Community-based literacy learning
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Abstract

Because reading and writing are social as well as personal activities, many recent curricular reforms that promote literacy development have focused on the relationship between the learner and the community. These reforms have been based on situated cognition theory, which holds that learning is intermeshed with the social and physical contexts of activity and that learning occurs through active participation in a community of practice. Yet there is no distinct orientation to the concept of community across the various educational programs. In fact, at least three different orientations to community appear in the literature on literacy reform: experiential community, classroom community, and anticipatory community. Both experiential and anticipatory community orientations situate literacy in non-school settings that involve learners in “real-life” communities. The classroom community orientation attempts to reproduce the roles of mentor and apprentice found in non-school communities; however, its claim to legitimacy of activity is based more on the learner’s manner of participation than in the activity itself.

Introduction

Reading and writing are social as well as personal activities. Literate action requires the transposition of thought into symbolic form that can be conveyed to others or to self. Therefore, literacy is particularly affected by our involvement in a community. Even when a reader or writer is alone, there is an exchange of ideas between reader and writer. The community in which the reader or writer participates may shape both the content and form of the literate action.

In a broad sense, a community may be viewed as a social network of two or more members who share a common activity (fly fishing, playing tennis, or reading a literacy journal). Through a process of gradual immersion into shared activity, inexperienced members learn the traditions, standards, and accepted practices of the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Although most communities we normally think of – communities of family, friends, neighbours, co-workers – afford members direct interpersonal contact, technology often permits members of a community to interact without face-to-face contact. Thus, communities can range from local and close-knit to global and distant.

Recognition of the relationship between literacy and community has influenced a number of recent curricular reforms that promote reading and writing development (to name just a few, Behrman, 2001; Boyd, 2000; Brock, 2000; Flower, 1996; Goatley, 2000; Griffin, 1995; Manyak, 2000; Mariage, Englert, & Garmon, 2000; Pedraza & Ayala, 1996; Schaub, Beane, Coates, Martin, & Sterling, 1996). In each, the interaction of the literacy learner with the community is a central underpinning of the curriculum. These reforms have been based on principles of situated cognition theory, which stresses the influence of social and physical contexts upon thinking and learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Greeno, 1997; Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996; Kirshner & Whitson, 1998; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Yet despite the growing recognition of the role of community in literacy learning, there is no distinct orientation to the concept of community across various literacy programs that claim to be community-based. Exactly what then, do literacy researchers and practitioners mean when they call a literacy program community-based? Is there a common thread that connects all community-based literacy programs? Or has the term “community” been applied so differentially that it fails to provide either a theoretical or pedagogical basis for curricular decisions? This paper explores the operational definition of community-based literacy learning, first by discussing literacy as situated activity and then by proposing three separate orientations to the concept of community as it relates to the literacy curriculum. It therefore presents an analytical framework to assist curriculum developers and researchers in designing, implementing, and evaluating community-based literacy programs.

Situated cognition and literacy

Recent years have seen the emergence of theories of cognition emphasizing the role of social and cultural factors, perhaps in response to the cognitive position that stresses cognition as an internalized, individual phenomenon (Reynolds, Sinatra & Jetton, 1996). Whereas a cognitive position views reading and writing as fundamentally decontextualizable psychological processes, though possibly acted upon by social and cultural variables, a social or sociocultural position views reading and writing as fundamentally
social processes or social “events” (Bloome, 2001). However, a criticism of social and sociocultural theories has been that they pay too little attention to the role of the individual and the interaction between individual and social construction of knowledge (Damon, 1991). In contrast, situated cognition theory has attempted to define cognition in terms of both internal and external processes (Kirshner & Whitson, 1998). Although situated cognition does not offer a unified theory of learning, several tenets have emerged:

