



Orality and Literacy: A Symposium in Honor of David Olson

Preeminent scholar David Olson opens this symposium with a reflection on the decades-long debate concerning the relationship between written and oral discourse. His essay is followed by a series of responses by leading literacy researchers, including David Bloome, Anne Haas Dyson, James Paul Gee, Martin Nystrand, Victoria Purcell-Gates, and Gordon Wells. The symposium concludes with a further essay by Professor Olson, in which he offers his reflections on these scholars' comments and looks to the continuing conversation.

Oral Discourse in a World of Literacy

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In a modern society we mark the significance of an event by appeal to an appropriate written document. Not only are contracts and constitutions as well as musical scores and religious scriptures all expressed in writing, but even minor events such as birthday and season's greeting are routinely honored by written documents. So ubiquitous is writing in a modern, technologically sophisticated society that writing at times seems to eclipse the more fundamental mode of communication, namely, oral speech. Early theories on the topic indeed tied social advance to forms of writing. Eighteenth-century writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Essay on the Origin of Language* argued that there was a direct link between social advance and the evolution of advanced forms of writing from pictographs, to characters, and finally to alphabets:

These three ways of writing correspond almost exactly to three different stages according to which one can consider men gathered into a nation. The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people, and the alphabet to civilized peoples. (1754-91/1966, p. 17)

This evolutionary thesis has lost much of its appeal, yet such modern scholars as Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and Marshall McLuhan in their different ways have contrasted speech, orality, with writing, literacy, as an important dimension of psychological and social change. As Derrida (1976, p. 30-31) insisted, "the factum of phonetic writing is massive; it commands our entire culture and our entire science, and it is certainly not just one fact among others." But what to make of this fact?





This is not to say that the writing and literacy theorists have carried the day. Linguists tend to follow Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, who in defining language as its spoken form, dismissed writing as merely a record of speech. Similarly, some discourse analysts preempt the literate concept of a *text* from its historical meaning as “discourse fixed by writing” and use it to refer to any stretch of oral discourse, reassigning written text to the “merest suggestion” of such an oral discourse (Silverstein, 1993, p. 38). Psychologists, too, have tended to minimize the cognitive implications of writing, attributing such effects as were found to prolonged education rather than to literacy (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

On the other hand, students of literature such as Roland Barthes (1982), Jacques Derrida (1976), and Julie Kristeva (1971) have found the presence and influence of writing so pervasive and so decisive in contemporary culture that they have created specialist concepts such as “écriture” (roughly, written culture) and “intertextuality” (roughly, the dependence of texts on other texts), to describe the properties of literary works quite independently of the relationship to ordinary spoken language.

Yet the comparison between such general categories as literacy and orality has lost some of its luster as it becomes clear that there are many ways of writing and even more ways of reading and that speech and writing are deeply interdependent (Heath, 1983). Clearly, both speech and writing play a variety of roles in diverse local cultures, in bureaucratic societies, as well as in our personal psychologies. Why exactly do people resort to writing when an oral agreement would seem to be adequate? Why do written scriptures hold such a commanding place in world religions, so-called religions of the book, only to be read in widely discrepant ways? Why do we pay such attention to the exact verbal form of a constitution or, for that matter, to an article for a scientific journal? But even more puzzling is why, then, do readers not simply learn from those written documents and comply with them rather than turning them into an endless round of interpretation and disputation? Most fundamentally, why do written documents not actually do the task that some centuries of writers have assigned to them? That is, in what ways are written documents limited? Why do we ultimately take recourse to oral discourse?

The general reasons people turn to writing are well known; writing preserves language across space and through time. Indeed, these two facts account for the two basic uses of writing that have been found historically and continue to dominate contemporary societies, namely, the use of writing for record keeping (through time) and for writing letters (across space). These intended uses, however, are only the beginning of the story of writing. The unintended consequences make up an equally important part. It is because documents are preserved through time and across space that the problems of misinterpretation and disinformation take on a distinctive and more urgent form. How can one be sure that the message is



interpreted correctly and that it reaches only the correct reader? In oral discourse a complex set of procedures are at play for producing a common understanding. These include not only linguistic structure and prosodic features such as stress and intonation but also paralinguistic properties including the physical context, shared background knowledge, and identity of the participants. The world's writing systems capture only aspects of the linguistic form, leaving out not only stress and intonation, but also gestures, winks and nods, and other forms of feedback that would be critical to a correct, or at least an acceptable, interpretation. Furthermore, when preserved through time and across space, not only may an expression reach a new audience in a new context, but its relation to the original speaker is to varying degrees dissolved. The utterance acquires some of the properties of "overheard" or quoted speech in that the recipient may not be the intended recipient, the one for whom the utterance was tailored (Olson, 2001). The difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of determining the "correct" interpretation leads some to celebrate the superiority of the spoken.

Francoise Waquet quotes the distinguished 19th-century philosopher and linguist Jules Michelet on just this point. Michelet had written:

La stenographie la plus complete, la plus exacte, reproduira-t-elle le dialogue? Non! Elle reproduira seulement ce que j'ai dit, et pas meme ce que j'ai dit. Je parle aussi du regard et du geste; ma presence et ma personne, c'est partie considerable de mon enseignement. La meilleure stenographie paraîtra ridicule, parce qu'elle reproduira des longueurs, des repetitions tres utiles ici, les reponses que je fais souvent aux objections que je vois dans vos yeux, les developpements que je donne sur un point, ou l'approbation de telle ou telle personne m'indique qu'elle voudrait m'arreter. (Quoted in Waquet, 2003)

[The most complete, the most exact, stenographic record, does it reproduce the spoken dialogue? No! It reproduces only that which I have said, and not even all what I said. I speak also with a look and a gesture; my presence and my person, is an important part of my message. The best stenographic record would seem ridiculous, because it would reproduce the pauses, the useful repetitions, the responses that I make following some objections that I see in your eyes, the elaborations I make on a point, or the consent granted or withheld that indicates that they would like me to stop.]

Writing, indeed, is a very limited representation of speech. However, this poverty of the written has three important implications. When the author loses control of the interpretation of his or her expression because of its dislocation in space and time, a conceptual gap is opened up between the meaning of an expression and the meaning that the speaker/writer had intended that the listener construct. Simply put, writing, like quoted speech, invites the distinction between the speaker's intended meaning and the sentence's meaning. Faced with this gap, writers must invest considerable effort in making the linguistic properties of the written form capture or sustain, so far as possible, the meaning he or she intended. As linguist



Roy Harris (1986) has argued, the history of writing is largely a history of the attempt to make up for what was lost in the act of transcribing speech. The context, the gestures, stress, and intonation that indicate how an oral utterance is to be taken must be brought into consciousness and be lexicalized, grammaticalized, and carefully edited to be made a part of the sentence meaning. Thinking for speaking is quite different from thinking for writing in that the latter is a matter of formulating a document in such a way that the lexical and syntactic structure will itself serve to determine the meaning or the type of meaning to be reconstructed by the reader. For example, the writer must inform the reader whether a written statement is to be taken as a mere conjecture or as a warranted fact, as a tentative offer or as a firm contract. The format, vocabulary, and punctuation must do what tone, emphasis, and context could have done in speaking. The extent to which this could be done successfully was and is easily exaggerated.

The history of writing is, in part, the history of specialization of genre to serve particular purposes such as the codification of law or the archiving of knowledge. Furthermore, it is this edited quality that contributes to the authority of texts that Richard de Bury in the 14th century recognized in his claim that “all knowledge is contained in books.” The belief that the construction of such self-interpreting texts was in fact possible is a defining feature of Modernism. Certainly efforts were and continue to be to write in such a clear and unambiguous way that readers would arrive at a single, true meaning, the final theory.

The second implication is that written texts are necessarily surrounded by a penumbra of oral discourse. Indeed, until modern times, written texts were written to be read out loud. But even when written to be consulted rather than read, even the most carefully crafted texts become invitations to interpretation. And courts, panels, churches, disciplines, and publics step in to regulate or control interpretation, taking some interpretations as legitimate and branding others as illegitimate or heretical. As historian Françoise Waquet has shown in her *Parler comme un livre* (2003), from the 17th century to the present, a condition in Western culture that she describes as “high orality” has ensured that oral discourse functions not only at the periphery but on a par with writing in literate culture, in our courts, our sciences, our arts, and our humanities. She writes:

Dans la civilisation de l'imprime, le monde intellectuel a non seulement beaucoup parlé, mais il a manifesté une confiance durable dans une oralité d'q'il a investie de'une forte valeur cognitive. (2003, p. 398)

[In the civilization of printing, the intellectual world not only speaks a great deal, but it manifests an enduring confidence in an orality that it invests with a strong cognitive value].

Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan (1988, in press), too, has pointed out how in cultures of writing, speech and writing are closely interrelated, the functions best



served by one being supplemented or monitored by the other. Written texts find their place in discourse communities, whether home, church, state, or academic discipline. These communities monitor, debate, and attempt to determine the one true and original meaning of their texts. As we say, there is no law without courts, and no religion without churches. The fateful illusion of Modernism was the belief that the true and ultimate meaning was in the text, to be discovered by careful reading, and, conversely, that meaning could be once and for all put into the text in such a way that it regulated its own interpretation. This assumption survives in the various fundamentalisms that distort discourse and sometimes threaten our civil societies.

The third implication flows from the new responsibilities and competencies that writing imposes on the writer and reader. Recall that a text captures only the linguistic properties of an utterance, and consequently, much of the history of writing is the attempt to compensate for what is lost in the act of transcription. The attempt to make texts say neither more nor less than what they mean continues to inform our attempt to design texts, documents, and other written artifacts. In speaking orally, a speaker has a richer range of resources at hand than does a writer; writers must invent or learn lexical and grammatical functions to compensate for such paralinguistic features as facial expression and tone of voice. Psychologists point out that one's "writing vocabulary" vastly exceeds one's "speaking vocabulary." Writers draw on an enlarged vocabulary, a more formalized grammar, a more logically organized rhetorical structure. In addition, they exploit such graphic devices as punctuation, quotation marks to distinguish one's own from other's utterances, and an elaborated set of "speech act" verbs such as *assert*, *imply*, *claim*, *conclude* to indicate how those utterances are to be taken. It is not only a matter of compensating for what has been lost in making a written transcription of what was said. Rather, it is a matter of making explicit and subject to reflection and control aspects of language that had remained largely implicit in speech. Thinking in a way suitable for writing is what distinguishes what we may think of as literate thought, the kind of thought that can be expressed either in speech or writing and that constitutes what Waquet called "high orality" (2003).

