
Oral to literate traditions: Emerging literacies in remote Aboriginal Australia

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Public debate on literacy in remote Indigenous Australia emphasises a narrative of failure. The discussion commonly focuses on the low literacy and numeracy benchmarks achieved in remote Indigenous schools. Little attention has been paid to the short history of literacy in isolated Indigenous societies, the shift from oral to literate traditions and how people use literacy in everyday social contexts. Yet with increased access to digital technologies over recent years, it is evident that new multimodal literacy practices are emerging. In this way we are seeing remote Indigenous youth acquiring oral, visual, gestural and written modes of representation and communication and using them in everyday social practice.

Keywords: *Australia; Indigenous; literacy; multimodal*

Introduction

Public debate on Indigenous education in remote Aboriginal Australia commonly emphasises English literacy as the key to successful Indigenous futures and participation in the “real economy” (Pearson, 2000). In this debate, assumptions about the power of the English language, and moreover literacy, abound. Yet the gap between expectation and reality seems wide when media and public discourse concurrently reinforces a narrative of failure by emphasising the illiteracy of youth and the failure of Aboriginal students to meet national English literacy benchmarks¹. The current neo-liberal reform agenda in Australian education, underpinned by an ideology of economic rationalism, assumes that for all non-English speaking students (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) learning English will lead to literacy acquisition and thus to improvements in employment possibilities and successful futures. This agenda is simultaneously fuelled by a “discourse of crisis” regarding English literacy (McKay, 2001) that has led to language teaching, especially English as a second

language teaching, being subsumed under literacy teaching (Lo Bianco & Wickert, 2001). This is particularly apparent in Indigenous education where bilingual language learning in some remote regions has been marginalised in the drive to prioritise English literacy (Simpson, Caffery & McConvell, 2009). Yet most children in remote Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia come from a speech community where the mother tongue is an Aboriginal language or Kriol.

Commentators often assume a shared understanding of what is meant by literacy in the remote Aboriginal context. Primarily they take for granted that, after only a few generations of schooling and exposure to English language and alphabetic literacy practices, Indigenous learners in remote areas (who generally do not speak English as a first language) will have English literacy levels commensurate with their mainstream counterparts. This expectation of commensurability is problematic because it, in effect, locates Aboriginal learners in a discourse of failure with minimal reflection on why literacy levels may differ so greatly, and causes are generally attributed to low school attendance and poor health. While these factors are of considerable importance, in this discourse little account is taken of how literacy has evolved over many centuries, in many societies, from its origins in oral traditions through the transformation of social and cultural practices, and the invention and adaptation of the material resources that support the particularities of Western literacy. It is also commonly assumed that schooling alone will achieve uniform high levels of literacy competence with little acknowledgement of the fact that Indigenous people in the remote world have made the transition from an oral culture to a literate culture only relatively recently, in comparison to Western society. The reality is that in some remote regions this generation of school attendees may in fact be only the first, second or third generation to pass through schooling and literacy is being learned in contexts where there are few antecedent social literacy practices.

There are many complex and intersecting factors that can be attributed to the lower rates of literacy in remote regions. However, in this paper, I want to broaden the discussion beyond the usual focus on schooling, attendance and literacy benchmarking by exploring certain rarely addressed sociohistorical and anthropological factors associated with literacy. I begin the paper by drawing a parallel between the shift from an oral culture to a literate culture in the

English-speaking world and remote Aboriginal Australia. I outline how early anthropological thought emphasised the great divide between oral and literate cultures, while more recent research in anthropology has come to view literacy in terms of social practice. I then describe how, in remote communities, new social practices are emerging with increased access to digital technologies. I illustrate how, despite the short history of literacy in remote communities, Indigenous youth are integrating oral and written forms in new multimodal practices. I conclude by arguing that when literacy is socially and culturally relevant, as with the new youth multimodal practices, literacy is taking hold in a manner that contradicts the narrative of failure typically associated with literacy in the remote world.