- Thinking is “adjusted to meet the demands of the situation” (Rogoff, 1984, 7).
- Learning and activity are intermeshed. Physical and social contexts of an activity are integral to the activity, and the activity is integral to the learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000).
- Learning is both an individual and a social process (Alexander, 2000). The learner constructs mental models that incorporate objects from the environmental situation (Greeno, 1991). An ideal learning system would promote individual conceptual development as learners participate in social settings across different contexts (Anderson, Greeno, Reder, & Simon, 2000).
- Learning is also influenced by the physical setting and its available tools or resources (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Greeno, 1997; Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 2000).
- Knowledge is distributed across members of a community (Gee, 2000).
- Learning occurs through active participation in a community of practice (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The novice becomes enculturated in the accepted knowledge and practices of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
- Learning is socially mediated. More advanced members of the community serve as mentors or masters (Gee, 2000).
- The community is also transformed by its interactions with the novice. Individual knowledge influences the common knowledge of a group, and common knowledge of a group influences individual knowledge (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993).
- Educational practices based on situative principles should place learning activities in authentic and meaningful contexts that represent the “ordinary practices of a culture” (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

Thus, situated cognition theory holds that learning is always a contextualized activity occurring within a community that has both social and physical features. Context so defines a learning situation that we cannot assume generality of learning across contexts. Patterns of activity in the new situation will influence the extent to which knowledge and skills from one situation will be carried over to another situation (Greeno, 1997). Therefore, from a situative perspective, reading and writing activities may be viewed as literacy situations. A literacy situation is created every time a reading or writing activity occurs.

The dimensions of a literacy situation constitute a complex and interrelated web of individual and contextual features. The reader or writer brings to the situation knowledge, skills, strategies, interests, beliefs, and motivational dispositions that have been learned in other situations. The interaction of these individual characteristics with the social and physical resources of the community, the task, and the conceptual domain will determine the extent to which previous learning may be applied in the new situation (see Figure 1). Consider, for instance, the case of reading a city map to follow directions. The reader may already have some familiarity with map reading, be fairly confident about this ability, and be highly motivated to succeed. Put into a new situation, though, the reader is dependent upon the physical resources of the community. Does the reader have access to a detailed street map of a precise location or a more general map with only major thoroughfares? The literacy situation is also affected by social context. Is there a more knowledgeable member of the community who can assist if the map reader becomes lost?

Further, the task goal may itself depend upon the social relationships between the reader and other members of the community. Must the reader find directions to a particular address (perhaps to attend a party) or simply to a neighbourhood (perhaps to have a solitary walk around)? The conceptual domain of the literacy situation is also socially determined within the community: how the domain is defined, what meanings are attached, what elements are considered important, what modes of inquiry are given legitimacy.

Learning is usually conceived to occur within a particular community (e.g., school, home, athletic team). I recently learned to paint within the social context of an art class of adult novices under the tutelage of an experienced painter, within the physical setting of my instructor’s home, and using the resources from our required materials list and whatever texts I could find at the local bookstore. Yet all of us are simultaneously members of multiple communities. I am influenced by involvement in professional communities (literacy educators, university professors), occupational communities (my university, my department), regional communities (where I grew up, where I now live), a gender community (male), an economic community (salaried, middle income), my family communities, as well as my ethnic and religious communities. So although the students in the art class shared a community of practice for two hours per week, no two students truly shared a replicated experience. In this sense, individual differences that learners bring to
the current community of learning interact with the learning activity itself, so that the activity is uniquely defined for each learner.

Three orientations to community

At least three different orientations to community appear in the literature on innovative literacy programs: experiential community, classroom community, and anticipatory community (see Table 1). The experiential community orientation considers the student’s background or home community and attempts to find ways of exploiting the background experience. Everyday activities that occur in the home or in the local neighbourhood are seen as important learning opportunities in their own right, as well as bridges between home literacy and school literacy. Parents, relatives, friends, and other adults who interact with students outside of school (scout masters, athletic coaches, church leaders) are considered knowledgeable others who can mediate learning. Students may be placed in learning projects that are based on their own developmental interests. For example, in the YouthALIVE! Project (Schauble, Beane, Coates, Martin, & Sterling, 1996), museum programs are developed by teens around themes of interest to them, such as “Waste Not, Want Not” and “What’s Law Got to Do with Me?” In one museum, teens write and edit a page in the city newspaper and submit stories to other media. They also plan and install new museum exhibits, design videos, and develop training programs. Such activities afford learners important opportunities for both print and non-print literacy development.