If written sentences are not adequate to their meaning, that is, if they always require interpretation, why do we not give them up and revert to oral discourse entirely? The transparency of oral expressions may be more apparent than real. In contexts requiring coordinated actions, a high level of agreement may be reached, while in other contexts it may be much more limited. A much higher degree of intersubjectivity is achieved by the explicitness provided by writing, editing, and rewriting in such domains as contracts, laws, and scientific reports. Carefully crafted documents are often a better indication of the intended meaning than an interview with the author him or herself. One's beliefs and thoughts are fluid and interrelated in ways that writing is not. Just as the requirements of speech impose



structure on thoughts (Slobin, 1996), so too, writing imposes additional structure on what one would ordinarily say. Writing is a matter of organizing, sometimes through multiple drafts, one's thoughts into a formal and fixed structure. Thus the document comes to be a more reliable clue to meaning than one's oral utterances or one's unwritten thoughts. The injunction "Thou shalt not kill" seems clear enough until one asks if that applies only to people, not to other animals, or if it applies in daily life but not in the context of war. When an attempt is made to spell out what all is meant by the injunction, the result is a complex written legal code.

Writing, then, makes explicit what has often remained implicit in speech. In speaking, an insistent tone may indicate that one wants to be taken seriously; in writing, one must *decide* whether an utterance is a suggestion or a demand and mark that decision lexically with a speech act verb such as *insist* or *suggest*. In this way one acquires the metalinguistic concepts needed for conceptual thought.

"Spelling out" is not limited to legal codes but to the very act of constructing written communication. Julie Comay (personal communication, 2004) provided the following exchange between two five-year-old children as their teacher transcribed a story being dictated by one of the children. The following conversation took place:

CHILD 1: . . . and then Lucy grew up to be a lovely girl.

CHILD 2: Who is Lucy?

CHILD 1: She's the baby I was just talking about.

CHILD 2: Then you should say so in your story. You should say: "The baby's name was Lucy."

CHILD 1: No I don't want to. It wouldn't sound good. It's not part of the story.

CHILD 2: You should say it. Otherwise people won't know who you mean. You could say, "The baby, whose name was Lucy . . ."

CHILD 1: Oh yeah. OK. [Turns to teacher] Write "The baby, whose name was Lucy, grew up to be beautiful."

TEACHER: "Beautiful" or "a lovely girl"?

CHILD: Beautiful.

TEACHER (WRITING AS SHE SPEAKS): "The baby, whose name was Lucy, grew up to be beautiful." Go on . . .

Who are these "people who won't know?" They are, of course, the possible readers who do not share the knowledge of the fact that Lucy is the recently discussed baby. Writing requires a new consciousness of what a *possible* reader might think or might not know. Filling it in is necessary if one is to control how strangers interpret a text.



Anticipating how a text will be taken by readers dislocated in time and space is important not only to law and commerce but also to science. The goal of a science is to characterize the properties of objects and their relations in terms of unambiguous laws and principles. Science advances when the interpretation or misinterpretation of an authoritative statement leads to disagreement. Useful disagreements and misreadings are possible, however, only when the authoritative written version is already at a high level of precision. Misinterpretations of imprecise or unedited expressions are unlikely to be contributions to knowledge. When disagreements loom or threaten to loom, precision is required and one encounters the almost universal appeal to writing.

O believers, when you contract a debt
 One upon another for a stated term,
 Write it down, and let a writer
 Write it down between you justly. (Quran 2:282)

The supposed cultural-historical transformation from an oral society to a literate one is no longer seen as adequate to an understanding of either mind or society. Rather by virtue of its fixity and permanence, writing quickly found a use for record keeping and for writing letters. Those uses engendered other problems in the use of written documents, the necessity of making the text adequate to its meaning to cope with the problem of misinterpretation and tying the text to its author to avoid the problem of forgery. On the one hand, we get the development of more specialized forms of writing designed to constrain the ways of reading, and on the other rich oral interpretive communities in the sciences, the courts, and the schools with the resources to debate and the power to determine (or assign) the correct reading of those documents. Learning to write is learning to compensate for what is lost in the act of simple transcription of speech. Making up for these lacks is what requires one to think like a writer. Thinking for writing is a kind of literate thinking that, once mastered, is useful even in oral discourse.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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What Counts As Evidence In Researching Spoken and Written Discourses?

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As I see it, central to Olson's claim about the relationship of literacy, oral discourse, and thinking, are questions about what counts as evidence in language and literacy research regardless of the perspective taken or the claims made (cf. Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Gee & Green, 1998; Graff, 1979; Heap, 1980; Street, 1984). I want to propose three problematics and five principles for considering what might count as evidence. There are others but given the limited space provided for a response, I can only list a few and briefly describe them.

PROBLEMATIC 1: WHAT COUNTS AS EVIDENCE DEPENDS ON THE THEORIES ONE BRINGS TO THE FIELD. Recognition of the partial nature of any perspective emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives and the use of complementary methods (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006; Green & Harker, 1988). Differences in literacy definitions, theoretical frames, and epistemologies have consequences for defining the relationship of literacy to spoken language, thinking, and thought. One could almost claim that the theory produces the evidence. Yet, I do not believe that researchers are necessarily trapped in either a relativistic or egotistic space. As Atkinson (1990) and Bloome et al. (2005), among others, have argued, researchers need to acknowledge the theories they bring with them into the field, maintain an



open mind, and deliberately put those theories into dialectical relationship with their experiences in specific situations in the field and with the theories of daily life that are held by the people there (and recursively so over a sustained period of time). What counts as evidence is derived through that dialectical process; and, as that dialectical process evolves over time, so too does what counts as evidence.

PROBLEMATIC 2: EVIDENCE IS ALWAYS PARTIAL. When does a social event, such as a reading or writing event, begin or end? What are the boundaries of influences on that event and on what that event influences? What are the boundaries on the ways people can take up what is occurring in that event and recreate it or redefine it? I would argue that any moment of interaction among people is always subject to refraction through its constructed relationship to other moments of interaction (Bloome, 1993; cf. Bakhtin, 1935/1981; Volosinov, 1929/1973). It is in this sense that the evidence that can be claimed about any moment of social interaction—whether it is reading aloud in a classroom instructional group or sitting alone at home—is always and inherently partial. This is part of the context of making claims and supporting them with evidence. Which is not to say that claims should not be made or supported, but rather that researchers must do so acknowledging that any argument is but a moment within a social and communicative event(s) itself that is inherently partial, belonging only in part to that researcher.

PROBLEMATIC 3: SOMETHING IS ALWAYS LOST IN THE TRANSLATION/REPRESENTATION. It is not just that any recording of a social event, such as writing an essay, reifies that event and as such loses aspects of that event, but also that researching human actions always requires recontextualizing that behavior and re-presenting that behavior for another audience (Atkinson, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988). It is no less an act of translation than translating a story or a poem from one language into another. The translation has some resemblance to the original and it may have flow, rhythm, and style that are also to be appreciated, but it is not the original. Through translation, it becomes the cultural and material object of the new audience. Yet, researchers have no alternative but to engage in translation and re-presentation. What is at issue is the degree to which researchers acknowledge that the evidence used derives from the translation and the degree to which we have theorized how the act of translation defines what counts as evidence.

PRINCIPLE 1: USE MATTERS. “Use” is not an optional condition. One cannot consider a spoken or written text outside of “use” (cf. Volosinov, 1929). As Bloome and Clark (2006) write:

The question to ask about discourse is not whether it is written or spoken, *discourse* or *Discourse*, animated or otherwise, verbal or non-verbal, ubiquitous or confined, adopted or adapted—discourse is always all of these. The question to ask is who is doing what, with whom to whom, to what consequence, when and where. The “when and where” is



critical as it situates discourse-in-use as an historical and interpersonal process. As Erickson and Shultz (1977) pointed out over two decades ago, people are the context for each other.

PRINCIPLE 2: DIVERSITY MATTERS. The experiences of people with written language vary widely; the experiences of any one group of people should not constitute the evidential basis of claims and theories for others. As far as theory building goes, it matters what people in Nukulaelae do with letters (Besnier, 1995); it matters what adults and children do with written language in a Samoan village (Duranti & Ochs, 1986); it matters how people in a Papua, New Guinean village take up and adapt external literacy practices to their own lives (Kulick & Stroud, 1993); it matters what preschool children do with crayons to write books made from newsprint (Champion, Katz, Muldrow, & Dail, 1999); it matters what young adolescents do with words on the playground (Gilmore, 1987); and it matters as much as what academics do. It matters not just as a foil to what middle-class children in the U.S. do, but because all people matter and all research expresses an underlying definition of personhood (cf. Egan-Robertson, 1998; Gergen & Davis, 1985). It is by definition ethnocentric to build a definition of personhood based solely or primarily on one cultural group.

PRINCIPLE 3: TIME MATTERS. It is not just that human actions need to be placed in relationship to what went before and what will come later—that is, historicized and coordinated with what else is occurring. But also that human behaviors need to be understood as a way that people move through time, whether it is getting through the school day (Ball, Hull, Skelton, & Tudor, 1984; Bloome & Katz, 1997; Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989), or creating time for writing (Sheridan, Street, & Bloome, 2000). The evidence researchers use needs to incorporate how those behaviors are both in time and creating time.

PRINCIPLE 4: POWER RELATIONS MATTER. If we think of power not just as coercion or a quantity of some kind (e.g., more money, larger armies, more skills) but as those processes that both enable and constrain opportunities for what can happen within any specific situation (and thus, define power as a situated and local process [cf. Luke, 1988, 1995; Street, 1995]), then understanding any human action(s) is always a matter of understanding that behavior within a nexus of power relations (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson., 1992; Gitlin, 1994). And, while power relations are only one aspect of social relationships, researchers need to account for how power contextualizes and produces human behavior.

