of breakfast for children (regulated beginning and ending times, brightly colored packaging, limited choice and limited attention to print) formulated as an act of charity are in sharp contrast to the signs of breakfast for adults (elaborate names and descriptions of food, subdued, matched color schemes, music, carefully designed doorways and pathways, Internet access) which are selected and organized by business owners to align the act of consumption with a sense of choice, self-definition, comfort, and class privilege.

Breakfast is a site for learning differentiated literacy practices—and in the process of learning and enacting those literacy practices, learning who one is within the context of that practice. The children and teachers learn, through their participation in patterns of movement, selection, use of objects, and attention or inattention to packaging, that they are certain kinds of people in school, with varying degrees of agency, choice, and privilege, who are expected to use print for some purposes and not others.

Breakfast, Multiple Literacies, and Structural Relations

If children and their teachers critically examined the literacy practices mediating breakfast at school, they might ask questions about the texts produced and used to define the nutritional value of a meal, that define school versus home, or that determine how and why food comes from places outside of their local communities. They might ask why a door is called a “breakfast door,” why breakfast has so many rules, and why some people are allowed to go in the building to eat while others stay outside. The children and their teachers would soon find what we label as the second tenet of literacy education; the ways literacy practices are structured and how they provide meaning, choice, and constraint, construct social relationships among people and social groups, as well as provide social identities to individuals.

If their inquiry continued into a study of the ways foods are produced and transported across the globe and within their own communities, children would also be able to associate print and the everyday event of breakfast with a third tenet of literacy education: Literacy practices connect social institutions with each other across local, national, and global contexts.
Having entered into a critical way of using and thinking about and with print that highlights the social, institutional, and economic implications of an everyday event like eating breakfast, children and teachers would also be prepared to adopt and adapt critical inquiry about literacy practices for other situations, including how print is produced and how it functions in transportation to and from work for the people in the school. They might ask questions about gas signs, legislative bills that open natural wildernesses to oil drilling, racial segregation in schools, mass transportation debates, and perhaps even the war in Iraq.

Chess, Drumming, and the Adaptation of Literacy Practices

At another Columbus elementary school, children participate in two popular clubs—chess and drumming. These clubs, like the breakfast event, offer many opportunities for participating in and examining literacy events and practices that are related to a fourth tenet of literacy education: People must adapt and improvise literacy practices; they must go beyond mere acquisition to shaping literacy practices by drawing on their resources (from home, school, and their communities) to create and add something new.

In order to become a member of the chess club, a novice has to learn the basic chess moves and how to write chess notations. To facilitate such learning, many first and second grade students are invited by older children to play chess during their recess time. The chess coach, a community volunteer, does not teach the basic moves; he expects an older student to have taught a younger student.

Similarly, the drumming club is formed through the induction of younger members by older members into the basic beats and compositions used in performances. At the end of every school year, in a public “handing off” ritual on the front steps of the school, graduating fifth graders hand over their drums to someone they recognize as an avid drumming student—someone who knows the beats but can also improvise. In the school’s basement classroom, the school’s music director organizes concerts and teaches all students how to play the drums as part of their regularly scheduled lessons.

But it is the drumming club and their practice sessions during recesses in the music room that help children develop the confidence and skill to perform and improvise.

Both the chess and drumming clubs require attention to specialized forms of print. All participants are expected to learn and share a common oral, written, and gestural language that allows them to communicate what they know, what they need, and what they should do next. Often the oral, written, and gestural are inseparable, so that a student who shouts “Two” during a drumming performance is able to reference a printed score and its change in pattern, while the music director holds up two fingers and shifts her body weight to indicate a change in emphasis in timing. During chess tournaments, children have to be able to read local and national rankings, the order of play, the notations for tracking their own and their opponent’s moves, and attend to the specialized chess clock. Children in both clubs also have to pay attention to high stakes documents like permission forms and applications to participate in performances or tournaments. They also have to be aware of practice schedules and whether these fit well with other school events.

Print for the children in these clubs is not merely words on a page. They use and produce print in order to relate to other people, evaluate their skill, and move from school and home into other performance and play spaces. Among chess players, in particular, a great deal of discussion occurs around the meaning of rankings, how—and where—they are calculated, whether they are fair, and how they will change after a successful tournament. The literacy events and practices associated with drumming and chess lead children to examine how print is produced, for what purposes, and by whom. While all of these practices are crucial for being a drummer and a chess player, the goal of both chess and drumming is not simply to do what others have shown you how to do. Rather, the aim is to adapt to a novel situation, to invent beyond what has been shown and given.