The classroom community orientation considers the student’s present involvement as a member of a school community and focuses on issues of position, privilege, and authority within the classroom. A teacher or advanced peer serves as the mentor. The classroom is seen as a collaborative learning environment in which students interact collaboratively with each other and with the mentor. Using the cognitive apprenticeship model (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989), the mentor first explains and models skills and strategies, then coaches the students as they engage in group activities that simulate “real-world” applications, and eventually “fades” to encourage the students to work more independently. A goal of the instruction is to give students agency in planning, decision-making, and problem-solving. For example, Flower (1996, 28) describes a writing project in which university students act as peer tutors to high school students, who are writing a newsletter to other teens about drugs. Instruction is planned “to create a social scaffold for rhetorical thinking, to engage students as writers and planning partners in a process that models literate action”.

The anticipatory community orientation considers the student’s future involvement in a workplace (or advanced academic) community and attempts to prepare the student for the transition. The classroom is seen as a weak or incomplete substitute for authentic
activity outside of school, so school-based instruction must be supplemented by legitimate participation in non-school settings. Traditional craft, mechanical, and professional apprenticeships, medical internships, and student teaching are well-established examples of this orientation. Expert practitioners within the domain (master craftsmen, experienced physicians, or veteran teachers) serve as mentors. Often an extended period of observation precedes active participation by the novice, followed by assignment to less demanding tasks, and then gradual increase in responsibility. The learner’s interests are usually subservient to the needs of the activity. For instance, when requesting a student teacher to write a lesson plan, a mentor teacher is unlikely to ask the student teacher, “What do you feel like teaching today?” but might suggest presenting three new poems that demonstrate the rhyme schemes introduced in yesterday’s lesson. Because the mentor’s expertise is acknowledged and respected, issues of agency are usually not prominent in this orientation. Furthermore, it is not unusual for this orientation to coordinate a field learning experience with a classroom learning experience. In student teaching, for example, the student teacher may be enrolled in a methods class at the same time as the field work. After a period of field observation, the literacy activity (e.g., writing a lesson plan) could be practiced in the classroom before being applied in a field setting.

Community-based literacy curricula

The Young Scientists Club represents a curriculum based on an experiential community orientation (Pedraza & Ayala, 1996). The curriculum follows “a perspective that views the background experiences of the students as a resource to build on and not an obstacle to be overcome” (Ibid, 76). The Young Scientists meet after school in the basement of a church, which adjoins vacant land that the city deeded to a local civic organization as part of a neighbourhood beautification project. The Young Scientists are involved in the development of the land into a park, so their literacy activities are directed toward decision-making for a tangible and immediate purpose. In an early session, the teacher remarks, “We will be asking all of you for your ideas because… the park is for you and the community…and you really know what you like and don’t like about parks and playgrounds”. After the children suggest monkey bars, slides, swings, and sports fields, the teacher replies, “It is a real contribution that you’ll be doing because you know how the community needs space for different things”. Many forms of symbolic representation the students must become familiar with are new to them. For instance, students must read catalogs of playground equipment to ascertain space requirements for each piece of equipment, then determine if the equipment fits into available space. Also, they must learn how to read a blueprint, which requires understanding of scales and proportions. In explaining how to read the blueprint, the teacher gives the example of building a house and stresses the importance of precise measurements. In another session the teacher shows students how to use a ruler to calculate distance, using proportional representation. Although some activities to introduce new concepts are “school-like,” the learning activities always grow out of tasks required to complete a meaningful and motivating “real-life” project in which the students’ participation has an important influence.

