Caught between discourses at home and school, deeply committed to the relations and values lived within his family, Jake struggled to negotiate a space for himself as a young reader and writer in the classroom. He practiced school literacies—sometimes giving himself up to the task of writing about car racing or family events, sometimes reading books reflective of his interests. Storylines voiced about him in his family, however, often seemed a stronger pull, a more powerful shaping of his boyhood identities. (Hicks, 2002, p. 123)

Introduction

Deborah Hicks’ evocative depiction of the literacy worlds of two White, working-class children, their communities, and the implications of both for the future of other working-class children serves as an apt segue for a chapter on what multimodality and New Literacy Studies contribute to literacy education. Multimodal and ethnographic perspectives, together and separately, capture a liminal space between home and school and between beloved, familiar objects and pedagogic ones informing and making more explicit the discontinuities across domains of practice that can cause difficulties for students such as Jake. Jake’s capacity to write about NASCAR miniatures alongside using a basal reader captures so well the subtle ways in which school literacy becomes relevant to learners like Jake in a detailed, situated, material way. Looking as much at the materiality of Jake’s car and what value it has for the learner as we do at a set of practices used to incorporate the car into a writing activity gives a clear picture of a literacy learning moment and what it can tell us about a learner.

Over the past 10 years there has been a steady braiding of the fields of multimodality and New Literacy Studies. Part of reason for this interweaving of two related yet different fields of literacy research and education lies in the explosion of multimodal texts and engagement and participation with them across a wide range of sociocultural contexts. From a paper crane that a middle school student makes, to a wiccan fanzine a high school student contributes to, to an adult’s fascination about old friends on her Facebook page, each one of these texts and practices rely as much on the manipulation of modes to create an effect as it does on social practice and situated conditions of identity. There is more of a necessity than ever to look as much at material qualities of texts and their relationship to the meaning-maker as there is to look at literacy practice being shaped by context and the identities of meaning makers.

Literacy can be understood as being a situated social practice that has links to everyday life (Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Texts are also multimodal and have material qualities, as they contain words and images and these both work together to create meaning (Kress, 1997; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). In our work, we wanted to link literacy, multimodality, and material culture. When a child connects to literacy, and is asked to write a story, this is the end of a long process of meaning making that could begin in a different setting, in the everyday, for example; with Hicks in mind, a child could love cars, and be obsessed with collecting cars. This interest spills into a story about cars. This could then become crafted as a digital story, and or written or narrated as a narrative text. School is one domain of practice, home another (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). By linking together the material, everyday life of a child, with narrative, two things are brought together, and domains of practice, home and school, are then linked through text-making.

Multimodality and New Literacy Studies as a Heuristic

There are two truisms of literacy today. Number one, in Brian Street’s words “literacy is always instantiated, its potential realized through local practices” (2003, p. 8). Number two, we cannot escape multiple modalities in
texts and practices, beyond the written word. Returning to *Travel Notes From the New Literacy Studies* (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006) in which we first conflated multimodality with New Literacy Studies, we talked about focusing on the ethnographic dimension of multimodal communicative practices to lift out not only the identities and the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) of individual meaning makers, but also locally and globally shaped practice. As a lens for practice, the ethnographic and the semiotic gives a more nuanced picture of meaning making in situated, textured contexts. Moments when meaning makers produced texts with traces of social practice, contexts, and sedimented identities, we argued, were instance of practice to be analyzed for broader implications. In this way, we understand the process of the local and the global as one of instances.

Multimodality takes its roots from the work of Gunther Kress (1997, 2003) and even further back to Michael Halliday (1978). Halliday wrote about locating language study in social context and using social context as a way of understanding text. Kress took the concept of texts in context and moved it into the direction of the notion of the motivated sign (Kress, 1997). Signs made or used by meaning makers are motivated by the interests of the sign-maker. The theory is and was groundbreaking because it opened up communicative events beyond a sole gaze on the written word to extend into other modalities. Taken up and used as an optic in other studies, multimodality increasingly becomes a way of breaking apart a literacy event. Today, multimodality is an accepted approach to literacy education and used as an informing principle in many studies (Harste & Albers, 2007; Jewitt, 2005; Lancaster, 2003; Leander, 2002; Marsh, 2005, 2006; Pahl, 2004; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). A main impetus for adopting a multimodal approach is to look at multimodal texts that children, adolescents, and adults use all of the time and to explain its design and content as visual, sound-based, animated, etc.