The development of Western literacy

It has taken many thousands of years for literacy in Western society to evolve to the stage where it is now. Writing systems were developed between 3100 B.C. and 550 B.C. and alphabetic literacy was used in classical Greek and Roman schools and civic contexts, and to a lesser extent during the Dark Ages (Graff, 1987). In medieval England to be *litteratus* (literate) meant knowing Latin, but not necessarily having the ability to read and write. Michael Clanchy's study of the Norman introduction of literacy to medieval England between 1066 and 1307 provides insights into how it took more than two centuries for literacy to gradually gain acceptance and influence. The shift from oral to literate habits and ways of thinking and acting (i.e. the shift from trusting memory and the spoken word above the written word, and from "habitually memorizing things to writing them down") was a gradual process that took time to develop (Clanchy, 1979, p. 3).

Prior to the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1447, reading and writing were separate skills. Reading was more often linked to speaking and hearing, emphasising the continuing connection with oral traditions (Clanchy, 1979; Graff, 1987). Reading remained for a long time an "oral, often collective activity" rather than the private, silent activity it tends to be today (Graff, 1987, p. 5). Reading and dictating were commonly coupled together and the skill of letter writing was in the art of dictating to scribes, mainly monks, who formed a small group of those actually able to write (Clanchy, 1979), whereas writing was commonly thought of, and used, merely as a mnemonic device (Olson, 1994). Before literacy could grow and spread beyond the small class of clerical writers "literate habits and assumptions, comprising a literate mentality, had to take root in

diverse social groups and areas of activity” (Clanchy, 1979, p. 149). By the thirteenth century increasing mercantile, business and civil activity gave literacy a practical application beyond clerical purposes and royal administration (Graff, 1987, p. 55). In 1476, Caxton introduced the printing press to England, and print “not only encouraged the spread of literacy”, it also “changed the way written texts were handled by already literate groups” (Eisenstein, 1985, pp. 21-22). Print gradually began replacing the oral aspects and memory arts of scribal culture and introduced a push for language standardisation. The standardisation of modern European languages came about quite late. Standardised language forms only became widely used (as opposed to merely prescribed or in use by very small elites) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hill 1999, p. 544). Print was also a major factor in the development of the “sense of personal privacy that marks modern society” and set the stage for the new practice of silent reading (Ong, 1982, pp. 130-31). Despite these significant changes, England remained neither a wholly literate nor a wholly illiterate society for a long time (Schofield, 1968, pp. 312-13). By the end of the sixteenth century, however, the term literate was used not so much as a marker of self-identity, but as “a descriptor to dichotomise the population into literates who could read in the vernacular languages and illiterates who could not” (Heath, 1991, p. 4). In the 1700s in the United States being literate was defined as being able to sign one’s name or an X to legal documents. By the 1800s it had become the “ability to read and recite memorized passages, not necessarily with comprehension” and by the early 1900s being able to read “began to require literal understanding of unfamiliar passages” (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 260-261).

The link between literacy and religion is significant and has remained so in the nearly three millennia of Western (alphabetic) literacy. The sixteenth century Reformation most strikingly linked literacy to religious practice and constituted the “first great literacy campaign in the history of the West, with its social legacies of individual literacy as a powerful social and moral force” (Graff, 1994 [1982], p. 157). Harvey Graff asserts that, in the wake of the Reformation in Sweden, near universal levels of literacy were achieved “rapidly and permanently”, without the “concomitant development of formal schooling or economic or cultural development that demanded functional or practical employment of literacy” (Graff, 1994 [1982], p. 159). A home and church education model was fashioned that trained a literate population. Nevertheless,

Graff posits that the Reformist educational process of rote memorisation of the alphabet and catechism left many “less than fluently literate”; even though some “effect” of literacy “must have taken hold” (Graff, 1987, p. 141).

