10 Literacy and Its Implication for First Language Teaching

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This work discusses the relevance of the concept of literacy (*letramento*) for the teaching and learning of the first language at all school levels in Brazilian schools. The article argues against the dichotomy that limits the relevance of literacy studies to the practice of basic literacy (*alfabetização*). This dichotomy suggests that while some early literacy teachers aim to introduce their students to literate society, first language teachers aim to find the best methods to teach genres to their students. However, this dichotomy does not consider the fact that students in the fourth, sixth, or eighth grade of primary school, as well as high school students, are engaged in a continual process of literacy learning. The paper presents examples of curricular activities centered on linguistic and discursive content or on literacy projects and discusses their respective implications. Lastly, the article discusses the implications of the literacy approach for teacher education.

Literacy studies (*estudos de letramento*) focus on the social aspects and impacts of the use of written language (Kleiman, 1995).[1] Initially an academic concept, "literacy" (*letramento*) gradually infiltrated school discourse, contrary to the original intention of the new term, which was to separate the study of written language from school practices to highlight the ideological nature of all written language use (Street, 1984). Additionally, the new term aimed to distinguish the multiple literacy practices (*práticas de letramento*) from the singular and general practice of basic literacy (*alfabetização*),[2] which is just *one* of the many literacy practices in our society, although possibly the most important one, particularly because it is carried out by the most important literacy sponsor: the school institution.

1 This paper is an extended, revised version of a handout for early childhood education teachers, prepared at the request of the Pedagogical Department of the Municipal Education Department of Campinas, in February 2007.

2 Translators' note: The word originally used for literacy, "*alfabetização,*" related to the word for "alphabet," generally means early literacy, while "*letramento*" refers to socio-cultural, critical, multimodal and situated practices of using written language. This separation emphasizes that learning to read and write does not end when students have learned the alphabet and its rules and codes.

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Perhaps it was the contrast established between basic literacy (*alfabetização)* and literacy (*letramento*), ever since the concept began circulating in Brazil in the mid-1980s, that limited the relevance and impact of the concept of literacy for teaching and learning to the early years of a student's contact with written language. In other words, it became associated with the period when a student is acquiring the basics of the written language code. Thus, while early literacy teachers focus on the best ways to make their students literate, first language teachers are concerned with the best ways to introduce genres, creating a false dichotomy. This is because students in the fourth, sixth, or eighth grade of primary school, as well as high school students, are also engaged in a process of literacy development throughout their education. In fact, all individuals who use written language in their daily lives are involved in this process. When faced with new writing demands due to a promotion or a job change that requires them to produce texts they have not written before, an employee might ask colleagues if there are templates for such texts in the archives, analyze the available examples, and thereby form some understanding of what is involved in producing the required text. Based on this material, they attempt a first draft of the text, show the result to colleagues, listen to their feedback, and revise if necessary. In this process, the professional is forming a representation of the unfamiliar genre, which is both social and individual, and therefore unique. Genres serve as socio-cognitive and cultural frameworks (Matencio, 2003) that enable participation in literate activities that one has never engaged in before. This way of acting in new situations, characteristic of learning, should be particularly true in school learning environments, as schools offer (or should offer) opportunities for experimentation that are absent from more tense and competitive contexts, such as the workplace. For example, Tápias-Oliveira (2006) reports a training experience in which first-year students in a language program were asked to create learning diaries, record key moments of their process: impressions and feelings about the most difficult, interesting, or incomprehensible aspects of the lessons. Faced with the task of virtually having to invent the genre, some students produced works closer to a personal and confessional diary, as exemplified by the following excerpt:

> I have a certain difficulty in listening to what another person thinks, especially when they think differently from me, and letting them finish, allowing them to complete their reasoning … This is something that distressed me a little during the course, and I know this is something I need to work on, because it will be important for me to feel like a member of the group (Tápias-Oliveira, 2006, p. 82).

Some students looked for a model in epistolary genres: "Dear E [name of university instructor addressed], I would like you to perform more activities like this one (exploratory reading), because of their importance. Through these analyses, I am better understanding all the material taught" (Tápias-Oliveira, 2006, p. 95); while others found in texts closer to reports a satisfactory model for recording their impressions: "[the debate is] of utmost importance, as through this debate we can clarify many existing doubts and make connections with concepts already studied" (Tápias-Oliveira, 2006, p. 144).

In the context of basic education, Guimarães (1999) reports a three-year-long project (from 5th to 7th grade in the Brazilian educational system) in which students, faced with a communicative situation of having to endorse or disapprove a book they had read for the benefit of their classmates, tried different genres until they arrived at what may be recognized as a standard review (summary, critical analysis, recommendation, or disapproval). In their first attempts, the fifth graders produced texts with many oral remarks, cataloged by the researcher as small notes, as in

> I laughed a lot while reading the book, especially when he runs away from home.
>
> What? You don't know what I am talking about?
>
> So, hurry up to a bookstore to buy the book and find out what I'm talking about. You'll love it. (Guimarães, 1999, p. 77)

In the third year of the project, the seventh graders could produce reviews, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> Aidan MacFarlane and Ann McPherson, writers from England, specialists in health problems in school life, were very successful, even turning the stories from their books into an English TV series.
>
> "Susie's diary" describes a diary of a 16-year-old teenager who wanted to outdo her brother …. In her diary, she writes about many things. We will highlight some of them, such as family and school problems, passions, sex, and drugs.
>
> "Susie's diary" is a good read for people of different ages because there is a lot of material with different subjects that could appeal to everybody. (Guimarães, 1999, p. 88).