PRINCIPLE 5: THE LOCAL MATTERS. The local matters not just because meaning and import are always situated, but because the local is the nexus for theory building by people in their daily lives (cf. de Certeau, 1984). The move to grand theory and grand narratives by researchers backgrounds what many scholars in the social

sciences and educational research over the past three decades have been foregrounding: namely, the particularities, situatedness, local knowledge, and social construction of everyday life in its complexity and heterogeneity (cf. Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Becker, 1988; Bloome, 2005; Geertz, 1983; Street, 1995).

The debate that Olson's essay encourages about the consequences of written language on thinking is, I think, one level of a much deeper and important debate. It is a debate about the degree to which the local and the situated matter and the degree to which use, diversity, time, and power relations matter in what counts as evidence.

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Literacy in a Child's World of Voices, or, The Fine Print of Murder and Mayhem

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He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug. (Strunk, White, & Kalman, 2005, p. 46)

I had read the *Elements of Style* before the recent illustrated edition graced the bookstore shelves. But I had never found its sample sentences so amusing. Through Maira Kalman's drawings, mundane sentences exemplifying precise



grammatical edicts—like “Keep related words together”—were embedded in visual scenes bursting with uncontained meaning. For example, that large stain in the center of the rug had a body (!) lying over it; although one of the elegantly clad folks in the scene seemed to have “noticed” the stain, he certainly did not spill his wine over it.

When I read the graceful essay David Olson had written for this month’s *RTE*, I thought of the *Elements of Style*. I wanted to be the essay’s illustrator, contextualizing its points in the unruly world of children. (Indeed, even bringing drawing into the discussion would disrupt the contained world of the oral and the written.) Instead of drawings, though, I use vignettes and child writings, particularly those of 6-year-old Tionna, a child in a recent study of the “basics” of learning to write (Dyson, 2006a, 2006b, in press). In so doing, I aim to open some theoretical and pedagogical space for children and their teachers, even as such space is being narrowed through test-monitored curriculum all over the country.

Olson’s central message is that “learning to write is learning to compensate for what is lost” in transcribing “speech.” Illustrative material for this message about speech and writing is found in sentences, like (the Biblical) “Thou shalt not kill.” The sensuous qualities of speech—its sonorous, reverential, or satirical edge—are not all that are lost in the written rendition of this oral injunction. Olson situates the edict in the legal domain, and he argues that what is lost is the capacity to interpret the oral in an immediate context with a known audience. But what is gained in writing (more elaborate than the stone tablet version without the fine print) is the potential to spell out the injunction’s legal and political intricacies and thereby bridge “conceptual gaps” between the intended meaning of the author (or Author) and future audience members:

The injunction “Thou shalt not kill” seems clear enough *until one asks* [emphasis added] if that applies only to people, not to other animals, or if it applies in daily life but not in the context of war. When an attempt is made to spell out what all is meant by the injunction, the result is a complex written legal code [and a professional livelihood for those who can read, write, and talk about such codes]. (Olson, this issue, p. ???)

This compensatory relationship between oral and written language is one kind of truth, one theoretical angle on a relationship. But, to support the learning of young school children, a different kind of theorized relationship—a different truth—comes to fore. The nature of that relationship is in fact suggested by the Biblical example itself. As quoted above, Olson suggests that writers of legal code are participants in conversations in which the fine points of murder are talked about. Thus, the voices of those prior conversations can become resources for writers as they shape their own voiced response to the legal goings on. As the language philosopher Bakhtin (1986, p. 69) explains:



[The speaker or writer] does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth . . . Moreover, any speaker . . . enters into one kind of relation or another [with preceding utterances] (builds on them, polemicalizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known . . .).

In this Bakhtinian view of language use, the critical question is not about the relationship between oral and written language but about how and whose voices become resources for and, even, absorbed into more complex and perhaps more artful forms of communication. A complex genre—a rap, a novel, a scientific exposition—may usually be written, but in the process of its formation, it recontextualizes or “digests” simpler utterances, particularly oral exchanges (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 62). Even a dry legal document is a responsive turn in a conversation and, as Olson also notes, unlikely to have the last word.

This notion—that writing is a turn in a kind of conversation—seems critical, even basic, to young school children's learning. It potentially transforms children's voice-filled everyday lives into a plethora of literacy resources. These resources include the particular and typified (i.e., generic) voices of family members and community participants, friends, teachers, and media figures as they tell stories, enact dramas, participate in sport and game, report the news, advertise their wares and services, celebrate, communicate, pray, and on and on. Children's sensitivity to such situated voices is on display in their play, when children sound like all manner of familiar others (Garvey, 1990). But to use their discursive stuff as resources for writing, children must learn more than how to encode speech or even to compensate for it; they must become active participants in new kinds of conversations.

Children may first approach writing as a way of indexing or representing an idea (“I like cats,” for example) or, perhaps, as simply a way of fulfilling the school demand to “write your three sentences” (a common first grade standard). Children expand their social and textual possibilities as they differentiate a place for (i.e., as they embed) writing within the actual give-and-take among the “people” in their class (Dyson, 1989, 2003).

That is, children may write in more extended and coherent ways if they are engaging in a familiar communicative space (i.e., a Bakhtinian genre or practice) and if they know the kind of voice they are to assume. They are not driven by “sentence” meaning nor even “conceptual” understanding but by meeting, negotiating, or resisting the expectations and conventions of the social goings on. Thus, they are not only transcribing speech (although they are doing that, too); they are making a voice—a situated utterance—visible on paper.

For example, listen to Tionna and her friend Lyron (both African American) establish the practice they are going to engage in during writing time—a kind of





fictional “game.” That game begins in talk and drawing and then moves into writing.

TIONNA: (drawing Lyron) You looking all mean and stuff.

LYRON: Why?

TIONNA: ‘Cause you mad at me and Mandisa and Janette.

LYRON: Why?

TIONNA: ‘Cause we stole all *your* stuff and you don’t got nothing. You only got a dollar. Ha ha ha ha.

LYRON: You don’t even know what I’m writing about *you* yet. You think I ain’t gonna write about you?

Tionna expands the play, aiming to bring Manny, sitting nearby, into the game:

TIONNA: You and Manny are mad at me—me and Janette, *and* Mandisa . . .
Manny is mad too. (laughs)

Manny, who has not been attending to the ongoing play, is caught off-guard:

MANNY: You don’t write about me. I didn’t do nothing to you.

LYRON: *NO!* She’s just writing about that, you being mad ‘cause um she took our money.

“Just writing” is akin to “just playing” in the above vignette. Tionna and Lyron had some sense of the truth-taking liberties (and the social disorder acceptable) in a “fake” or story world. That world drew from a gendered playground game, a kind of chase game. But Tionna was making a move to a written version, enticing Lyron to give verbal chase (and, eventually, pleasing the people in her class during sharing time).

Near the end of the year, the children engaged in much more dramatic action, verbally maneuvering against each other through their writing in a kind of war game (another extension of a playground team chase-game). Lyron and Manny were the major composers of war. During composing time, they had elaborate duels of graphic actions, accompanied by speech, but their written texts were brief, usually three-sentence affairs that anticipated the war and declared its outcome (e.g., “Manny is goin to los [lose]. I am going to winn.”).

But one day Tionna decided to play war during writing time with her friend Mandisa. Lyron, overhearing their plans, was quite indignant:

LYRON: Me and Manny have our own war. You guys [girls] don’t even know about war.



TIONNA: Yes we do. I watched the war on TV.

MANNY: You're just copying offa us.

TIONNA: We got the girl war. No boys are allowed.

Jason, who sits at the table, makes gun sound effects directed at the girls, but Tionna at first refuses to play with him:

TIONNA: Jason, we're not playing in your war . . . So you can kill us by yourself.

You might be killing us, but we're not killing you and we're not on your team and we're not playing war with you guys.

JASON: Okay.

LYRON: No! We're *letting* you guys [girls] play with us.

The tension here was not about the nature of the practice but about the right to participate. When Lyron wrote that the girls would lose, Tionna adopted a defiant female voice. In her text, the boys only had one tent, in comparison to the girls' many castles; moreover, the girls "stole there [the boys'] money." All the girls would need to defeat them as they huddled in their tent was a rock. The boys "can't lay a hand on the tofe [tough] girls."

The children thus illustrate the way in which engagement in writing entails, at heart, engagement in a practice. In learning to write, young children are energized by writing that is in effect speaking to, yelling at, telling a good story to, or explaining how it really is to people, particularly those with whom they write and for whom they perform their writing in that critically important time, sharing time. Moreover, they are encoding, not just "speech," but varied kinds of appropriated voices.

For example, the "tofe" Tionna also wrote with great appreciation about her feelings for the "cute" Jon, whose "heir [hair] is the stilly [style]," replayed for laughs the jokes her aunty told, and composed a Mother's Day card for her grandmother: "out of all the moms there be you are the best one there is in live [life]." By the spring of the school year, Tionna even wrote dialogue differently depending on the voices she was evoking in her texts, just as do the novelists that so impressed Bakhtin. In one entry, for example, Tionna wrote about a cousin who

always copy cat me and I say aren't you tier [tired] of copycating me *she say* no I'm not that is my favord [favorite] so ples stop ascking [asking] me mame [ma'am] I get tier of that[,] calling me mame so I will call her mame.

The assertive back and forth of Tionna's written dialogue, her explicit feelings and conversational present (*she say* and *I say*) contrast the more straightforward and formal prose of her texts based on her teacher's talk. For example:



Yesterday Mrs. K went to the doctor she had to leave for the rest of the afternoon because *she said* her son Kelly had a bump on his arm *she said* they had to remove it.

The oral and written voices of Tionna and her peers replayed in my mind as I wrote this response to “Oral Discourse in a World of Literacy.” Most clearly, I heard Tionna, whose brief written sentences blossomed into a diversity of voices as writing became a mediator of a range of social encounters, of practices. Following the lead of Maira Kalman, who opened up the meaning of a seemingly straightforward proposition about a stain on a rug, I have aimed to account for those voices by refracting and magnifying the multiplicity inherent in a sentence about speech and learning to write. “Speech” has become “voices,” and voices, organized in conversations, feed and, indeed, can become the constitutive stuff of writing, which itself is a dialogic turn.