The Early Literacy Project (ELP) represents a curriculum based on a classroom community orientation (Mariage, Englert & Garmon, 2000). ELP is a reading and writing intervention for special education students. Its instructional premise is that literacy instruction should “be embedded in meaningful, contextualized, and purposive activities” and “foster a discourse community where literacy performance is mutually shared, constructed, and made public” (Ibid, 302). Literacy activities include basic skills instruction such as phonemic segmentation and phonographemic correspondence, choral reading, partner reading, story response/discussion, journal writing, and process writing. In one literacy activity called Morning Message, students dictate personal experience stories to the teacher, who acts as recorder and coach, prompting and modelling composition strategies. Other students ask the author questions in order to expand, modify, or improve the story. Three scenarios
of Morning Message are presented that illustrate diminishing levels of teacher support. In the first, the author is unable to articulate an exciting experience. The teacher uses leading questions to stimulate the author ("What did you do this weekend?" "Did you watch something special on T.V.?"). When the author is unable to create a sentence, the teacher invites the author to get help from another student. Here the learner receives extensive modelling from both the teacher and a peer. In the second scenario, before the teacher begins to record the author’s story, the teacher asks, “What do I need?” to which students respond, “Indent,” “Capitals,” “Topic sentence.” Here the teacher’s role has shifted to that of facilitator. In the third scenario, the teacher simply repeats each student’s idea until the class can reach resolution. When the author dictates, “Angie’s birthday is on April 24th on Saturday,” the teacher repeats her sentence aloud, to which a second student replies, “That doesn’t sound right.” The teacher repeats, “That doesn’t sound right.” The teacher then offers two versions of the sentence that have been suggested by students. Here the teacher deliberately transfers responsibility for meaning-making and monitoring to the students. The researchers remark that “students are thinking and assuming leadership roles from which they command or govern the writing process” (Ibid, 308), an event that marks the students’ emergence as active members of the learning community.

Community Partners in Literacy (CPL) represents a curriculum based on an anticipatory community orientation (Behrman, 2001). CPL, currently under development at National University in Los Angeles, is intended to enhance content literacy of high school students by combining school-based instructional activities with site visits to community business partners. For each learning module, students first meet in a classroom setting to discuss what they know about a particular industry and to prepare for their site visit. Next, students visit a community business, where they interact with professionals using literacy skills on the job. Then, students return to the classroom setting to engage in an academic project based on literacy skills that are used in that business. Classroom activities utilize cooperative learning, with students organized into learning groups to complete short-term or intermediate-term projects. However, the demands of the task determine the social arrangement (that is, if the students work on their own, with a partner, or in a group). Representatives from community businesses serve as mentors to the cooperative learning groups. Site visits are anticipated to domain-related industries in CPL Biology (human medicine, veterinary medicine, oceanography, water treatment, and biotechnology); CPL Economics (banking/lending, financial management, accounting, insurance, and real estate); and CPL Government (legislative, public administration, law, criminal justice, and public service).

For example, a literacy activity in CPL Biology may require a student group to investigate the benefits of a new treatment for heartworms in dogs. Working with an experienced veterinarian, students must carefully read the brochures describing the new treatment to understand how the treatment works and how it differs from other treatments; locate and analyze multiple sources of information; discriminate between evaluative studies conducted or funded by the developer of the treatment and studies conducted by independent sources; weigh the potential benefits against disadvantages of the treatment; and make an informed decision whether the veterinarian should recommend the new treatment.

CPL differs from the cognitive apprenticeship model in several significant ways. Importantly, although much learning is school-based, learning extends beyond the physical setting of the classroom. Students receive an orientation to workplace communities and are introduced to the community of practice at the work site. Projects are drawn from actual problems occurring in the workplace, with students expected to use texts, tools, and equipment available at the work site. Thus, access to a wide range of resources (including print, audio-visual, and electronic texts) becomes a regular part of the learning activity. The social configuration of the learning activity (individual, partners, small group, large group) is determined by the needs of the project. To accomplish the coordination of school-based and field-based learning, traditional time patterns in and out of school are restructured to promote authentic reading and writing situations; that is, the assignment of “biology” or “economics” to one-hour time blocks three (or five) times per week is abandoned in favor of a more adaptive and flexible schedule. While the teacher has responsibility to manage the activities, the workplace mentor is recognized as the knowledgeable other.

Discussion

Situated cognition theory emphasizes the importance of learning from contextualized activity. Literacy instruction based on situative principles therefore views students and learning within the social and physical dimensions of a learning community. A classification of community-based literacy learning is presented here as a possible framework for analyzing innovative curricula based on situated cognition theory. The Young Scientists Club, the Early Literacy Project, and Community Partners in Literacy represent reasonably “pure” examples of the three curriculum orientations. It is possible, of course, that a community-based literacy program may exhibit hybrid characteristics; overall, though, it is likely that one orientation will appear most dominant.