I believe that it is at school, the main literacy agency of our society, that space must be created for experiencing forms of participation in literate social

practices and, therefore, I also believe in the pertinence of assuming literacy, or rather, the multiple literacies of life, as the structuring objective of school-work in all cycles.[3] In this article, I will examine some of the implications of this assumption for teaching, ending with implications for teacher education and training.

Curricular Contents from the Social Perspective of Uses of Writing

Assuming literacy as the goal of teaching in all school cycles implies a social conception of writing, as contrasted with the traditional role of literacy that considers learning to read and write text as the learning of individual skills and abilities. The difference between teaching a practice and teaching the student to individually develop a competence or skill is not just a terminological difference. In institutions such as schools, where the conception of reading and writing as a set of *skills* predominates, the activity of reading and writing is viewed as a set of skills that develop gradually until reaching an ideal level of reading and writing competence, i.e., the proficient use of written language. Literacy studies, on the other hand, start from a conception of reading and writing as discursive practices, with multiple functions, inseparable from the contexts in which they develop.

In the social perspective of writing we have been discussing, a communicative situation that involves activities that use or presuppose the use of written language—a literacy event (Heath, 1983)—is not different from other situations in social life: it occurs as a collective activity with several participants who have different bodies of knowledge and mobilize them (generally cooperatively) according to individual interests, intentions, objectives, and common goals. This conception contrasts with the underlying practices of using written language within school, which generally involve the demonstration of individual ability to perform all aspects of certain school literacy events, no matter whether they involve spelling, reading aloud, answering oral or written questions, writing an essay, writing down dictated words, analyzing a sentence, or researching a theme. Thus, it is not uncommon to find reports of school activities involving writing a letter of complaint to some authority, or a petition to the community (school, neighborhood, city) to which the class

3 Translators' note: In the 1990's, several school systems were reorganized in two- and three-year cycles in order to eliminate or decrease students having to repeat grade levels. Nowadays the cycle has been adopted nationwide as an alternative form of evaluation and of curricular organization.

belongs, in which each student individually writes their own letter, instead of joining efforts to produce collectively a letter signed by the whole class. This is because, even when focusing on a relevant problem to citizenship and civic life, the objective of the activity is not the resolution of the problem—getting the government to address the request. Rather, it was simply learning the genre of the argumentative or petition letter.

Social practice as a starting and ending point implies, in turn, a *different* question regarding the structuring and planning of classes from the traditional, curricula-centered perspective: "What is the most appropriate sequence of content presentation?" The importance of content for teacher education cannot be sufficiently emphasized.[4] However, the content is the target: they represent the behaviors, procedures, and concepts that the student is expected to learn. They should not be understood, it seems to me, as an organizing principle for curricular activities. Let us see why.

Early elementary education aims to introduce the learner to all aspects of the Portuguese orthographic, linguistic system. This does not mean, however, that the teacher should plan their classes in order to present the alphabet first, then the open syllables (*ba, be, bi*), then syllables with consonant clusters (*bra, bre*) and next closed syllables (*bar, ber*) and so on, based on a script for presenting the various elements of this system from the simplest syllables and regularities to the "orthographic difficulties" of the traditional Brazilian primer (which every teacher knows).

In this cycle, other contents correspond, basically, to the set of knowledge required in literate social practices such as measurement, volume calculations, building models, maps, and blueprints (i.e., mathematical concepts) and those necessary for participation in the discourse practices of text reading and production in different genres. To be able to read and write, the student needs to recognize and use components related to the mastery of the code, such as word and phrase segmentation, regular sound-letter matches, spelling rules, and the use of capital letters, as well as components related to the textual domain, such as the set of cohesive resources of connection, temporal relations, and causal relationships. None of this would be relevant if the student were unable to also attribute meanings to the texts they read and write according to the parameters of the communicative situation (Brazil Ministry of Education, 1997).

However, in every communicative situation that involves the use of written language—in every literacy event—there is a need for all these skills and

4 It is not without reason that Paulo Freire (1976) says that the progressive educator and the conservative one are similar when both are serious, because they both know which content is worth teaching.

therefore there is *always* an opportunity for the teacher to focus systematically on some content; that is, to present material for the student to perceive a pattern, to practice a procedure repeatedly, and to seek an explanation. In this case, the movement will be from social practice to the "content" to be enacted in order to participate in the situation (procedure, behavior, concept), never the other way around, if the student's literacy is the objective that structures teaching.