For a long time, literacy was not necessarily “a formal, distinct or institutionalized activity”, nor an event synonymous with childhood or youth (Graff, 1987, p. 237). Although many English towns had elementary or grammar schools by the fourteenth century, prior to the late 1800s it was commonly expected that families would care for children and, moreover, teach them to read at home. At that time, the home and the workplace were less separated so childcare took place side by side with learning through observing and participating in adult processes and “making sense” of the mature roles of their community (Rogoff, 2003). The eighteenth century Enlightenment consolidated the ideological underpinnings for the modern and liberal reforms of popular schooling. The spread of the ideals of liberal democracy and capitalism was to push more people towards functional literacy skills and literacy became tied to the uneven pace of social and economic development. Industrialisation introduced the need for literacy for practical purposes and, with the growth in technology, a greater volume of printed material was made available (Graff, 1987; Clanchy, 1979).

The concept of the school class or grade emerged gradually between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. In the late 1800s, with the introduction of compulsory schooling in England and the United States, learning shifted from acquisition in a familial context, embedded within community and church life, to institutionalised learning (Rogoff, 2003). As literacy and schooling became “more closely allied”, schooling, in effect, institutionalised literacy learning (Graff, 1987, p. 261). Schooling then became a socialising agent, aiding the inculcation of values thought required for commercial, urban and industrial society and the new middle class promoted literacy as the basis of moral order. In particular, education promoters and social reformers attempted to instil the moral bases of literacy in their attempts to avert idleness, pauperism and immorality, particularly among children of the poor (Graff, 1987), and as I will discuss later in attempts to civilise newly colonised indigenous peoples. Literacy also came to represent emancipation and enlightenment with the political mobilisation of the working class. This led to the demand for access to literacy as a right and the later

rise of popular literacy movements among the poor and disenfranchised (Freire, 1993 [1970]; Hoggart, 1957).

Until at least the mid-nineteenth century, rote repetition and oral reading dominated in the classroom and attention to meaning was neglected, so students were “not learning to read well” (Graff, 1987, pp. 326-7). By the end of the nineteenth century, schooling supported sequenced approaches to learning to read and write and valorised individual achievement, and “in its drive to instruct, measure and prescribe the individual, the school jettisoned much of the learning in communities” (Heath, 1991, pp. 4-5). By the last quarter of the twentieth century, literacy skills such as “making inferences and developing ideas through written material” were expected, “prompted in part by widespread use of information technology in the workplace” (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 260-261). Simultaneously, as Shirley Brice Heath posits, critics in the developed world pointed out the failure of schools “to move large numbers of students beyond a minimal level of competence in literacy” and educators were chided for “letting standards slide from past eras of mythical high achievement” (Heath, 1991, pp. 4-5). Writers have suggested that a moral panic regarding the twentieth century “literacy crisis”, and the purported decline in literacy standards, has ensued (Graff, 1987; Heath, 1991; Street, 1995). Heath suggests that the critics of literacy achievement focus almost completely on schools even though “closer looks at the history of literacy in the industrialized nations of the West make it clear that developing a sense of being literate, rather than simply acquiring the rudimentary literacy skills of reading and writing, entailed far more than schools alone could give” (Heath, 1991, pp. 5-6).

The newly literate remote Australian Indigenous context

From Clanchy’s (1979) study of the Norman introduction of literacy to medieval England we understand that what was needed was not simply the introduction of literacy skills, but a shift from an oral to a literate mentality entailing not just altered modes of communication, but a profound shift in ways of thinking that underpinned cultural and epistemological assumptions about how the world was ordered, as well as changes in people’s sense of identity (Street, 1995, p. 31). A parallel can be drawn with the introduction of literacy to Indigenous groups in some remote regions of Australia as late as the 1950s and 1960s.