For example, during a drumming club rehearsal or performance, the music director will use drumsticks, hitting them together, to indicate a break.
for improvisation. At this point, an individual drummer will come forward to spontaneously fill two measures with rhythms that operate in contrast with the underlying beat of the group. Sometimes children’s improvisations are rehearsed, but they are often invented in the moment as a response to the feel of the music and musicians around them. The challenge of improvisation is enormous for most nine- and ten-year-olds. They have to bring all of their knowledge, confidence, and attention into that moment and create something new.

The improvisational challenge is also part of chess, as children work with sixteen pieces and the moves each can make to progress across the chessboard, knocking out an opponent’s pieces while preserving or exchanging their own. As they learn more patterns for movement, children also learn that they can work within or around the most obvious moves. They study chess books that use specialized notations, explanations, vocabulary, and images to describe ways a player can sequence moves and countermoves. During chess tournaments that take place across the city’s schools, and in other cities and states, every player is expected to use their acquired knowledge not merely to complete familiar moves, but to improvise on that knowledge in response to each of the surprises that a game of chess invariably creates. Each player also records every move and later scrutinizes the sequence of events on the chess board, often recreating the entire match as adults and other players look on and offer their interpretations and commentary.

The practices of chess and drumming merge, at times, with the school’s expectations for membership in a community. In spaces outside of classrooms, some more open and available than others, children in this school experiment with materials and interpret print for purposes that lead to participation in public events where their use of language and materials, and their attention to others’ actions, may be recognized as both competent and innovative.

Like all those people who populate the greater Columbus area, who navigate streets and highways, find their way to cafes and breakfast spots where they can join friends in conversation about how they will make ends meet or make meetings end, children in schools need to be able to move across spaces, make decisions and engage others in their lives so they can figure out what they know, how it is useful, and how they can expand their repertoire of possible ideas and directions. A literacy without improvisation is static, without tension or interest, and available only for rote recitation. Improvisation contributes to participants’ abilities to use language and materials for their own ends, as it also contributes to the development of the literacy practice itself.

If learning multiple literacies is viewed as a matter of understanding relationships among people and texts and as an ongoing effort to define, understand, and solve complex problems in relation to multiple places, inside and outside school, then participation in shaping literacies becomes even more important than acquiring literacies. Literacy events at school, whether school breakfast or in-classroom lessons, become opportunities to use print to act upon the world in which children live, and by acting upon that world with and through written texts, acquire not just multiple literacy practices but an understanding of how to improvise literacy practices. Instead of situating literacy only as a time and place where books are read in preparation for comprehension tests and papers are written to practice the use of grammatical and rhetorical conventions, literacy events and practices extend across school, home, and community spaces, allowing students to question and participate in remaking the geography of Columbus.

**Summary**

Even in ordinary, daily events such as drinking coffee or eating breakfast, there are literacy practices that structure our social, cultural, and economic relationships with others and that contribute to our social identities. It is similarly so in classrooms.

We stated four tenets for a literacy curriculum based on the concept of multiple literacies.

1. In people’s everyday lives, they make use of a diversity of literacy practices
2. The ways literacy practices are structured and how they provide meaning, choice, and constraint construct social relationships and social identities.

3. Literacy practices connect social institutions with each other across local, national, and global contexts.

4. People must adapt and improvise literacy practices; they must go beyond mere acquisition to (re)shaping literacy practices to create and add something new.

In order to participate and thrive in a democratic society such as Columbus—with all of its opportunities and difficulties, promises, and deferred dreams (cf., Hughes, 1951)—one has to know which written texts are appropriate and needed in which situations; what can be accomplished by those texts (and what cannot be accomplished); who can use those texts and who is excluded from such uses (excluded by law or by tradition); how such texts are to be used (e.g., read aloud, filed, written upon, read silently, followed literally, interpreted loosely); how such texts are related to other texts; what assumptions are required to interpret a text; where a text can be obtained and where it needs to be stored; what texts guide and frame the evaluation of social interaction, when, where, how, and for whom; and which texts can be used appropriately across different activities, situations, and institutional contexts. Yet, it is not enough to just have knowledge of extant literacy practices. Students and teachers need to learn how to reshape those literacy practices that obstruct access to the basic qualities of safety, respected labor, adequate food, health care, education, love and caring, and justice, and in so doing reshape Columbus geography.

Notes


References