When the contents (whatever they are) do not constitute the curriculum structuring element, the question that guides the planning of teaching activities will no longer be "what is the most appropriate sequence for the presentation of linguistic, textual, or enunciative materials?" because the teacher, as long as they have full knowledge of what is to be taught in the cycle and is aware of its importance in the curriculum, may then begin by asking a question that is charged with socio-historical and cultural import: "what are the significant texts for the student and his community?"

In fact, in the teaching of reading and writing texts representative of a particular social practice, the ease or difficulty of learning do not merely depend on letter-sound relationships or on the presence or absence of diphthongs, consonant clusters and other "orthographic difficulties," or on the presence of more or less familiar cohesive elements for the student. It depends, above all, on the student's degree of familiarity with the texts belonging to the genres enacted to communicate in activities and events which materialize that social practice. Letters, syllables, words, and sentences are not perceptible units when the system is taught starting from salient elements, both verbal and non-verbal, that stand out in the texts (headlines, titles, illustrations).

In this perspective, the specific "most difficult" elements taught late in the traditional progression may appear at any stage of the process if they are learned within a meaningful context. The digraph ("ss") and diphthong ("au") in the Brazilian Portuguese word "dinossauro," for example, are not the elements that will prevent a child from carrying out school research on that animal if the child is in fact interested in dinosaurs and if the activity is well oriented.

The results reported by Guimarães (1999), in which fifth-grade children gradually learned how to write a *review* using the appropriate genre, also point to the pertinence of a social practice literacy approach as a structuring objective of curricular activities for students in later elementary school cycles. In this experience, it is obvious that the main content goal was the *review* genre, but the true structuring axis of the activities was the social practice—recommending books to classmates—which is typical of that educational institution. If the genre had been the structuring element alone, students might have been subjected to classes about the genre, with explanatory sequences

and demonstrations on how to approach the themes, what type of language to use, how to structure the text, and what the genre's compositional elements were (Bakhtin, 1979).[5] Instead, students started experimenting based on their knowledge of other genres and step by step came to infer the relevant elements for writing reviews, relying on their book reading practices, practices of informal recommendations or criticisms made to a well-known audience, listening to and reading critical comments from their classmates, reading published reviews, revising their own texts, rewriting them based on comments from classmates, and, above all, from the teacher, who certainly had the targeted subject matter in mind while guiding them through this process.

In the National Curriculum Parameters (PCN) for Portuguese language teaching in the same cycle (5th to 8th grade), procedural points considered relevant to "the constitution of the student's linguistic and discursive proficiency" are also detailed (Brazil Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 53).[6] An example of content matter related to the practice of reading is the "selection of reading procedures according to the students' different objectives and interests (study, personal formation, entertainment, task performance) and according to the genre and support characteristics" (Brazil Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 57). Among the possible procedures, various types of reading are detailed, such as:

- Inspection reading: using files to choose texts for later reading.
- Scanning: identifying specific information in the text, locating entries in a dictionary or encyclopedia.
- Revision reading: identifying and correcting, in a given text, certain inadequacies according to an established standard.

In regard to the case currently under discussion, students necessarily develop and use different reading strategies according to the demands of the situation. Various types of knowledge, values, ideologies, meanings, resources, and technologies, including strategic knowledge, need to be mobilized in

5 In correspondence, moreover, with one of the contents of linguistic analysis practice, as proposed in the National Curriculum Parameters (PCN) for the teaching of the Portuguese language in the second cycle of elementary education (5th to 8th grades): *Recognition of the characteristics of different text genres in terms of thematic content, compositional construction, and style* (Brazil Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 60).

6 Translators' note: The National Curriculum Parameters for two cycles of fundamental education (from 1st to 4th and from 5th to 8th grades), were published in 1997 after the approval of federal legislation for the basis and guidelines for National Education, in December 1996. They had a big impact on the curricular organization of all "areas of knowledge": Portuguese language, mathematics, natural sciences, history, geography, art, and physical education. They were elaborated by the Federal Government and had as their main objective to orient teachers through the standardization of the subject matter of each discipline.

literacy practices (Baynham, 1995; Kleiman, 1995; 2006a; Scribner & Cole, 1981). The student who writes a note recommending a book and justifying their recommendation presumably makes an *inspection reading* when they select a book in the library, or when they look for a book review in the newspaper's children's page; they also *scan*, looking for details, when they reread some part in the book to copy specific information they want to include in their recommendation or review; they also do a *revision reading* when they read their own text before making it public.

Social practice makes the teaching of genres feasible, since it is their knowledge that allows an individual to participate in the events of different institutions and to carry out the activities of these institutions with any degree of legitimacy. In an institution like school, which as Heath (1986) points out overestimates analytical activities, the adoption of any linguistic, textual or enunciative concept for structuring curricula and instruction almost inevitably leads to the transformation of the activity involved—i.e., learning the genre to be able to act in society—into a metalinguistic activity: analyzing the texts belonging to the genre in order to learn their form or to use them as a model in order to learn to write texts of that genre. Knowing how to prepare a review according to the parameters of the communicative situation is a type of knowledge very different from knowing what a review is about, or what the degree of formality of the language used is, or what its parts are. The first presupposes the second, but the opposite is not true.