For many Aboriginal people living in remote central and northern Australia the transition from a nomadic hunter-gatherer existence to a sedentary “community” lifestyle came relatively late and only after people walked into or were forced into missions, settlements and towns in the early to mid twentieth century. In certain locations, contact with Anglo-Australian settler society was delayed, with some very remote groups continuing a hunter-gatherer existence until the 1950s in parts of Arnhem Land and the 1960s in the Western Desert regions of central Australia. Traditional cultural dispositions and norms began altering once people began adapting to European social and institutional practices only a few generations ago. Once the encounter with the nation state commenced, however, people became habituated (Berger & Luckmann, 1975 [1966]) into the new paradigm of school, training and work encountered on missions, stations and settlements. Elsewhere I have written about the short history of schooling for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory (Kral, 2000, 2007a; Kral & Falk, 2004) and in certain parts of remote Western Australia (Kral, 2007b). There is not the space to discuss this in detail in this paper. Briefly, however, it was not until after the passing of the Education Act in 1945 that Western Australia displayed its intent to educate its Aboriginal population, and after 1951 that there was a “willingness” on the part of the Department of Native Affairs to also accept responsibility for the education of children in missions (Kral, 2007b). Similarly, in the Northern Territory, government responsibility for the education of Aborigines commenced only in the 1950s. Prior to the introduction of government schooling in the Northern Territory, most Aboriginal children living in remote areas either received no formal Western education or were educated in mission schools. Although the Commonwealth Affairs Department had overseen the education of children of Aboriginal descent in urban areas of the Territory for some time, overall responsibility for Aboriginal education emerged in tandem with the government’s commitment to a policy of assimilation throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Kral, 2007a). Despite the use of restricted English literacy (and to a lesser extent vernacular literacy) in education and limited adult church, employment and governance contexts over the ensuing years, widespread everyday family and community literacy practices are not yet apparent (Bat, 2005; Kral, 2007a; Kral & Falk, 2004).

The taken for granted nature of literacy in Western society (and English literacy in Anglo-European countries such as Australia), and its primacy in everyday life, masks its complexity. As outlined above,

it has taken more than a thousand years for literacy to become widespread in Western society and for written English to become standardised (Strang, 1970). Yet we still cannot claim to have achieved universal literacy, despite a long history of schooling interconnected with family and community literacy practices developed over many centuries. In fact, the 2006 national Australian (i.e. mainstream, not remote Indigenous) *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* found that 16% of the adult population has reading, comprehension and maths skills so low that they would be required to undertake a Certificate I or II basic education course to attain the employability skills required by modern industry (Australian Council for Adult Literacy, 2009, p. 1). In contrast, Indigenous people in the very remote regions of Australia have made the transition from an oral culture to a literate culture only relatively recently in comparison to most Western, or other major literate cultures, without the prior and parallel development of many socially or culturally meaningful textual practices. Therefore, if we compare the Aboriginal context with the historical conditions outlined above, as one writer has noted, “the development of Aboriginal literacy has been rapid and spectacular in the extreme” (Hoogenraad, 2001, p. 129).

Literacy and anthropology

When British colonisation was at its height around the world in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Western schooling, and ipso facto literacy, was utilised to civilise the peoples of the colonies and progress the evolutionary process. Colonising thought was inextricably linked to an assumed sense of the innate superiority of white culture and Christian values. Such attitudes to literacy stemmed from early anthropological thought where literacy was emblematic of the “great divide”: the binary division between “civilised and primitive”, “literate and illiterate”; and the determinant of difference between “us” and “them” (Goody, 1968; Ong, 1982). From this purview, literacy reached its apogee only in the West and, in the non-Western world, illiteracy was a signifying feature of inferior or primitive cultures (Besnier, 1995 p. 1). Graff suggests that within the underpinning philosophy of “linear, progressive or evolutionary change” illiteracy came to signify that the training required for civilisation and progress remained incomplete (Graff, 1987 p. 323). As exemplified by Jack Goody, who posited that on the literacy continuum from preliterate to literate, the newly literate acquired only a form of “restricted literacy” (Goody, 1968).

This so-called “great divide” between oral and literate cultures remained a focus of anthropological research and discussion until only a few decades ago when the work of researchers such as Cole and Scribner (1981) indicated that literacy as such had few cognitive benefits. The nature of literacy research was further altered by the significant work of Street (1984, 1993) who emphasised the cross-cultural distinctions in how communities use written text and Heath who explored oral and literate strategies used in diverse communities in the United States (Heath, 1983). Later, research from the New Literacy Studies (Barton, 1994; Gee, 2000) shifted the focus away from the attainment of individual technical skills competence to the social context of literacy use. Additionally, sociohistorical (Clanchy, 1979; Graff, 1979) and cross-cultural (Schieffelin & Gilmore, 1986) or ethnographic (Besnier, 1995; Kulick & Stroud, 1993) studies have shed light on the variety and complexity of literacy practices across cultures, locations and time. Following on from this, researchers from the New London Group (New London Group, 1996) have explored so-called multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