This multiplicity of voices gives rise to visions of ideal pedagogical environments for the very young. In these environments, everyday voices are welcomed in a permeable curriculum in which children’s relationships with each other are a kind of breeding ground for meaningful literacy use (and provide much ideological content for talk about, say, the “fun” of killing in war). Moreover, it includes ample guidance so that diverse purposes and audiences can be made socially sensible for and with children; in this way, children are supported in entering new kinds of textual conversations, new sorts of dialogues with the world.

It is hard, though, to actually see such environments, given the current narrowing of the curriculum for young children. The achievement tests, required textbooks, and curricular objectives in Tionna’s school, as in those all over the country, simply forwarded a “correct way” of writing and, thus, of speaking—of arranging and articulating words. One has to strain to hear the rich possibilities of child voices in our culturally, linguistically, and socially diverse society. In the spirit of this *RTE* issue, we might listen, not only to our own voices, but also to children’s; may they become the substance of our own endeavors to make schooling a safe, productive place for their growth.

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Oral Discourse in a World of Literacy

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There is nothing I disagree with in David Olson's excellent essay. Though, in keeping with his essay, I should also point out that my agreement is an artifact of how I have interpreted him, not some fixed meaning his text has without my participation. So, let me start with four points that I take from Olson's essay. These are points I have, over the years, tried to develop in my own work, as well (e.g., Gee, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2005):

1. Writing, like other technologies (e.g., television, computers, video games), does not have necessary effects, but it does have affordances that lead it relatively predictably to have certain sorts of effects in certain sorts of contexts. For example, when Olson says that "[w]riters draw on an enlarged vocabulary, a more formalized grammar, a more logically organized rhetorical structure," this is an affordance that writing has, one that has been realized in certain of its uses within specific sorts of contexts, e.g., academic ones or in other sorts of "essayist literacy" practices (Scollon & Scollon, 1981), practices which writing helped to create in their modern forms. Other sorts of contexts can mitigate or reverse these effects or lead writing to have quite different effects. For example, writing in instant messaging leads to a different grammar and different rhetorical structures, not necessarily more formal ones or more "logically organized" ones. So, in studying writing or any other technology, we have to study both affordances and the full range of contexts in which the technology is used.
2. Writing is not "decontextualized." While it does move language from face-to-face contexts, writing, like all uses of language, relies on contextual interactions for its interpretations, for instance, people's background knowledge and their memberships in various social groupings (e.g., physicists, feminists, or fundamentalists). For example, consider a sentence like "Hornworm growth displays a significant amount of variation." This sentence is in a style of language that would usually be written, though, of course, it can be spoken, as well. Consider the phrase "significant amount of variation." What counts as the sorts of variation worth measuring (in regard to growth) and what counts as significant, and how significance is measured (e.g., statistically), are settled by



appeals to how a particular discipline (as a type of discourse and social practice community) does things. Biologists of a certain sort have decided that certain things are worth measuring in certain ways. Failing knowledge of this cognitive and social context, the phrase is inexplicable. Surely this sentence is no less “contextualized” (i.e., in need of reflection on contextual knowledge for its understanding) than a more vernacular version like “Hornworms sure vary a lot in how well they grow.”

3. Historically, many different social groupings and institutions have sought to use writing to “fix” interpretations as if context and the reader’s interpretative capacities could be ignored. The result is often some sort of “priesthood” (insider group) that serves to enforce the so-called “fixed” interpretations, which rarely stay fixed, in any case, across specific applications or across history (see Ault, 2004 for an excellent example dealing with fundamentalist and their so-called “literal” readings of the Bible).
4. Because writing is always in need of interpretation through consideration of its interaction with various contextual features, it is almost always accompanied by speech in one way or another. For example, the lectures of the literary critic that tell us what Emily Dickinson “really” meant according to his or her theory of literary interpretation, or the fundamentalist pastor telling his congregation what the Bible’s “literal” (“real”) meaning is (again, see Ault, 2004). If we consider again the sentence “Hornworm growth displays a significant amount of variation,” it is clear both that a great deal of speech and social interaction support the various ways to understand and debate a phrase like “a significant amount of variation” and that people who really understand this sentence can usually speak and not just write the style of language in which it finds its home.

Let me add two points that, in my view, though they are not in Olson’s essay, follow from some of the points he makes:<NL>

5. Because speech and writing so often go together, and because both of them trade on contextual interactions for interpretation, it is often better to ask about a particular *genre* of language (e.g., lectures, which though spoken, are writing-like in some ways, or family letters, which though written, are spoken-like in some respects) than writing or speaking *per se* (Biber, 1988). This is all the truer today with things like instant messaging and chat rooms, since these are, in some ways like face-to-face conversations, but are written—forms of what Ong (1982) called “secondary orality.”



6. Because speech and writing so often go together and because both trade on contextual interactions for interpretation, it is often better to study *social practices* that include both writing and speech, as well as various values, ways of thinking, believing, acting, and interacting, and using various objects, tools, and technologies (e.g., practices in courtrooms, secondary science classrooms, graffiti-writing urban street gangs, or urban tagging groups), than it is to look only at writing or speech *per se*. This is, in my view, the main point behind the so-called “New Literacy Studies” (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 1999; Gee, 1989, 1990, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995). For example, considering once again Ault’s (2004) ethnography of a fundamentalist church, it may often be better to study the social practices (and everything that goes with them, e.g., values, ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, and ways of using objects, bodies, places, and times) in which fundamentalists embed Biblical texts than to study the texts themselves or what fundamentalists write about them. The study of literacy, then, becomes the study of practices in which literacy is embedded, not just the study of reading and writing.

There are points in Olson’s essay where I would qualify what he has said, along the lines of the six points I have just made. For example, when he says (this issue, p. ???), “Thinking in a way suitable for writing is what distinguishes what we may think of as literate thought, the kind of thought that can be expressed either in speech or writing and that constitutes what Waquet called ‘high orality’ (2003).” I would restrict this by saying something like “Thinking in a way suitable for writing *as it is used in specific practices in domains like academics, law, medicine, etc . . .*” Of course, other sorts of writing practices, such as instant messaging or “leet speak” in video games, may lead to different ways of thinking, but we probably would not want to use a term like “high orality” for what these are.

Or take the following remark:

A much higher degree of intersubjectivity is achieved by the explicitness provided by writing, editing and rewriting in such domains as contracts, laws, and scientific reports. Carefully crafted documents are often a better indication of the intended meaning than an interview with the author him or herself. One’s beliefs and thoughts are fluid and interrelated in ways that writing is not. (this issue, p. ???)

Again, I would want to qualify this statement by stipulating the particular sorts of writing practices being talked about. At the same time, it can be misleading to say that writing, even in its academic forms, is more “explicit” than speech. For example, consider the sentence below (example taken from Halliday & Martin, 1993, and this discussion based on their work):



1. Lung cancer death rates are clearly associated with an increase in smoking.

A whole bevy of grammatical features mark this sentence as part of a distinctive academic social language (Gee, 1999, 2004). Some of these are the ways in which a “heavy subject” (“lung cancer death rates”), deverbal nouns (“increase,” “smoking”), a complex compound noun (“lung cancer death rates”), a “low transitive” relational predicate (“are associated with”), passive or passive-like voice (“are associated”), the absence of agency (no mention of who does the associating), an abstract noun (“rates”), and an assertive modifier to the verb (“clearly”) pattern together in the sentence.

However, sentence 1 is no more explicit than vernacular language. It is no less contextualized. It is simply inexplicit and contextualized in a different way. Though we tend to think of academic writing and speech as clear, unambiguous, and explicit in comparison to speech, sentence 1, in fact, has at least 112 different meanings. However, anyone reading sentence 1 (at least anyone in our culture) hits on only one of these meanings (or but one of a select few) without any overt awareness that the other 111 meanings are perfectly possible.

How can sentence 1 have so many meanings? This fact is due to the grammar of the sentence. The subject of sentence 1 (“Lung cancer death rates”) is a complex compound noun. There are a number of different ways in which such a compound noun can be “parsed” (that is, in which its parts can be put together). Furthermore, “rates” can be taken to mean either “number” or “speed.” There are, then, at least, four possibilities here:

- 2a. [lung cancer] [death rates] = rates (number) of people dying from lung cancer = how many people die from lung cancer
- 2b. [lung cancer] [death rates] = rates (speed) of people dying from lung cancer = how quickly people die from lung cancer
- 2c. [lung] [[cancer death] [rates]] = rates (number) of lungs dying from cancer = how many lungs die from cancer
- 2d. [lung] [[cancer death] [rates]] = rates (speed) of lungs dying from cancer = how quickly lungs die from cancer

The first two meanings above (2a-b) parse the phrase “lung cancer death rates” as “lung-cancer (a disease) death-rates,” that is “death-rates from lung-cancer,” where “rates” can mean the number of people dying or the speed of their deaths from the disease. The second two meanings (2c-d) parse the phrase “lung cancer death rates” as “lung cancer-death-rates,” that is “cancer-death-rates for lungs,” where, once again, “rates” can mean number of (this time) lungs dying from cancer or the speed with which they are dying from cancer. This way of parsing the phrase is



analogous to the most obvious reading of “pet cancer death rates” (i.e., “cancer-death-rates for pets,” that is, how many/how quickly pets are dying from cancer). Of course, everyone reading this paper probably interpreted “lung cancer death rates” in terms of 2a.

Now consider the verbal phrase “are clearly associated with” in sentence 1. Such rather “colorless” relational predicates are typical of certain social languages. Such verbal expressions are ambiguous in two respects. In the first place, we cannot tell whether “associated with” indicates a relationship of *causation* or just *correlation*. Thus, does sentence 1 say that one thing causes another (e.g., smoking causes cancer) or just that one thing is correlated with another (smoking and cancer are found together, but, perhaps, something else causes both of them)?

In the second place, even if we take “associated with” to mean *cause*, we still cannot tell what causes what. You and I may know, in fact, that smoking causes cancer, but sentence 1 can perfectly mean that lung cancer death rates *lead to* increased smoking. “Perhaps,” as Halliday remarks, “people are so upset by fear of lung cancer that they need to smoke more in order to calm their nerves” (Halliday & Martin, 1993, pp. 77-78). It is even possible that the writer did not want to commit to a choice between *cause* and *correlate*, or to a choice between smoking causing cancer or fear of cancer causing smoking. This gives us at least the following meaning possibilities for the verbal phrase “are clearly associated with”:

- 3a. cause
- 3b. caused by
- 3c. correlated with
- 3d. writer does not want to commit herself

Now, let’s finish with the phrase “increased smoking.” This is a nominalization, compacting the information of a whole sentence (“smoking increases”) into a noun phrase. Does it mean “people smoke more” (smokers are increasing the amount they smoke), or “more people smoke” (new smokers are being added to the list of smokers), or is it a combination of the two, meaning “more people smoke more”?