Thus, the teacher who adopts social practices as the organizing principle of teaching will face the complex task of determining what those practices are, and consequently what constitutes a meaningful text for the community. The activity is complex because it involves starting from the diverse cultural backgrounds of students who, before entering school, are already participating in routine activities of groups; these groups already belong to a technology-oriented literate society[7]—centrally or peripherally, with different degrees and modes of participation (more or less autonomous, diversified, and prestigious).

One of the great difficulties in implementing a program aimed at students' linguistic-discursive development through social practice lies in the incompatibility of this conception with the dominant, traditional conception of the curriculum as an inflexible, segmented programming of content organized sequentially from the easiest to the most difficult.

7 In this article, we are ignoring the aspects of acculturation and symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1975) resulting from teaching written language to groups that come from families with little or no schooling, in which written language plays almost no role in their children's initial socialization. Certainly, in these cases the job is more difficult and potentially conflicting.

What content should be taught first when the structuring element of the curriculum is social practice? Literacy practices certainly change the traditional logic of organizing knowledge. Genres are not necessarily units that can be ordered according to the idea that certain contents are necessary for the understanding of others, although it might be argued that there are oral genres that may help learn written genres, or that the genres which Bakhtin (1979) calls primary should be understood in their unaltered forms, prior to their use in complex secondary genres, when, according to the author, they lose their immediate relations with social reality.

The answer to the question of content elements and their progression, so urgent for the teacher's daily life in the traditional school, is not clear.

A possible answer is typological. The social perspective cannot refrain from focusing on the social impact of writing, particularly the social changes and transformations resulting from new technologies and new uses of writing, with their effects on the common person. This focus necessarily broadens the conception of what the object of reading will be, previously reserved for literary texts—in fact, the extraordinary texts of the privileged few—and permits the inclusion of the ordinary texts of everyday life. In fact, such texts have outstanding pedagogical value when they are used as pedagogical resources to build students' self-confidence in their ability to read and write: lists, tickets, recipes, notices, "outdoors," street signs, name tags, t-shirts and *buttons worn by passersby*. In short, the writing surrounding students during their everyday lives, in its enormous variety, significantly expands the students' set of readable texts, due to their short length and the meaning-making possibilities derived from accessible and immediately recognizable images.

Another aspect that seems relevant to me for curricular selection is the function of the text in the student's social life, also inviting the expansion of the set of texts to include genres specific to the student's daily life. Clearly, texts from prestigious public institutions should constitute the main focus, but texts that circulate in other domains, such as those of domestic intimacy (notes, messages, and personal letters; bills, statements, and checks; exams, reports, and vaccination cards, report cards, and diplomas) may be included: students may write their family history by making captions and notes for and about the photos in a family album and by consulting birth and death records; they may read and crop advertisements to help the family weekly food budgeting; they may keep health or education records of family members, if they are learning ways to file and record information; they may keep schedules, label items. The functions of writing in everyday life, even if limited and finite, introduce archival, identity-based, content and communicative practices, as well as genres that will be very useful in many other social practices.

Aiming to expand the set of texts circulating in the classroom, Costa (2001) carried out an experiment with pre-school children using texts belonging to two genres from school and family life, well before the time when these texts would be introduced in traditional classroom teaching.[8] The project introduced five and six–year-old illiterate children to reading encyclopedia entries and newspaper news for children with the purpose of familiarizing the children with reading (by the teacher, in reading circles) and collective text writing (with the teacher as scribe).

The children used their fairy tale knowledge to appropriate the new genres: when making hypotheses about a news item from journalistic photos, for example, they slipped from the factual account as portrayed in the photo accompanying the news ("she is an old woman with dogs, she is going to the fair") to the fairy tale world: "grandma was going out to buy dog food and on the way she found a big bad wolf, who ate everything, all that was left was her hat" (Costa, 2001, pp. 134-136).

A similar transition took place when children were going over the pages of the children's animal encyclopedia in alphabetical order: the figure of the elephant on the page motivated the beginning of a story about this animal ("once upon a time there was an elephant that …"), then came the giraffe and another character was introduced, followed by the hippopotamus, and so on. The plot started to bother the child as new entries with new animals appeared, forcing the child to introduce more and more "characters" in the oral tale. We know that it is precisely these moments of discomfort between the previous knowledge and the new that detonate the perception of differences (in the example, between genres) necessary for learning (Vigotsky, 1984).

Genres that circulate in these two domains—home and school—are strong candidates for basic, fundamental blocks of knowledge for curricular progression. However, more than using the logic of fundamental (basic, first) blocks in the construction of knowledge, what interests social-practice-based curricular organization are general principles that conceive of classroom activities which are based on teacher-student(s) and student(s)-student(s) interactions that involve a variety of social and personal factors the results of which are unpredictable.

In the social conception of writing, it is not the progression from the easiest to the most difficult item that facilitates or hinders learning, especially because it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty what makes something easy or difficult for any given individual. If, in social practice, the student is faced with non-simplified texts, in a classroom where social practice

8 Both of them have been pointed out as appropriate content for elementary school cycles (Brazil Ministry of Education, 1997; 1998).

is the structuring element, the student should also be faced with texts that circulate in real life. Facilitation, so that students can overcome the obstacles that reading such texts may present, is the product of collective work: working with classmates, who have different bodies and types of knowledge, as well as different weaknesses and strengths, under the teacher's guidance.