New Literacy Studies (NLS) grew out of the work of scholars such as Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) and their anthropological work with the Vai people in Liberia to explore what represents literacy practices in day-to-day life. What they found at the time of their research was that literacy happens across communities and cannot be viewed as sets of ideas and practices solely tied to schooling. In 1983, Shirley Brice Heath conducted her 10-year study of literacy practices in three communities in the Carolinas establishing that literacy practices not only existed outside of school, but also that literacy practices were shaped by the context and identities in which and by which they are used. Shortly after Heath’s study, Brian Street (1984) examined literacy practices in different parts of the same community in Iran, finding correspondingly that literacy practices are shaped by context and identity, and also that an ideological view of literacy takes account of practices, concepts, texts, identities, and contexts in which they take place. Instantiated into these perspectives is the issue of power in that Standard English was seen as happening in school, which rendered outside literacy practices as less powerful and relevant. These international studies sparked a host of other studies that looked at ideological models of literacy practices in local and global contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Davies, 2006; Gee, 1996; Hull & Schultz, 2004; Hymes, 1996; Janks & Comber, 2006; Luke & Carrington, 2002). As researchers, it is important to be sensitized to the global as well as the local when analyzing literacy events and practices (Brandt & Clinton, 2006).

Behind both NLS and multimodality disciplines sit epistemologies and research methods: semiotics and ethnography. Semiotics is a grammar of sign systems, and with the dominance of multimodal texts, a semiotic perspective allows researchers to broaden the nature of text analysis. Ethnography provides the context and the tracing process to understand texts. We see ethnography in the context of a focus on meaning in context (Geertz, 1993). As researchers, we recognize that the richness of thick description is invaluable in unpacking how texts are created. Bringing semiotics and ethnography together provides a way of viewing texts as material and situated, as tracers of social practices and contexts. This method of analysis gives an ideological quality to multimodality and multimodality gives ethnography and New Literacy Studies an analytic tool to understand artifacts.

**Multimodal Practice as Ideological**

In light of our joint and separate research, we have found that the complementarity of New Literacy Studies and multimodality opens up new spaces for students. This accords with Street’s (1993) notion of an ideological model of literacy as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society. Such a view of literacy is in stark contrast with an autonomous model which conceptualizes literacy in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context. Isolating literacy events as in particular events when literacy takes place and literacy practices which look at patterns within such events achieves what Janet Maybin (2000) talked about as a main goal of New Literacy Studies:

> I shall suggest that the taking on of more complex ideas about discourse and intertextuality in these studies of literacy enables the researchers to more clearly conceptualise the pivotal role of literacy practices in articulating the links between individual people’s everyday experience, and wider social institutions and structures. (p. 197)

The key point here is the lifting out of everyday experiences and tying it to macro concerns such as issues of power and limits in power due to a mismatch between sanctioned literacy practices and contextualized literacy practices.

Where in the past we have blended New Literacy Studies with multimodality (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, 2006; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007), in our more recent work we take New Literacy Studies and the ethnographic more into the multimodal and the material. A presiding claim is that NLS and multimodality as a heuristic more powerfully illustrates the everyday, the habitus in texts made and valued by meaning
makers. Viewing the everyday and situated in the materiality of texts gives meaning makers more power as learners. As multimodal events unfold, in that process, it is possible to watch modes sedimenting identity (Rowssell & Pahl, 2007). The choice of mode is itself a trace of meaning-making as modes are infused with emotion. There is a felt connection with modes chosen during meaning-making which has a direct tie to habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) as an unfolding of the everyday. Bi-modal representation means that meaning-makers can merge different modes such as visuals and sounds to make complex artifacts. Multimodal events such as creating digital stories (Pahl & Rowssell, 2010), draw on multimodal practices. Given that multimodality gives the meaning maker more agency and more license to pull on habitus, it represents a more current, viable, and indeed ideological approach to literacy education.