We can also ask, in regard to the death rates and the increased smoking taken together, if the people who are increasing their smoking (whether old smokers or new ones) are the people who are dying from lung cancer or whether other people are dying as well (e.g., people who don’t smoke, but, perhaps, are “associated with” smokers). Finally, we can ask of the sentence as a whole, whether it represents a “real” situation (“*because* more people are smoking more people are dying”) or just a hypothetical one (“*if* more people were to smoke we know more people would die”)? This gives us at least seven more meaning possibilities:



- 4a. increased smoking = people smoke more
- 4b. increased smoking = more people smoke
- 4c. increased smoking = more people smoke more
- 4d. the same people are smoking and dying
- 4e. the people smoking and dying are not all the same
- 4f. the situation being talked about is real (*because*)
- 4g. the situation being talked about is hypothetical (*if*)

We now have considered four possible meanings for the subject (“lung cancer death rates”), four possible meanings for the verbal phrase (“are clearly associated with”) and seven possibilities for the complement (“increased smoking”). You can take one from list A and another from list B and yet another from list C and get a specific combination of meanings. This gives us 4 times 4 times 7 possibilities, that is, 112 different possible meanings.

All of these meanings are perfectly allowed by the grammar of sentence 1. And, in fact, there are other possibilities I have not discussed, e.g., taking “rates” to mean “monetary costs” or “lung cancer death rates” to be the rates at which lung cancer is dying. And yet, nearly everyone reading this paper hit on just one of these many meanings and the same one (or, at worst, considered a very few of the possibilities). Why? We all hit on only one (and the same one) of the 112 meanings because we have all been part of—we have all been privy to—the ongoing discussion or *conversation* in our society about smoking, disease, tobacco companies, contested research findings, warnings on cartons, ads that entice teens to smoke, and so on and so forth through a great many complex details.

Given this conversation as background, sentence 1 has one meaning. Without that conversation—with only the grammar of English in one’s head—the sentence has more than 112 meanings. Obviously, however important grammar is, the conversation is more important. It leaves open one meaning (or a small number of possibilities, like allowing that sentence 1 also covers people getting lung cancer from secondary smoke).

A more technical way to put this point is this: Meaning is not merely a matter of decoding grammar, it is also (and more importantly) a matter of knowing which of the many inferences that one can draw from an utterance are *relevant* (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). And “relevance” is a matter deeply tied to context, point of view, and culture. One knows what counts for a given group of people at a given time and place as “relevant” by having been privy to certain “conversations” those people have heretofore had. If there had been a major conversation about environmentally induced lung cancer in a nervous society, then sentence 1 could perfectly well have been taken to mean that the prevalence of lung cancer is causing many more people to turn to smoking to calm their nerves (2a + 3a + 4b).

Writing like that in sentence 1 is not “bad writing.” In fact, it contains grammatical structures that are absolutely typical of academic prose and for this reason: in academic domains—and other similar domains—people want to write in such a way that assumes that the readers have been part of the earlier “conversation” in the domain. They don’t want to always to begin again, but, rather, to accumulate knowledge and move on from more and more advanced parts of the conversation. They write from the middle of the conversation, writing nominalized subjects like “the spin of electrons,” leaving the reader to unpack what this means and, in the process, the reader must add back in a large piece of the domain conversation that is left inexplicit in the writing. This is why such writing is such a good “gate-keeper” for the domain, allowing only “insiders” or potential “insiders” in.

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**Response to David Olson's "Oral Discourse in a World of Literacy"***Martin Nystrand**University of Wisconsin-Madison*

David Olson surveys research on the relationship of oral and written discourse noting problems in previous arguments that writing is a record of speech (Saussure) or speech written down (Bloomfield) and that writing evolved from pictographs to cuneiform writing to alphabet (Gelb). Citing these scholars and others, including poststructuralists Derrida and Kristeva, Olson nonetheless argues, as he has before (Olson, 1977), that written discourse, if not a record, is a transcription and, as such, is fundamentally shaped by the need of writers to compensate for "what is lost in the transcription of speech." Considerable research, however, refutes this claim. We know, for example, that writing and speech are functionally inequivalent (Stubbs, 1990). The choice between written and spoken language relates not to the transcriptional capabilities of writing to represent speech, but, rather, to the idiosyncratic affordances of each mode of communication in its contexts of use (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). To use some of Olson's examples, we don't undertake contracts or scientific reports or books in speaking; indeed, writing such documents' "complex written legal code" is never a matter of "making a written transcription of what was said" (Olson, this issue, p. ???) since these genres are not spoken. Some things said are strategically (or cynically) not committed to writing. And if academics present papers orally at conferences, they must make critical decisions on how to deal with idiosyncratic features and conventions of published papers, including abstracts, citations, and references, not readily available to speakers. Even though a skilled communicator might decide to write, telephone, or e-mail some message, she will discriminate among the often subtle potentials of these respective modes of communication in their specific contexts of use. In some offices, depending on the relationship and/or respective status of the conversants, telephoning will trump e-mails or memos in "breaking through" and urgently contacting someone. Even handwriting, as opposed to e-mailing, can accent particular messages. Deciding to use any mode of discourse, including writing, requires not compensating for what might get lost in transcription but, rather, learning to calculate and exploit the potential of the mode chosen. All such decisions figure in the sociocultural, institutional context of the communication, the speaker/writer's relationship to the listener/reader, and the purpose and urgency of the message.

The development of writing as a system of communication has long been attributed to the invention of the alphabet to transcribe spoken language (Goody & Watt, 1963; Havelock, 2003; McLuhan, 1968; Ong, 1982; Rousseau, as quoted by Olson, this issue). According to the alphabetic theory, writing evolved from pictograph to cuneiform writing to an alphabetic system originating among the ancient Semites and perfected by the Greeks. We now know, however, that writing



emerged as a mode of language completely unrelated to the need to transport speech; writing developed not to “preserve language across space and through time,” as Olson puts it, but rather to enable language in remote contexts of use. Archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat’s (1978, 1996) research shows that writing developed to serve the invoicing needs of traders over their long-distance routes in ancient Mesopotamia. Between 8000-4400 BCE, clay tokens were sent along with shipments of sheep, bushels of grain, quantities of gold, and so on, to account for and secure the shipments. Each item represented by a token was marked by an abstract symbol representing the item; the number of tokens matched the number of items. The tokens were neither pictographic representations of the items nor phonetic representations of their names. Starting around 3700 BCE, traders sealed the tokens in clay bullae, or envelopes, with impressions of the tokens impressed on their surface. After 3500 BCE, impressed clay tablets were substituted for the tokens themselves, which had become redundant. Hence, writing evolved in ancient Mesopotamia (although it was independently invented in China and among the Incas) not as a transcription of speech but, rather, as an alternative system of communication, a semiotic language for accounting. This system offered features and resources unavailable to speakers yet meaningful to international traders who had no need even to speak the same language, even as today, Asian people including Koreans and Japanese can read Chinese characters even though they do not speak Chinese (Gernet, 1982). Indeed, Schmandt-Besserat argues, it was only as written signs were invented to represent items and record their numbers that “writing could become phonetic and develop into the versatile tool that it is today” (1996, p. 125).

Goody, who with Watt had promulgated the alphabetic theory in 1963 (Goody & Watt, 1963), has since recanted this formulation, arguing against claims that conflate writing as an “objective correlative of speech” with writing as a modified use of language (1977, p. 76). He also refutes the corollary argument of alphabetic theory that the invention of the alphabet triggered Western civilization, syllogistic reasoning, and history, as well as the achievements of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment. “It is a gross ethnocentric error of Europe to attribute too much to the alphabet and too much to the West” (Goody, 1987, p. 56).

Transcribing speech into writing, as in Olson’s example of court records, presents unique problems for court stenographers, and Olson is correct in his argument that paralinguistic features of speech are left out of such transcripts. Indeed, Conversation Analysis (CA) documents the elaborate systems CA has developed for capturing such features. Yet such “transcription” problems are not unique to writers. Speakers rendering written texts into spoken accounts face a comparable challenge and must recruit devices of oral language to compensate for resources idiosyncratic to writing. Speakers either quoting others or putting distance between themselves and those they quote resort to wagging double fingers on both



hands or saying “quote unquote” to accommodate a feature routinely available to writers. Transcription, perhaps more accurately understood as cross-media rendering, is never “simple.”

It is true, of course, that writers must make do without such paralinguistic devices as the “gestures, winks, and nods” that Olson catalogues. But if paralinguistics refers to those phenomena that “occur alongside spoken language, interact with it, and produce together with it a total system of communication” (Abercrombie, 1968, p. 55), then written language may be said to have its own special resources in this regard, which might well be called “paragraphics.” Speakers do not have “a richer range of resources at hand than does a writer” (Olson, this issue, p. ???) but rather a different set altogether. These resources serve the essential paralinguistic purposes of modulation (superimposing upon a text a particular attitudinal coloring) and punctuation (marking boundaries at the beginning and end of a text and at various points within to emphasize particular expressions, and to segment the utterance into manageable information units [Lyons, 1977, p. 65]). In addition to punctuation, these devices include paragraphing, indentation, underlining, italics, bold face, hanging indents, and quotation marks; tables of contents, titles, subheadings, footnotes, endnotes, and indexes (and pagination). Few, if any, of these devices serve the purpose of transcribing speech, though it is possible to use some of them for this purpose. Punctuation (especially commas) is commonly thought of (and taught) in terms of pauses, and when texts were mainly written to be read aloud, they often functioned to do just this; even today some texts are written specifically to be read or performed aloud, e.g., drama scripts or national addresses. Yet in contemporary written English, punctuation marks not pauses, but, rather, relations among parts of sentences and texts. The paragraph (from the Greek *para*, beside + *graphos*, mark) was originally a symbol placed in the margin to indicate conceptual, narrative, and other shifts in the flow of discourse. Halliday and Hasan (1976) note paragraphing as a written language device to mark “periodicity.” The original notion persists in the use of *paragraph* as a verb (Rodgers, 1966). Some fine distinctions available to writers, including colons versus semicolons, or interoffice memo formats indicating *cc*: and *bcc*: (and, in so doing, marking who is absent in either category) would present special problems to any speaker who sought to convey their force. Such affordances of the written language are not compensation for what is lost in the transcription of speech. These devices, which have no functional equivalents in speech that might be transcribed into writing, define the idiosyncratic resources of written language.