From Social Practice to Literacy Project

Participation in a given social practice is possible when the individual knows how to act discursively in a communicative situation; that is, when they know which genre to use. Therefore, it is natural that representations or models that enable communication in social practice—genres—are important units in planning. This does not mean, however, that class activity should be organized according to which genre to teach.

If second-year students, just beginning to read and write, are curious about the extinction of dinosaurs, this curiosity can propel them to venture onto the internet, read entries in encyclopedias, visit science museums, or interview scientists. To carry out these activities, they will need to become familiar with the reading of digital texts, dictionary or encyclopedia entries, and develop ways to ask questions. The teacher can draw attention, explain, and exemplify the text characteristics when orienting them on how to read and write texts belonging to those genres. This is quite different from defining in advance that this hypertext, dictionary entry, and interview (etc.) will be taught, in this order, regardless of the interest shown by the student and any other particular circumstances that point to the desirability of a change in planning.

Flexibility is crucial. In an initiative for continuing teacher education in basic school (middle and high school levels) in the interior of São Paulo state, we proposed a project to get a library, based on indications from the principal and the school pedagogical coordinators.[9] After half a dozen meetings between the university team and the school team of teachers, it became evident that most teachers had no interest or time to participate in a teacher training process designed to reach its goal through activities centered on their students' scientific, mathematical, and digital literacy, each working according to their specialty, resources, and knowledge. The initial planning was then abandoned, because any work based on the conception that all teachers are literacy teachers no matter what their subject matter is, would require other impracticable formation activities at that time.[10]

9 The Teacher Literacy Group team, coordinated by Angela Kleiman.

10 In fact, a course along these lines would have duplicated a project from the Secretary

We continued this project with only the teachers of Portuguese; this time, we believed that, united around the idea of mobilizing the school community in order to make the school library a reality, we would have the participation of students in several literacy practices towards this goal. However, during the meetings with the Portuguese teachers, it became clear to us, from the university team, that there were two conceptions of the pedagogical project at stake. For us, the project was an initiative that would integrate the subjects in the Portuguese language curricula with the various participating grades; for the teachers, however, the project was a complementary activity that came in addition to the curricular activities already planned: the teachers would continue to develop their programs, and the library project would be carried out whenever the programmed curriculum allowed it.

Once again, the university team had to change the plan. Assuming that the school newspaper is an instrument that allows curricular integration through student participation in civic life (Cunha, 2007; 2008; Freinet, 1976), we suggested to the Portuguese teachers to engage students in the production of a school newspaper with the first issue focusing on the school library. In this issue, they would write texts from the planned genres; thus, the newspaper would be the tool that would enable both the insertion of students in diverse literacy practices and the mobilization of the community around the need for a school library.

There were material conditions for the project to be carried out: the school newspaper was a familiar genre for the teachers, the school had computers and many students were familiar with them, and we had a free-access program for the elaboration of newspapers. The idea was immediately accepted by the teachers, who presented the proposal to the students, who, in turn, immediately embraced it (Cunha, 2007).

In the conception of the newspaper that the two teams—school and university instructors—discussed, the different sections of the newspaper would be geared towards community efforts to acquire a library. Such genres as news and reports, interviews, opinion articles, advertisements, letters, and notes would revolve around themes related to that goal, such as the history of books and libraries, sustainable architecture, ergonomic furniture, catalog design, contact with publishers, among others. The specific objectives of the university team—teacher training through the practice of literacy projects—and those of high school teachers—teaching of various types of genres through established didactic sequences—would be fulfilled. Finally, we had a viable plan with which we were all in agreement.

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of Education of São Paulo state, aiming to train teachers of any discipline to teach reading as well. The course, Reading to Learn, was being offered across the state in that period.

However, when the discussions to organize the students' work for the first newspaper issue began, the high school students were outraged over a series of disciplinary measures taken by the school management that in their view were unjustified. Continuing with the library project became unfeasible for the teachers and, thus, school rules, norms, and responsibilities became the overall theme that motivated the reports, interviews, debates, and opinion articles of that first issue. The first issue also allowed the teachers to present the argumentative sequences at which the activities were aimed, among other aspects of the opinion article genre, and concomitantly, allowed students to participate collectively in an activity, according to their individual interests and abilities.

The choice of genre as a relevant concept does not mean that it should become the structuring element of the social practices in the project because it runs the risk of reducing the goals of teaching and schoolwork to its formal and analytical aspects, as we have already mentioned.