Implications of NLS and Multimodality for Research

Over the past decade, we have adopted an NLS-multimodal lens for studies featured in Table 25.1. The aim of foregrounding the chart is to illustrate the potential for New Literacy Studies and multimodality as a lens for practice. Each perspective spotlighted in the table represents a strand present in our research that can feed into new ways of using New Literacy Studies and multimodality.

**Literacy as Situated** In adopting an ethnographic-NLS lens to literacy research, researchers can uncover meanings of literacy to participants, the academic community, and themselves that suspend previous cultural constructs and narratives and acknowledge and listen to others’ ways of making meaning. By focusing on listening as a methodology (Back, 2007), researchers can make sense of meanings that reside not only in texts, but in visual modes. For example, in Kate’s project in Thirsk, North Yorkshire, UK, whereby parents made digital stories with their children about their favourite objects, a mother described to her 8-year-old daughter, who was filming her, what a pink crystal meant to her:

*Lucy:* I got this crystal off my friend because I have had a hard time in the last couple of years and she thought

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Face</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Aim</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy as Situated</strong></td>
<td>1999–2003</td>
<td>Kate Pahl</td>
<td>Three homes in London: This study was an ethnographic study of three boys and their meaning making in three London homes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4 year study</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1998–2001</td>
<td>Jennifer Rowsell</td>
<td>Texts as Traces of Practice: This study was an ethnographic-style study of the educational publishing industry.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4 year study</td>
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<td><strong>Literacy as Multimodal</strong></td>
<td>2008–2009</td>
<td>Kate Pahl</td>
<td>My Family, My Story: This was a digital storytelling project that worked with five families to create five digital stories, together with a museum and a school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Jenny Wells, The World of James Herriot Museum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Kate Pahl</td>
<td>A Reason to Write: Using artifacts to create reasons to write in the classroom.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Steve Pool, Sally Newham, Gail Harrison</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2006–2009</td>
<td>Jennifer Rowsell, Julie Dunham, Courtney Crane, Barbara O’Breza, and Doug Levandowski</td>
<td>Artifactual English: This project is an ethnographic-style research study looking at the artifactual lives of sixty teenagers using interviews, observations, and artifactual collection and analysis as the main mode of data collection and analysis.</td>
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<td>3 year study</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy as Sedimenting Identities</strong></td>
<td>2005–2007</td>
<td>Kate Pahl</td>
<td>Capturing the Community: The study was an ethnographic study of the impact of a group of artists on the work of children in a school in Barnsley.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 year study</td>
<td>Heads Together, Sally Bean</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2006–2007</td>
<td>Kate Pahl</td>
<td>Ferham Families: This project created a museum exhibition, Ferham Families, from ethnographic interviews with five family members of families who migrated to the UK from Pakistan in the 1960s.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>Andy Pollard, Zahir Rafiq</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2003–2005</td>
<td>Jennifer Rowsell, Marianna Diiorio, Kathy Broad, Mary Lynn Tessaro</td>
<td>Family Literacy Experiences: The study was a focus group and interview-based study of family literacy practices of eight families and the stories of their grade four children.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 year study</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy as Ecological</strong></td>
<td>2009–2011</td>
<td>Kate Pahl</td>
<td>Inspire Rotherham: An ecological study of the impact of a literacy initiative in Rotherham on parents’ learning using visual and ecological methodologies.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Margaret Lewis, Louise Ritchie</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006–2009</td>
<td>Sue Nichols PI, Helen Nixon (PI), Jennifer Rowsell (Partner Investigator), Sophia Rainbird</td>
<td>Parents Networks of Information: This project takes an ethnographic, ecological, and geosemiotic perspective on how parents develop networks of information within three quite different communities in Australia and the United States.</td>
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it would help and because I had that one I collect a few little ones as well.

J: Does it help?

Lucy: No (long pause, laughter)...it looks nice! (long pause)

J: Does it feel special to you.

Lucy: Yes, because my very close friend gave me it.

Artifacts can become a tool for listening (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010) and can become imbued with wider meanings because of their complex modal properties. The crystal was pink, it was a natural stone, and her friend gave it to her. This connective node of representations plus history provided a place from which to tell a story. Literacy is situated within material culture and is it in itself a material cultural practice that links to storytelling in community contexts.