Olson conceives discourse, in Bakhtin’s terms, as the monologic transmission of messages from speaker to listener (writer to reader) characteristic of such official modes of discourse as scripture, law, scientific reports, and archives. Such genres require readers, Olson explains, to “arrive at a single, true meaning” (Olson, this

issue, p. ???) and writers to produce “explicit” texts that “say, neither more nor less, than what they mean” (p. ???). Bakhtin and Volosinov show, however, that no discourse, neither spoken nor written, is inherently monologic. The language and discourse of any given time and place are continuously shaped and pulled in different directions by interacting forces of stability and change. On the one hand are the “centripetal” forces of stability and canonization—rules of grammar, usage, “official genres,” “correct” language, privileged ideologies; on the other hand are the “centrifugal” forces of life, experience, and the natural pluralism of language. The genres of written discourse that Olson highlights—scriptural, legal, scientific, but notably not correspondence or novels—are all highly codified modes of discourse that their communities organize to resist, censor, and suppress the forces of heteroglossia in the interests of stability and canonization; Bakhtin cited the Russian Orthodox Church seeking to impose a “single language of truth.” If legal and scientific discourse is fully “explicit” with “single, true meanings,” however, it is not because the resulting texts are inherently so because writers of such documents have learned to compensate for what is lost in transcription from the spoken language, but, rather, because these discourses, in what Linnell (1992, p. 254) calls “situated decontextualizing practice,” are so organized by the communities of their use.

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Written Language and Literacy Development: The Proof is in the Practice

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Today is Election Day in Costa Rica. Since 6 a.m., the air has been filled with the sounds of horns honking, overlapping, competing, and calling for attention. When one walks out to the street, the cars, trucks, and vans take on a dizzying aspect of arms waving, people calling to each other, and flags flying their different colors (marking one's political party allegiance). It soon becomes clear to the outsider that these vehicles are all performing the same function: picking people up on the street or by arrangement at their homes to take them to voting stations. This activity continues unabated until 6 p.m. when the voting places close.

For the last six months, the newspapers have been filled with candidate statements, political analysis, calendars of events for each presidential and deputy aspirant. Flyers and pamphlets are posted and handed out everywhere. Bumper stickers and T-shirts are given out and displayed with their political colors and slogans.

This is a country that believes deeply in democracy. It has a long history of peaceful democratic procedure. Voting is still required by law of all of its citizens (although this law is no longer enforced with fines). Children wear the colors of "their" party and vote at children's voting stations with paper ballots "to learn their responsibilities as members of a democracy." Accommodations are arranged for the disabled. Those in institutions (the elderly, the prisoners, the hospitalized) vote by special arrangement.

Written texts are everywhere. They permeate the lives of the people, weaving, mediating, and reflecting the social realities, histories, and values of this election season. It is within this context that I sit down to respond to and reflect upon David Olson's "Oral Discourse in a World of Literacy."

I am in Costa Rica as part of an ethnographic study on the literacy practices of the Nicaraguan immigrant communities. This is where my own research has led me: to a desire to understand literacy as a social and cultural practice in the lived lives of people, particularly people who live in social communities that are considered "marginalized" by the mainstream. I see this as central to my larger goal of both theorizing marginality as it relates to literacy opportunity and learning in schools and developing early literacy curricula and pedagogies that are responsive to the literacy worlds of marginalized children.



Interestingly, I began this journey from the perspective of the issues raised by Olson in “Oral Discourse in a World of Literacy.” Thus, I will respond to the editors’ request by focusing on my own development as an educational researcher who began this journey with the newly acquired insight that, yes, written and oral language differ. Much of my development has been contextualized by the theoretical debates that circled around Olson’s early work (1977), along with that of Ong (1982), and Goody and Watt (1968), regarding “the great divide.” However, my own work was never initiated nor shaped by this disagreement about the role of writing in social and cognitive development.

Before going further, I wish to anchor my remarks in a brief review of my research. It is essential that my work be understood within the context of my pre-graduate school experience, which provided the impetus for the research that followed. I entered graduate school following seven years as a teacher of children who struggled to learn to read. As a beginning teacher, I walked into a class of classified learning disabled 7th graders with only an undergraduate degree in English, and the ensuing years were filled with my search for ways to help these students and the “garden variety” remedial readers who followed. This is to say that my research has always been driven by instructional concerns, and I sought greater insights, knowledge, and theory that would inform instruction for children who consistently underachieve in school, particularly in learning to read and write.

Being somewhat methodical, I thought it made sense to begin my search with an understanding of the beginnings of literacy development. I have never really moved beyond this level, although as I dug deeper into the beginning of literacy development, my research grew to encompass adult literacy practices and family and community literacy.

From the start, I focused on the relationships between young children’s experiences in the home and learning to read and write in school. A single experience shaped my future research. A course in oral and written language differences was offered at UC Berkeley (where I was studying as a doctoral student), and all of the language and literacy grad students were taking it. Taught by linguist Wallace Chafe, this course opened an entirely new landscape for my consideration. Chafe had documented, through discourse studies with adults, the linguistic differences between written language and speech, and was working to relate them, not to cognitive or social development, but rather to cognitive factors, affordances, and constraints.

I used Chafe’s results and his methodology to test the hypothesis that children who had been extensively read to in their early years acquire a distinct linguistic register for written narrative language—a linguistic register schema that they could use to their advantage as they learned to read and write in school. Using a “pretend read” task, I documented the existence of such a register and described it linguistically (Purcell-Gates, 1988). This study served as the basis for



subsequent studies that looked at the different dimensions of written language knowledge that young children can construct through experiences with written language use in their home and community lives, the relationships between those emergent literacy concepts and school success (Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1991), and with specific types of experiences with specific types of texts in their home lives (Purcell-Gates, 1996).

In the midst of this, I conducted a two-year ethnography of a young boy and his mother struggling to learn to read in the public and adult education systems (Purcell-Gates, 1995). This family belonged to the socially, economically, and politically marginalized community of White, poor, urban Appalachians, and my insights into the dual roles of social marginalization and linguistic inexperience with written registers moved my research to a different plane. From that point on, while I continued to frame my work within children's experiences with written language, I broadened it to consider these experiences within contexts of social and cultural marginalization.

Along the way, I ran into the work of Brian Street (1984) and the multiple literacies construct that was framing the work of such researchers as David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998). Street positioned his theory of literacy as social, multiple, value-laden, and subject to power relationships against many of the theories referred to in Olson's piece. The notion that literacy is cultural practice and reflects and mediates, rather than determines, social practices is central to my work. My portrait of Election Day in Costa Rica, with which I began, illustrates this lens—written texts mediate the lives of people; they are created and read to serve social functions, and their different genres reflect the social realities of people's lives.

Using this lens, I seek to broaden or reconceptualize the unitary conceptualization of *writing* or *written language*. I see many different *types* or *genres* of writing, a presupposition that is acknowledged by Olson in his essay but left theoretically unexplored. Assuming that *writing* is only a general term for the technical aspects of many different written genres is crucial and essential to my work. This is because my theoretical framing is heavily influenced by the social semiotic theories of Halliday and Hassan (1985) and current genre theorists such as Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) and Martin, Christie, and Rothery (1987). Social semiotic theory reveals language (oral and written) as social, dialogic, and communicative, serving social functions. Language genre forms (oral and written) are seen as socially constructed, reflecting sociocultural norms and expectations, to accomplish social purposes. Further, these norms are not static but change to reflect shifting sociocultural needs and contexts. Written language forms serve functions that require written, rather than oral, purposes and contexts. The forms, themselves, reflect these constraints, purposes, and contexts (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1986; Purcell-Gates, 1988, 1995). In this way, written genre function always drives

written genre form. It serves me to ask such questions as “What are the literacy practices of a specified social group, and, within those, what are the written genres that provide the written language environment and input for the children?” It is this written-genre environment that provides the fertile linguistic greenhouse within which young children will construct their understandings and intentionalities of written language and with which they will make sense of the literacy instruction they receive in school.

I believe that this lens provides much promise for future research that could lead to significant changes in literacy pedagogy for young children from all varieties of literate cultures and communities with their differing values, beliefs, and socioculturally determined language functions. The logic is thus: Young children bring to school with them a conceptual base that specifies oral and written language functions, genres that serve these functions, and knowledge of the semantics, syntax, vocabulary, and print conventions that are embodied in these different genres (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004). Large-scale experimental and correlational studies have shown that literacy instruction is more effective when teachers engage students with texts and purposes for reading and writing those texts that are known to the students—real-life, authentic texts (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002; Purcell-Gates & Duke, 2004). The task is to (a) learn of the literacy practices in different social, cultural, and linguistic communities, and (b) develop pedagogies for early literacy instruction that are based within these practices. By learning to read and write using genre-types that children already understand as functional, this critical early phase of literacy development is more likely to make sense and to be mastered by the children. This is the research agenda that I am currently pursuing.

This research and theorizing, spawned by the work of Olson and others, is evidence, I believe, that we do indeed stand on the shoulders of scholars before us. Further, these shoulders continue to serve students of all ages as they continue to learn to read and write in schools across the world.

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Monologic and Dialogic Discourses as Mediators of Education

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A central claim in David Olson's article is that "both speech and writing play a variety of roles in diverse local cultures, in bureaucratic societies, as well as in our personal psychologies . . . and speech and writing are deeply interdependent." This statement represents a considerable modification of the modernist position that Olson espoused in his 1977 *Harvard Educational Review* article, "From utterance to text: The bias of language in speech and writing," with its arguments that in carefully crafted writing, "the meaning is in the text." Yet he still leaves little doubt that it is the functions of written documents that he finds most significant in characterizing contemporary societies. While the functions typically performed by speech in everyday life have continued more or less unchanged for some 50,000 years, it is the recent development of specialized written genres in science, law, medicine, and other institutions that have been instrumental in creating the bureaucratic society in which we live today (Olson, 2003). In my response to his article, I intend to focus on some of the implications of this argument for the ways in which speech and writing mediate the activity of education.