The difference is significant. The program "Writing the Future," financed by the Itaú Foundation and coordinated by the São Paulo NGO Cenpec (Center for Studies and Research in Education, Culture and Community Action), organizes a yearly contest that, in 2006, awarded prizes for the best opinion article, memoir, and poem written by fourth and fifth graders from schools all over the country. Once the genre was chosen, several formative actions for the teachers involved ensued, such as sending didactic materials for teaching the genre to the participating teachers. Accurate descriptions of the genre and its didactic sequences (Schneuwly & Dolz, 2004) thus became known to teachers nationwide.[11] These materials fulfilled their objectives with excellence. For teaching the opinion article, for example, one of the guidelines was to choose, as the theme for that article, some controversial subject that was affecting the community to which the students belonged.

In a sample of 160 analyzed texts (out of a total of one thousand submitted in 2006), most of them adequately reproduced some of the compositional aspects of the genre: for instance, there was an expression of an opinion, in general about some problem, which implied taking a position on a subject. However, not every subject is controversial and raises the need to defend an opinion. Taking a stand against the problem of violence, or poverty, or wasting energy sources, is not controversial (or should not be). The students who managed, to different degrees, to approach the proposal and write an opinion article were those whose choice of theme was an issue that was disturbing the

11 Translators' note: An important question in Brazil, with its continental dimension and with enormous differences from one region or city to another, is teachers' access to university-produced knowledge, as was the case at the moment, when the notion of text was being replaced by the notion of genre as the relevant language unit for teaching Portuguese at school.

social fabric in their community. In other words, they were the students who, confronted with a situation that divided the class, the school, or the city, managed to put the genre at the service of their need to take a stand and express themselves politically, thus turning the exercise of using—or attempting to use—the genre into a social practice.

The literacy studies' conception of writing assumes that people and social groups are heterogeneous and that the different activities among people happen in many different ways. This heterogeneity does not align well with traditional classes where students interact with the teacher only. In traditional teaching, the teacher is the privileged speaker as well as the focus of everyone's attention. Moreover, the teacher gives the lesson according to a curriculum defined for all classes in the school or municipality, because one day in that semester or school year all of the students in the class will be evaluated according to parameters—also supposedly representative of the knowledge to be reached in the series or cycle—defined for the entire nation.

On the other hand, literacy studies show—in a way that is very important for curricular reflection—that literacy events require that participants draw on their diverse resources and knowledge. This means that some literacy events aimed at resolving the goals of social life will undoubtedly create countless learning opportunities, all different from each other, reflecting the differences among the participants. It is up to the teacher to highlight and systematize the aspects that are part of their semiannual or annual planning as many times as necessary for the student to acquire confidence and autonomy towards the targeted knowledge.

Any proposed pedagogical project (Dewey, 1997; Hernandez & Ventura, 1998), which may range from a large interdisciplinary school project that meets the interests of different classes up to the work of a small group of students in a class, can offer heterogeneous students—with different levels of writing proficiency and diverse reading and text production experiences that they bring to school—an opportunity for differentiated participation. For this reason, school projects are, in my opinion, an ideal didactic approach to organize schoolwork that takes the heterogeneity of students seriously and that gives up prerequisites and rigid progression regarding the presentation of curricular elements.

Although the school organizes its activities around relevant themes, it is interesting to think of projects as *literacy projects*: activity plans aimed at student literacy. Thus, a literacy project would be constituted as "a set of activities that originates from a real interest in the students' lives and whose realization involves the use of written discourse, that is, the reading of texts that, in fact, circulate in society and the production of texts that will be actually

read, through the collective work of students and the teacher, each according to their skills" (Kleiman 2000, p. 238). This means that, whatever the project's theme and immediate objectives, it will be analyzed and evaluated by the teacher according to its potential to enact knowledge, experiences, skills, strategies, resources, materials, and technologies for the use of written language by different institutions whose literacy practices provide the models for the students' uses of texts.

This is what distinguishes a literacy project for recycling aluminum cans from a can recycling campaign carried out by a neighborhood association. In the first, the number of cans collected may be the motivating force behind the students' action, but for the teacher the motive to carry out the activities lies in the opportunities that the project creates to make calculations, compute, represent data in graphs, make advertising campaigns, prepare ads for the radio, i.e., to motivate students to participate in different literacy practices and to use written language. Clearly, the neighborhood association is driven by other interests, focused on environmental and/or financial issues.

To Conclude, Teacher Education: The Same Principles

It is evident that the role of the teacher changes within this new perspective on literacy instruction, where the focus is placed on social practice, regardless of whether the teaching involves initial alphabetic practices or essay writing in Portuguese. A socially contextualized approach can grant the teacher autonomy in the planning of teaching units and in the choice of teaching materials.

In this case, the teacher assumes a place in the educational system as a professional who decides on a course of action based on the observation, analysis and diagnosis of the situation. When the teacher also chooses to work with projects, they begin to decide on issues related to the selection of knowledge and practices that are local, functional for life in the students' immediate community and relevant for the student's participation in the social life of other communities and that, one day, may be used to change and improve the student and their group's future.[12] The teacher may decide about the inclusion of what should be part of the school's daily life, because it is legitimate and/or immediately necessary, and, on the other hand, about the exclusion of unnecessary and

12 Paulo Freire's commitment to knowledge transformed in subject matter is even greater. Neither project teaching nor social practice emphasis release the teacher from the obligation to teach concepts, procedures and relevant scientific genres to the subject. Decreased emphasis on contents was one of the limitations that Macedo (2005) observed in project centered classes, counteracted by an increase in the number of literacy events, which resulted in a major diversification of written language functions.

irrelevant material in order to insert the student in the literate practices that, it seems to us, persist due to inertia and tradition. Finally, they also decide on the negotiation of what may not be of interest to the student at the moment, but needs to be taught because of its relevance in our society.