Both experiential and anticipatory community orientations situate learning in ecological settings that
involve learners in “real-life” communities. Students volunteering in a museum, planning a neighbourhood park or watershed, and observing real estate agents or veterinarians in their daily activities are examples of what Lave and Wenger (1991) call “legitimate peripheral participation” in a community of practice. In the experiential community orientation, it is the learners’ backgrounds that command central attention: goals and activities are important to the community-at-large, but important to the learners as well. Learners are thus valued because their interests shape the outcome of a community-respected activity. In the anticipatory community orientation, it is the learners’ future lives that command central attention: goals and activities are more or less prescribed because learners do not yet have sufficient experience. Learners are valued because they can eventually move from novice to expert, and thereby perpetuate the practice.

The classroom community orientation attempts to create learning settings “that capture some of the practices of the culture” (Moore, Lin, Schwartz, Petrosino, Hickey, Campbell, & the Cognition and Technology Group, 1996, 216). Students are seen as learning apprentices who may appropriate the mentor’s skills and strategies. It is the students’ current status as active and collaborative learners that commands central attention. Goals and activities may be negotiated between learner and mentor. The learner is valued less for any present or future contribution, but more by virtue of participation. Thus, legitimacy of activity is based more on the learner’s manner of participation than in the activity itself.

However, it is less certain whether the classroom community orientation always provides for an authentic social context. Legitimacy of activity in social settings would require that negotiated goals and activities nonetheless have meaning for the community as well as the individual. For example, the Morning Message has no apparent purpose other than as a school composition assignment required by the teacher. Nor are students observing a master writer in the regular practice of writing. Authenticity of the classroom community orientation may be further challenged by limited physical resources, which often fail to replicate the options available in a legitimate out-of-school community. While the student may be restricted to the resources provided by the teacher, or present in the school library, out-of-school settings offer the full range of resources available in the community. For example, most content-area classes rely upon a single text as the source of information (Alvermann & Moore, 1991). Continued reviews of community-based literacy learning, therefore, should analyze how purposeful/meaningful the activity is to the learner, whether the activity arises in response to a naturally-occurring problem or need, the authenticity of resources, and whether learners are exposed to experts whose knowledge, skills, and strategies may be appropriated.

Fundamentally, differences among the three curriculum orientations may reflect a tension between definitions of community that emphasize theories of practice (“learning as doing”) versus those that emphasize theories of identity (“learning as becoming”) (Wenger, 1998). “Doing” refers to the activity itself as well as the social/historical influences that provide structure and meaning to the activity. “Becoming” refers to the relationship between the individual and the community, including social categories of status. Identity is determined by how we see ourselves, how others see us, and how we participate. The classroom community orientation, with its attention to providing status and position, leans toward the Identity pole of the Practice-Identity continuum (see Figure 2). The anticipatory community orientation, with its attention to reproducing culturally normed activity, leans toward the Practice pole. The experiential community orientation, linking students’ backgrounds to outcomes that are socially esteemed, falls more to the center of the continuum.

Ultimately, the value of any community-based literacy curriculum will depend on its success in having learners gain knowledge, skills, strategies, and routines that can be applied to other situations. A critical issue facing situative theorists, and curriculum developers basing programs on situative theory, is how initial learning achieved in one situation can transfer to another situation. Educational psychologists continue to study whether transfer to new situations occurs because of recurring elements in cognitive, social, physical, or activity structures (Greeno, Moore, &

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**Theories of Practice**

Learning as Doing

**Theories of Identity**

Learning as Becoming

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*Figure 2. Practice-Identity Continuum*
Smith, 1993). If one takes a fully interactive perspective on literacy learning, as suggested in Figure 1, transfer would be seen as resulting from a combination of interrelated structures. The challenge for curriculum planners, whether following an experiential, classroom, or anticipatory community orientation, is to more explicitly describe the range of new situations to which they believe the learning will transfer and the assumptions inherent in the curriculum regarding the portability of performance across situations. The challenge for curriculum evaluators and literacy researchers is to describe more precisely the dimensions of the literacy situation that were observed and to document interactions between and among these dimensions in relation to literacy performance.

References