Monologic and Dialogic Discourse

While Olson gives substantial weight to the interpretive function of oral discourse in relation to written texts, an important distinction that also needs to be made is that between the “monologic” and “dialogic” functions of a text, whether spoken or written. This distinction was first brought into prominence by Bakhtin (1981, 1986), who argued for the intrinsically dialogical nature of any utterance, whether spoken or written:

However monological the utterance may be (for example, a scientific or philosophical treatise), however much it may concentrate on its own object, it cannot but be, in some measure, a response to what has already been said about the given topic, on the given issue, even though this responsiveness may not have assumed a clear cut external expression. After all, our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, and artistic—is born in the process of interaction and struggle with others’ thought. (1986, p. 92)

However, it was Lotman (1988) who, writing somewhat later in the same tradition, gave equal prominence to the monologic function in distinguishing between the two functions that may be served by a text. As he explains, the aim of the monologic function is “to convey meanings adequately” (p. 34) and, in order to do so, it must be constructed in a manner that makes it what Olson calls “autonomous.” Texts of this kind play an important role within society by passing on cultural meanings, “providing a common memory for the group” (p. 35), and preserving continuity and stability of beliefs and values within a culture. By the same token, however, a text of this kind is by its very nature authoritative, not open to question or alternative perspectives; that is to say, it resists dialogue.

By contrast, the aim of a dialogic text is to generate new meanings:

[It] ceases to be a passive link in conveying some constant information between input (sender) and output (receiver). Whereas in the first case a difference between the message at the input and that at the output of an information circuit can occur only as a result of a defect in the communication channel, and is to be attributed to the technical imperfections of this system, in the second case such a difference is the very essence of the text’s function as “a thinking device.” (Lotman, 1988, pp. 36-37)

In Lotman’s view, then, the important difference between these two functions is the contrasting roles they play in society, either maintaining continuity and stability or encouraging innovation and originality. However, as he makes clear, while texts may be constructed (by single or multiple authors) with one or other aim in mind, all texts can potentially be treated from either point of view by those who respond to them. Furthermore, although both Bakhtin and Lotman tend to focus on written texts, the distinctions they make apply equally to speech as well as writing. For example, although oral interaction typically tends toward the dialogic



end of the continuum, there are many contexts in which the interaction is more monologic, such as a judge pronouncing sentence, an immigration officer interviewing an arriving alien, an auctioneer taking bids, or a political spokesperson briefing newspaper reporters. Conversely, written texts may invite a response, such as in the “letters to the editor” page in newspapers, the solicitation of comments on service provided by hotels, and the submission of articles for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

In considering the various functional uses of language in education, therefore, it may be more profitable to consider them in terms of their position on the monologic-dialogic continuum rather than simply in terms of whether they are realized in speech or writing. At the same time, as Olson (2003) points out, it is equally necessary to recognize that there are two equally valid, but different, perspectives on the functions of language in education: the pedagogic and the institutional. The pedagogic is concerned with developing students’ cognitive and metacognitive abilities in making sense of the world in which they live; the institutional is concerned with the specification and assessment of the knowledge and skills for which students should be held accountable. The question is how can or should these perspectives be reconciled?

Discourse and Knowledge

The first, and perhaps the most critical, issue concerns the ways in which knowledge is conceptualized from the two perspectives. Contemporary reform movements in the pedagogy of the subject disciplines, notably in mathematics and science, are placing increasing emphasis on students engaging in the practices of the relevant disciplines through inquiry and collaborative discussion (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). From this pedagogical perspective, the focus is on students’ growing understanding, that is to say on their active knowing as they bring their current experience-based understanding to bear on problems in the disciplines, collaborating in forming and testing conjectures, offering and critiquing explanations, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding than that with which they started, and then formulating this understanding in genre-appropriate written texts. This sort of “progressive discourse” (Bereiter, 1994) clearly falls at the dialogic end of the continuum.

From the institutional perspective, on the other hand, the emphasis falls on “what is known.” Knowledge, viewed institutionally, is the accumulated outcome of the formal procedures whereby what particular individuals claim to know as a result of their research is critically evaluated and formally documented according to the historically developed practices of the professional organizations to which they belong. In this way, knowledge becomes independent of individual knowers, since, as Polanyi (1958) points out with respect to scientific knowledge,



nobody knows more than a tiny fragment of science well enough to judge its validity and value at first hand. For the rest he has to rely on the views accepted at second hand on the authority of people accredited as scientists. (quoted in Olson, 2003, p. 67)

Clearly, the texts in which this institutionally sanctioned knowledge is set out have a status different from those written by individual knowers. For, while “what is known” is continually being revised and extended, and so cannot be taken to be true in any absolute sense, it does represent the current consensual basis for bureaucratic decisions in the public spheres to which it applies. For this reason, such statements of knowledge are intended to be authoritative and so appropriately fall at the monologic end of the continuum.

At first sight, then, it might appear that these two conceptions are incompatible. “Knowing” is dynamic, individual, and situated in a particular time and place; “knowledge” is synoptic and is taken to be universal, at least with respect to the societal institutions that make use of it. Significantly, too, knowing is typically mediated by spoken interaction with other participants in an ongoing activity, while knowledge is inscribed in written documents, which then serve to mediate further actions. However, just as speech and writing are interdependent, so are these two perspectives on knowledge. Authoritative texts continue to be interpreted in new contexts of action, which in turn leads to discourse among participants that augments both individual and collective understanding; conversely, an individual’s knowing, if it builds on institutionally sanctioned knowledge and is formulated in an appropriate written genre, may eventually contribute to the revision or extension of what is known. Indeed, this is just how advances are made in the different disciplines and professions.¹ And, in my view, it is how learning and teaching in schools should proceed—with due account taken of where learners start in this cycle (Bereiter, 1994; Wells, 1999). However, at the present time, this is generally very far from being the case.

The Discourses of Education

As institutions of society, the national and local departments of education together have the responsibility to ensure that all young people become conversant with the knowledge that is considered necessary for full participation in society, both as workers and as citizens. Two ways in which they fulfill this responsibility are by prescribing what should be known and by credentialing those who demonstrate that they know it. That the institution should exercise these responsibilities seems uncontroversial. But, what *is* controversial is the manner in which these responsibilities are enacted.

Local v. Universal

Understandably, national or state-wide curricular guidelines are couched in universalistic terms. However, schools and classes differ widely in terms of the



communities they serve and in the out-of-school experiences that students bring to their engagement with the prescribed curricular topics. If there is a real concern to meet the needs of all students, it is essential to make connections between students' lived experiences and community-based concerns and the curricular topics with which they are asked to engage (Dalton & Tharp, 2002). This, in turn, requires that, locally, there be latitude with respect to the choice of the curricular topics to focus on and the ways in which they are approached. Such latitude becomes even more important when recent immigrants and English language learners are concerned.

Depth v. Breadth

As accredited knowledge continues to grow apace in all academic disciplines, the question of what should be treated as essential becomes increasingly acute. Many have argued that it is better to develop a deep understanding of a small number of well-chosen topics in a discipline than to have a superficial acquaintance with a large number. However, to develop deep understanding requires time, particularly when connections to other related topics need to be made. Inevitably, therefore, if this recommendation is followed, the number of topics addressed during a single school year must be relatively small. Choices need to be made. In practice, however, there is increasing pressure, at every grade level, to "cover" all the topics listed in curricular guidelines. The result is that there is no time to do more than skate across the surface, with students memorizing "facts" rather than developing understanding of the larger conceptual disciplinary frameworks within which these facts are seen to be significant.

Inquiry v. Recitation

In the history of the human species and in that of particular cultures, knowledge has typically been created through the discourse among people solving problems together, and this still remains the norm among "knowledge workers" today (Franklin, 1996). On the other hand, while expert problem solvers are able to draw on what is already known in the problem field, students are still in the process of appropriating this knowledge.

However, as Vygotsky (1987) made clear, "scientific" concepts can only be developed on the basis of "spontaneous" concepts derived from engagement in practical, everyday activities with other members of the community. Asking students to make sense of discipline-based theoretical knowledge before they have first-hand experience of the relevant phenomena and an opportunity to make sense of them through action and exploratory talk (Mercer, 1995) almost inevitably leads to their learning to repeat the words without truly understanding their meaning. It is therefore dialogic inquiry rather than recitation that best helps them to construct discipline-based knowledge.



From the institutional perspective, on the other hand, knowledge is typically seen as a finished product, authoritative and indisputable, to be transmitted by a combination of the textbook and the teacher's exposition. The students' task is to receive and memorize this material without critical questioning or interest-based digression. Even when "discussion" does occur, it is most frequently undertaken to ensure that students have received the information correctly. The institutional perspective thus reinforces a monologic mode of communication.

What Can Be Done to Bridge the Divide?

<TXT>The problems summarized above are not new to readers of this journal, and many of us have been involved in developing and advocating more dialogic approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. In examining why recent research on learning and teaching has had so little impact on what happens in schools, Olson (2003) suggests the reason is that researchers do not give sufficient consideration to the institutional perspective on schooling. As he points out, schooling is an institution that is organized and sustained through rights, responsibilities, and controls, which are enshrined in legally binding documents that are decidedly monologic in form and intent.

Earlier I argued that monologic and dialogic texts stand in an interdependent relationship to each other, as do the uses of speech and writing. In each case, both can have an important part to play in a reformed model of education. At present, however, the monologic mode of communication admits little dialogic response and, equally, writing is accorded much greater credence than speech. There is thus little interdependence in practice—at least at the official level. Nevertheless, as Olson argues, no text is ultimately autonomous. And so, while acknowledging their overall responsibility to ensure that all students encounter and appropriate the culture's core knowledge and values, as prescribed in institutional documents, school administrators and teachers have to interpret the universalist directives such documents contain in terms of local conditions in order to determine the best way to achieve the required outcomes.

Currently, many school districts are too readily adopting a monologic interpretation, which they then enact through a system-wide, tightly prescribed curricular timetable, in some cases delivered according to scripted lesson plans. However, this would not need to be the case if both teachers and administrators became more able to put forward alternative, locally appropriate ways of meeting institutional requirements, supported by evidence based on effective local practice.