A change in a teacher's performance necessarily depends on changes in the university's formative courses. One such change is the conception of writing; another, the acquisition of new attitudes towards literacy, which undergoes a naturalization process as schooling progresses. These transformations include a political-ideological dimension, since naturalizing uses of written language obscures the fact that such uses are not neutral toward power relations in society and may in fact contribute to inequality and exclusion.[13] Therefore, learning the written language can become one more social barrier for students who have not participated in literacy practices in their primary socialization, with the family. Teacher education courses must function as a space for denaturalization, for the attainment of a gradual process of weakening or eliminating the ideology of neutrality regarding written language.

One of the objectives pursued in this process is the self-questioning about one's own practices, which is necessary to perceive the difficulty of written language activities and to avoid tasks that may not make sense to the student but are considered universal by schools and other prestigious institutions.[14] For example, in recent years, recipes, notes, and labels have become common in textbooks and classrooms, often used for literacy purposes. However, teaching a group of children to read or write a recipe or a label without having built a context that justifies reading or writing such material, in activities that could perfectly be done orally or with other texts—we do not need a condensed milk can label to learn the letter *m* in the word *moça*,[15] for example—is a meaningless task. Such activities could therefore be much more difficult than simply reading words beginning with the letter "M" in their primer.

Contrary effects can also sometimes be produced when the student is asked to read or write a recipe or instruction when, in the first place, it is perfectly possible to *show* how to make the recipe or how to set up a toy without a given justification in writing it, and, secondly, this is the common practice in the student's community. Writing texts such as recipes and instructions may seem natural to highly educated groups, but they are not actions that belong

13 It is important to remember that teaching how to read and write is not a technical but a political issue, as Freire always maintained. We do not operate in a void.

14 The universalist conception, typical of school literacy, is known as autonomous literacy (Street, 1984).

15 Translators' note: The best-known brand of sweetened condensed milk in the country has a picture of a girl ("*moça,*" in Portuguese) accompanied by the word in highlight.

to the natural order of things: they are non-universal conventions for recording an action. Predicting these potential difficulties is not easy for the teacher or for anyone who has already naturalized writing as just one more semiotic system (in addition to the gestural, oral, imagery etc. systems).

Starting from literacy practices and functions of writing in the student's community means, among other things, distancing oneself from ingrained beliefs, such as the "superiority" of all literacy over orality; it also means learning and teaching how to live with heterogeneity and plurality, valuing the different and the singular. It involves acting as a privileged facilitator between groups with different literacy practices, and planning activities aimed at the organization and participation of students in the literacy events of prestigious institutions, such as reading literary, scientific and journalistic texts, watching theater plays, writing a book(let), making an art exhibition, organizing a soiree or an autograph night.

An important discipline for such transformation in the undergraduate teacher education course was suggested by Heath (1983), when she proposed to regard the work of a teacher as the work of an ethnographer, particularly when they teach students from communities with very different written and oral language traditions from those of the dominant groups—the latter very well represented at school. Observing students in their great heterogeneity provides valuable clues about their social practices of origin, which may assist the teacher when diagnosing, planning, and evaluating teaching and learning processes. Knowledge based on an accurate observation of classroom settings may help avoid generalizations and value each student's individuality when they formulate a hypothesis, give an answer, question a piece of information, or demonstrate knowledge, understanding or skills that seem to counter the information and knowledge provided by the school.

Knowing that students have diverse cultural backgrounds as participating members of a literate society, it becomes easier for the teacher to allow students to take part in different situations, to create different tactics to deal with their limitations or potentials in the situation, to reach different understandings, all due to their extremely varied learning, even before occupying school benches and despite the homogenizing practices learned at school. It is more difficult for the teacher who learns to listen and record the culture of the other to deny the existence of different cultural practices and to reject them *a priori*. In turn, this makes class interaction less conflicting. Hence the relevance of teaching, in early or continuing teacher education courses, principles and techniques for conducting participant observations and analyzing observed interactions and minimizing the graphocentric filters we impose on our interpretations of the social world.

The relationship between the types of content learned in the teacher education courses may also change. More than specific concepts to be learned, the course should aim to support the teacher's workplace literacy, thus understanding writing as an identity element of their undergraduate course (Kleiman, 2001). This means that, more than the learning of certain analytical-theoretical concepts and procedures, which change with shifts in linguistic and pedagogical theories, it is essential to equip the teacher to continue learning throughout their life and, in this way, to keep up with scientific developments related to their discipline and teaching methods. Thus, the teacher's relationship with the curriculum is transformed: the curriculum is no longer the straightjacket of schoolwork; instead, it may be viewed as a dynamic—and possibly changeable—pedagogical organization of subject matter that is worth teaching, that takes into account the local reality of the class, school or community, and that is organized according to relevant social practices.