Jennifer’s work with parents and their children and her work with teenagers lifted out valuable, naturalized practices that can be built upon in school. For example, in her high school project, Artifactual English, by harnessing canonical texts to familiar, digital texts such as Facebook, students built on their tacit understanding and appreciation of multimodal texts within more traditional, written texts. Student participants created Facebook profiles for characters in *Black Boy* such as Richard or Bessie and combined their digital practices such as doing a Google search on popular music in the 1920s and then speculating on the kinds of music, literature, and interests that characters in Wright’s novel would enjoy (Wright, 1945). What the assignment compelled students to think about was what characters value, why they value them, who is in their inner circle, how to multimodally represent characters. Figure 25.1 illustrates

![Facebook Forum](image_url)
how students designed Facebook pages about characters in *Black Boy*. To create a Facebook profile, students had to choose a photo that resembles the character, create a typical dialogue that characters might have on their wall, and even choose particular games or applications that they might use. Grounding literacy in student worlds, lived experiences, and their community offers them more ways to appreciate its relevance in their lives.

**Literacy as Multimodal** A challenge for literacy researchers has been a growing recognition that we can no longer focus on alphabetic print as the unit of study in literacy education. The balance is shifting to the visual and other channels or modes of expression for literacy research and pedagogy to remain current and to less the gap between monomodal school policy and multimodal forms of living and communicating. By making an understanding of literacy multimodal, the affordances of meaning making open up. For example, children move swiftly from talk, to model making, and then to storying and writing (Pahl, 2009). In a small scale project Kate conducted called ‘A Reason to Write’ in an ex-mining community school in Yorkshire, UK, children aged 4–6 created models of a giant castle, worked with giant artifacts such as a giant shoe, and drew giant footprints on the playground (see Figure 25.2). This footprint was then followed up with writing, such as the inscribed ‘big’ beside the shoe, and stories about the giant. The affordances of the multimodal boxes to create the giant’s castle, using the chalk to make the big words on the playground, and then the spilling over into talk from that experience widened the writing of the young children. When literacy is understood as multimodal, and the roughness of chalk on a playground is acknowledged, then the meanings are stretched.

In Jennifer’s work, she has moved from print-based technologies and modal choice and its tie to meaning makers to digital spaces as pathways to understanding students’ literacy practices (Rowsell & Burke, 2009; Rowsell, 2009; Sheridan & Rowsell, 2010). In a digital literacies study with Anne Burke, Jennifer found that middle school students have sophisticated understandings of interface design, story plots and structures, and intertextuality, but at the same time lack core academic literacies (Street, 2005). One case study, Peter, stands out for his in-depth understanding of Naruto and the concept of Chakra, yet he exhibits very little interest in reading and writing in-school (Rowsell & Burke, 2009).

**Literacy as Sedimenting Identities** The texts children, adolescents, adults make and value can tell us so much about how they learn, who features in their lives, and what events were pivotal. A consistent and powerful thread in our research draws from an interest in locating identities and even fractures of identities within texts (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). For example, Kate observed how a group of girls sedimented fractal shards of identity in a multimodal text, creating an ocean environment in which stories of home and school, lining up and having babies, were sedimented over time in the course of the making of the boxes, and, then, as conversations shifted in context, the boxes themselves became differently understood and contextualised (Pahl, 2009).

Situating literacy practices and understanding identities and their connections to literacy can be achieved through observations and interviews, but if identified identities are fleeting and often ephemeral. Locating fractures of identities in texts and practices with texts is in some ways a more tangible and concrete way of locating meaning makers in contexts. Histories of particular localities and people in these localities, and individuated histories that accompany them, can be read off of texts. For this reason,
we have argued that ethnographies of literacy practices can yield powerful results. By situating literacy within a wider sociohistorical context, and making the connections alive between felt experience and textual practices, through an imaginative effort of ethnographic work, a more critical and nuanced understanding emerges of the relationship between literacy and identity in relation to social practice (Blackburn & Clark, 2007; Willis, 2000).