Here there is an opportunity for substantive collaboration between university researchers and school-based educators in generating such evidence. For some considerable time, individual teachers have been conducting and publishing research carried out in their own classrooms (e.g. Gallas, 1994, 2003; articles in *Networks*). Such research is more likely to carry weight, however, when conducted

collaboratively with other teachers and with the participation of university researchers. A number of such collaborative groups already exist (e.g. Palincsar, Magnusson, Collins, & Cutter, 2001; Varelas, Pappas, & Rife, 2004; Wells, 2001), but they have not, in general, entered into dialogue with local and national representatives of the educational bureaucracy about the potential implications of their findings. To attempt to do so should be the next step.

Just as learning and teaching in the classroom needs to be enacted through dialogic inquiry if students are to be helped to negotiate between their experience-based beliefs and the socially sanctioned knowledge that is set forth in the official texts, so the monologic directives issued by the educational bureaucracy need to be brought into negotiation with the knowledge generated through the systematic inquiries of educational professionals (teachers, administrators, and university researchers) working together. To me, this seems to be the best hope of achieving educational reforms that aim to give all students the educational opportunities they most need in order to succeed.

NOTE

1. This is precisely what has happened with respect to Olson's views, as put forward in his 1977 publication. That article received critical acclaim and was the subject of ongoing argument between us, and with others who responded to it in print, in all the years that we were colleagues at OISE. His 1995 article gives an excellent account of how he became persuaded to recognize that the reader is as important as the author in determining the meaning of *what is meant* on the basis of *what is said*.

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Response: Continuing the Discourse on Literacy

David R. Olson

As David Bloome argues, different theories and different methodologies determine or at least constrain what counts as evidence for the nature and consequences of literacy. Theories contrasting the oral and the written may occlude the diverse uses of writing within a society, let alone those in very different societies. Indeed, much of the ground-breaking research of the past three decades has aimed at showing the diversity of uses of writing as well as the diversity in ways of reading, a diversity that overwhelms the prospects of advancing any general theory of writing in relation to speech or written culture in relation to non-written culture. Indeed, Martin Nystrand adopts the view that speech and writing are just different, that is, functionally inequivalent such that comparison is meaningless, and Victoria Purcell-Gates assumes that writing “is only a general term for the technical aspects of many different written genres.” James Gee proposes a more moderate view, suggesting that “it is often better to ask about a particular *genre* of language” and that “it is often better to study *social practices* that include both writing and speech” than it is to look only at writing or speech *per se*.

Thus it seems that pragmatics (use) trumps syntactics (form); form serves function. And the study of these diverse uses has told us much about both literacy and society. Yet it is misleading to infer that there are only discourses and social practices as if writing was merely a contingent or incidental factor when, in fact,



writing is the critical feature of many discourses or the social practices as it is, for example, in such documentary social practices such as law, science, or literature. And we will not understand those practices unless we look more closely at just how writing serves those functions. Writing, as I quoted Derrida as saying, is not merely one fact among others; it underwrites our whole society. Scribner and Cole (1981), for example, attributed the cognitive effects they observed to schooling rather than to literacy because they located a society in which the two were separate. However, attributing the effects to schooling hides the fact that schooling is a literate practice par excellence. That is, it treats the role of literacy in schooling as if it were merely an incidental or contingent fact. Rather, schooling is the institutional practice of inducting the young into the literate practices of the society. Thus, schooling and literacy are not contrastive notions. Similarly, Halverson (1992) claimed that “the ‘cognitive’ claims of the literacy thesis have no substance” (p. 301) and yet acknowledged that “a ‘cumulative intellectual tradition’ is unquestionably aided immensely by writing” (p. 303), as if the cumulative intellectual tradition were not itself a literate tradition. Somewhat different notions of “literacy” appear to be involved in such disputes.

Such criticisms, along with emphasis on the uses of literacy advanced by Bloom, Nystrand, Purcell-Gates, and Gee, do require some revision of the literacy hypothesis. First, it becomes important to distinguish reading and writing from literacy. Reading and writing are forms of competence that involve the grasping of the relations between one’s oral competence and a script. While there are forms of graphic representation that do not involve such a mapping, all the world’s writing systems exploit that relation. Indeed, a major obstacle to children’s learning to read and write is learning that mapping, a competence described as metalinguistic awareness, namely, the understanding of the phonological, syllabic, morphemic, and syntactic properties of speech that are represented by a script. This is not merely a skill but, rather, a bringing into awareness properties of one’s language that otherwise remain implicit or unknown. Benjamin Lee Whorf famously claimed that we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language; I would revise the claim to say that we dissect language along lines laid down by our scripts. This is what is involved in learning to read and write.

Literacy, on the other hand, is, as our authors insist, a social condition, a set of social practices that exploit the affordances of writing for particular ends. As there are different scripts and diverse uses of those scripts, there are quite diverse forms of literacy; we can no longer assume that Chinese literacy is the same as Arabic literacy or Western literacy. Different practices have evolved to serve somewhat different goals in somewhat different ways, in many cases depending upon the nature of the script—alphabetical order depends, obviously, on an alphabet—but preeminently on the basis of social needs and goals. Yet across this diversity there does seem to be emerging uniformity and universality in ways of thinking and



social practices in law, economics, science, and perhaps even politics that develop as societies become more literate and documentary. I will return to this point.

Diverse forms of literacy arise also within a single, somewhat uniform society such as Canada or the US. Readers may read their Bibles in very different ways, and they read their Bibles in different ways than they read their newspapers or their school texts, and those ways need to be better understood and catalogued. As Gee points out, reading is less a matter of what is given than a matter of “ways of taking” those texts. The study of ways of reading is still at an early stage, and an important step would be taken if we could enumerate or at least classify those ways. At this point, the ways of taking texts appear to be entirely open. Yet the competencies involved may be more general and uniform than diverse literacy practices would suggest. That is, the competencies developed in dealing with one set of texts in one tradition may generalize to other traditions. As Esther Geva and her colleagues have shown, literacy skills in one language readily transfer to a second, even very different language (Geva & Siegel, 2000; Gholamain & Geva, 1999; Wade-Woolley & Geva, 2000; see also August & Shanahan, 2006). The 19th-century philosopher Santayana once commented that not only did Catholics read the Bible in a different way than Protestants, but even lapsed Catholics continued to read in a different way than lapsed Protestants! That is, the ways one is taught to “take” texts stay with us much as our dialects do. Those ways of taking may generalize and examining how they do is important task for the future.

One of the blessings, or perhaps one of the curses, is the remarkable uniformity that literacy imposes upon cultural traditions. The “rule of law,” for example, has become a touchstone for every society, and literate forms of knowledge, in the sciences, for example, are seen as universalizing practices. So again, diversity of uses of writing is just one side of the story.

Nor do the diverse and possible ways of taking texts sit well with the mandate of the school to “transmit” both certain literacy skills and certain, specifiable forms of knowledge. As Gordon Wells importantly points out, any society, if it is to continue, has the obligation to pass on its traditions, the norms and standards of judgment, that are the presumed ground of that society. It does so by exploiting the fact that writing allows for the formulation, editing, and revision of documents to make them, *so far as possible*, (in fact an insurmountable task as Gee nicely illustrates) monological and autonomous so as to be effective instruments for transmitting cultural knowledge. As Wells puts it “the institutional perspective thus reinforces a monologic mode of communication.” Not only do societies use such texts to transmit cultural knowledge, but they empower the school to transmit this knowledge and to hold students accountable for its mastery. Thus, to be judged competent, all readers are to learn to read some texts in specified ways with little room for cultural biases or individual preferences. Nystrand disparages the assumption that there is a “single language of truth” and Dyson, too, points



out, that this emphasis on “the correct way” of reading enforced by standardized tests leaves little room for learners to discover their own voices in their writing and so may completely alienate beginning readers. Yet it remains a fact that schools hold children accountable for meeting fixed criterion as the basis for the awarding of credentials. The diversity of individual and cultural perspectives on texts, the dialogical, is thus often in conflict, as Wells points out, with the school’s mandate for uniform standards of achievement. Understanding how texts allow private interpretation and yet impose uniform standards, what we may think of as the centrifugal as opposed to the centripetal affordances of texts, remains to be sorted out. Wells argues that the monological and the dialogical perspectives on texts must be combined if pedagogy is to succeed a notion that sits well with the concerns of Dyson.

Furthermore, modern Western societies are committed to the view that there is such a thing as “basic literacy,” the fundamental competence to read and write as distinguished from the specialized knowledge embedded in particular disciplines and institutions. Hence, there is an almost universal attempt not only to teach basic literacy but also to create instruments that may assess and therefore compare the literacy levels of children around the world. The goal of such programs seems to be to produce a level of universal literacy while allowing latitude for the particular knowledge and beliefs that are to be taught—literacy without content. While many of us see literacy training as universally liberating, indeed a human right, others, such as Weber (1976) saw such literacy training as a means of turning peasants into loyal citizens; and yet others, such as Marx (1845/1975), saw such training as a means of turning peasants into an industrial work force. Whatever the reason, and perhaps there are many, nations around the world seem intent on developing universal literacy.

Whether or not one may define basic literacy separate from knowledge and from voice remains uncertain. Tests of so-called functional literacy inspire little confidence, as they are completely tied up with genre, background knowledge, and expertise. It may be possible, however, to define basic literacy as the ability to translate one’s oral expressions into a standard written form and to read those expressions back on a later occasion. Such a measure would preclude any standardized test in which the text to be read was fixed independently of the reader, but it would be a more valid indication of basic literacy than any test currently available. Higher levels of literacy, as Purcell-Gates points out, involve the mastery of the technical aspects of genre as well as domain of knowledge—how to write an invitation or an invocation or, for that matter, a news report or a scientific article.

We all seem to agree that the discourse about literacy has matured from the immediate concern with teaching children to read and write and from general claims about written culture, into a discourse about the ways of writing and ways of reading that underpin the diverse cognitive and intellectual practices of per-



sons and the diverse institutional practices of literate, documentary societies, as well as the special affordances of writing and written language that bias those cognitive and social functions. It is an honor to participate in such discourse.

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