In university education, as in the other levels of education discussed in this article, literacy projects provide a means to supply the pedagogical organization the teacher will need to perform their new functions: at the university, just as in other educational contexts, projects are organized in terms of the social practice significance for academic and professional life, as pointed out by reports of projects in teacher education undergraduate courses and in-service education courses using project-based pedagogy (Oliveira, 2008; Tinoco, 2006a; 2006b).

Tinoco (2006b) reports on 14 projects focusing on the patrimony of cities in Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, carried out by groups of teachers who were completing their teacher certification requirements.[16] These teachers, all of whom were lead teachers with extensive classroom experience, were encouraged to register their classes for the National Treasures of Brazil Contest, open to all elementary and high school students across the country, aimed at valuing Brazilian heritage (historical-cultural, natural, artistic, emotional).

The literacy project of each group of teachers consisted, therefore, of the necessary learnings—concepts, reading and writing practices, and genres—to guide the projects of their classes. For example, once the specific city patrimony was chosen, teachers had to guide the search for data in photos, maps, leaflets, newspapers, in short, in all kinds of pertinent documents. In order to teach their elementary and high school students how to choose or take

16 Translators' note: As required by a new teaching certification decree of 1996, that demanded that basic, initial level education teachers, up to then mostly graduates from a professional 2-year training course (*Escola Normal*), complete the 4-year requirements for teaching certification at the university. The activity here described was part of a course in a Program for Professional Qualification at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte.

photos, the teachers needed to understand how multimodal texts work. To register the classes in the contest or to guide their research, they needed to learn how to use the internet, and so on.

Pedagogy and Language courses that achieve their students' professional literacy through explicit models, resignified in projects, help to support teachers who may be described as social agents: individuals who stand out because of their skills to enact the abilities, resources, and knowledge of the community of apprentices where they act (Kleiman, 2006a, 2006b). These are skills that complement and may even replace the mastery of potentially obsolescent knowledge and theories.

A literacy agent is capable of articulating interests shared by the learners, organizing a group or community for collective action, assisting in making decisions about certain courses of action, interacting strategically with other agents (teachers, coordinators, parents), and modifying and transforming their action plans according to the group's on-going needs.

Training a teacher to act as a literacy agent places new and different demands on university educators: academic knowledge and familiarity with various literacy practices, including academic ones, are still important, but essential is the attitude of a teacher who, knowing they are in a continuous process of literacy, dares to experiment and, in doing so, continues learning with their students through literacy practices that motivate the entire group and, at the same time, meet individual interests and objectives. This way, they form readers, spark curiosity, and give confidence to beginner writers. For the teacher to act this way one day in their practice, we must today, in their training process, provide models of this kind of work.

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Reflection

The editors' request to reflect on the reasons why this article was widely read and cited, and what, if anything, would be changed, added, or taken out today in view of new research allowed me to read critically a text that otherwise I would have never reread, for it is with the greatest difficulty that I can bring myself to read an article of mine already published. "Out of sight, out of mind" seems to be my motto.

My thought is that this text has been frequently read in both initial and continuing language teacher education courses because it contributes to the understanding of concepts such as genres, writing as a social practice, and

literacy projects as integral parts of a didactic organization that offers an alternative to traditional (prescriptive and instrumental) language teaching practices. The text discusses the implications of such an approach as well as presenting a set of systematized 'ways of doing' in order to further competence in reading, writing, and oral practices from a social practice perspective.

Although official Brazilian education documents have for some time stressed the importance of approaching language work as an interactional process, teachers' courses have not, in turn, highlighted the ways through which such an approach may be brought about. Therefore, pointing at ways that break away from more traditional perspectives, the article in question acts as a guide for how to teach language starting with students' actual needs and desires and exemplifies, in the process, what a difference that student-centered teaching makes. It also points out both didactic and methodological ways for breaking away from a rigid curriculum where teaching contents, such as genres, are taught prescriptively, by showing that literacy projects allow not only the teaching of curriculum contents, but also the incorporation of multiple literacy practices into school life, considering the different socio-cultural spheres or domains that intercross students' lives.

If I were to write this text today, I would focus more on teaching vulnerable groups who, in spite of some efforts and programs to improve their school performance, have become even more vulnerable, as the recent pandemic has shown. It is not possible to treat all students as if they have the same needs. And I would emphasize a critical approach to this issue, similar to the one I currently adopt regarding the concept of multiple literacies, which in our official documents is addressed with a predominantly digital bias. It is not worth teaching all types of genres when we think of the less privileged: memes or fake news may actually attack their self-esteem, whereas considering an emergent genre of a quilombo group (Afro-Brazilian residents of settlements first established by escaped slaves in Brazil) as a proto genre, related to the genre demanded by school or government officials, makes the learning of the target genre more meaningful. In a project, multiple literacies are justified as long as they make sense. It is not possible to make such decisions without a critical stance. As the pandemic has also shown us, it is not about what technologies to teach, but about why and for what purpose we teach them.

– Angela B. Kleiman