**Literacy as Ecological** Viewing communities and neighborhoods as ecologies is a way of isolating the situated nature of contexts and it imbues the locating effect of a study. As ecologies, communities have hubs or centres of activity and these hubs carry their own unique set of literacy practices. Taking an ecological approach to data collection means documenting commercial spaces, institutional spaces, places of worship, schools, and health clinics. Taking an NLS-multimodal research entails taking equal account of surroundings and practices in surroundings as it does interpreting the material quality and even geosemiotics of spaces. Kate is conducting a study in Rotherham that uses Google map to trace learning journeys of parents across the borough. By asking parents to use disposable cameras to map their encounters with literacy providers, she is creating a research space that is participatory and provides a way of accessing visual methods of hearing parents’ voices. By looking at communities in relation to the contexts for interactions and mapping those contexts in spatial forms, the research gains an additional layer of ‘thick description,’ following Geertz’ point that,

No one lives in the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it—‘the world around here.’ (1996, p. 262)

The ecologies of literacy make connections between lived experience, home, everyday life, and the ways in which literacy intersects with that, through letters, school newsletters, library and sports events, mother and toddler groups. These multifaceted literacy experiences can be perceived as spaces through which parents can traverse and experience in a community setting that is itself agentive and changing. This way of mapping literacies across neighborhoods links up individuals with contexts, community activist groups and literacy organisations with schools and families to enable new connections to be explored across these spaces that illuminate how parents perceive the agencies and literacy providers around them and how these providers impact upon home spaces.

In the multi-sited, international project Jennifer is involved in with Sue Nichols, Helen Nixon, and Sophia Rainbird at the University of South Australia, the research team takes an ecological approach to analyzing three neighborhoods in relation to parents’ networks of information about children’s literacy and development. Their study has three interconnecting dimensions as part of its ecological survey:

1. An environmental focus: artifact collection, mapping, visual documentation, and observation in three contrastive sites
2. An organizational focus: interviews with information workers, network tracing, and artifact collection.
3. A family focus: ethnographic participant observation, interviews, and artifact collection.

Part of the study involves using technological tools such as Google map to chart out key landmarks in communities, to document where case study participants go with their small children, to highlight areas with less access to information and materials, and so forth. Time-space grids are used as a part of the methodology to chart how parents talk about their networks of literacy information in relation to their own childhood and their child’s past/more recent past juxtaposed with where these moments happen in space, whether it is at home, in the community, in cyberspace, etc. Finally, geosemiotics has provided a language for analyzing texts and discourses in such artifacts as signs, billboards, leaflets, and flyers (Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

**Conclusion**

Seeing literacy as materially situated enabled new kinds of connections to be made. Literacy can be mapped, as in the ecological studies described above, and thereby conceptualized differently in relation to contexts, activities, and practices and the connections between them. Literacy can be understood as linked to local practice but also these local practices can have diasporic, global contexts, such as the context of migration (Appadurai, 1996). We would argue that it is important ‘to examine the relationship between the local and global from the perspective of the local’ (Blackburn & Clark, 2007, p. 19). Listening to the local means an active focus on listening methodologies, from using digital stories, to community exhibitions, such as Kate’s work for Ferham Families that resulted in a website and set of learning resources (www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk).

It can also result in creating new spatial and ecological research methods, such as using Google map, or using architects to work with children, as a powerful way to for articulate new visions of communities. For example, Barbara Comber’s (2010) work has been focused on giving children the tools to articulate a lived vision of what their communities could look like as part of a critical literacies project. Rogers, Mosley, Kramer, and the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group (2009) have advocated a critical literacy pedagogy that engages with parents and children’s lived experiences of inequality and then create spaces to argue for social change in practical ways. In our own work, we have suggested a pedagogy of artifactual critical literacies—that is, using artifacts to find out about the experiences students bring to schooling and to their narratives and explore, through imaginative ways, the links between lived experience and socio historical contexts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). This requires an ethnographic imagina-
tion (Willis, 2000) and a commitment to creating spaces for listening that are dialogic, open, and alive to how people’s everyday life connects with the texts they make and the representations they produce (Back, 2007). If literacy is seen as materially situated, it looks different—it becomes something that reflects the reality of the lived world and its everyday-ness. It ceases to be autonomous (Street, 1993); instead it is ideological and can be linked to timescales, spaces, and places of lived experience, global identities and local concerns. By linking New Literacy Studies with multimodality, a lens appears that shifts literacy into a space that accounts for local practice, lived experience, and the imaginative and cultural spaces of the everyday.

References