From these and other studies in history, anthropology and linguistics we understand that literacy is viewed as social practice and cannot be understood simply in terms of pedagogy as it is part of other more embracing social institutions and conceptions. It also cannot be removed from the cultural conceptions, social meanings and ideological dimensions that are associated with reading and writing in historical and contemporary contexts. As such, literacy is a cultural process that cannot be analysed in isolation from the circumstances and conditions that precipitate its development as social practice. From this perspective, initiatives to increase literacy also need to take account of broader issues such as the connection between language and identity and what people actually use reading and writing for in everyday life, beyond the parameters of schooling. Researchers recognise that children who learn to read successfully do so because, for them, “learning to read is a cultural and not primarily an instructed process” (Gee, 2004, p. 13). That is, being literate involves more than having individual technical literacy skills and individual competencies, it also depends on the relationship between language behaviours and supporting social relations and cultural practices. These cultural practices are what people use reading and writing for in adult everyday life in different social and cultural contexts: at home, at work, in church, and in recreational and leisure pursuits.

Oral traditions and multimodal literacies

A continuing connection with oral traditions is a feature of incipiently literate societies (Besnier, 1995). International research has explored the links between oral traditions and story schema to show the culturally-bound nature of oral narrative structures and how these influence writing style (Bauman, 1986; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). It has been suggested that the “narrative structure that is valued in each community gives form to the way that people express ideas in conversation and writing” (Rogoff, 2003 p. 269). In the Australian Western Desert, verbal arts are central to social interaction. Analyses show the influence of oral traditions on early Aboriginal Australian attempts at vernacular literacy (Goddard, 1990; Kral, 2007b). Recent research has shown that young adults in remote desert communities are adapting oral narrative skills and exploring an expanding repertoire of multimodal practices (Kral, 2007b). Young people, familiar with the oral, visual and gestural features of sand storytelling, readily embrace multimodal literacies by adapting the narrative schemata of sand stories to new multimedia forms. In other locations, traditional oral narrative schemas, verbal arts and speech styles have seeped into new song writing and recording practices. The songs produced by youth in remote areas draw on recurrent features in the cultural schema by revealing empathy for individuals who are longing for country or kin or by using travelling narratives” —story schema that predictably use the journey as a structuring principle—from the traditional oral canon (Glass, 1980; Klapproth, 2004).

Earlier I suggested that commentators often assume a shared understanding of what literacy is in the remote context. So far I have discussed this from an anthropological, or social practice, perspective in terms of understanding what literacy means in a newly literate context. I now suggest that few commentators have, in fact, moved beyond a school-based deficit perspective on alphabetic literacy, to notice the changing modes of literacy in the “new media age” (Kress, 2003). New approaches to thinking about literacy have come about due to the emergence of social practices associated with digital technologies. The advent of such technologies all over the world has enabled new forms of media production and the composition of multimodal texts that incorporate visual, oral, gestural and written modes of representation and communication (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Livingstone, 2002). According to literacy theorist Gunther Kress, social generational differences in the approach to the production of texts and the logic of reading have appeared (Kress, 2003). Similarly,

others have concluded that “what counts as literacy”, and how it is practised are now in “historical transition” and “young people are at the vanguard of the creation of new cultural forms” (Hull & Zacher, 2004, p. 42).

According to mainstream standards of literacy, Indigenous youth appear to be failing, yet many are now engaging in new multimodal practices and producing their own creative literacies. Over recent years, in remote communities, there has been a rapid increase in the personal ownership of affordable, small, mobile digital media technologies such as MP3 players, digital cameras and mobile phones, coupled with increased access to *iMovie* and *GarageBand*: free film and music editing software available on Macintosh computers. New forms of textual communication and linguistic creativity are emerging where even those with few alphabetic literacy skills are using digital technologies to create song recordings, films and slideshows where multimodal texts are constructed and framed using intertextual layering of image, text, song and gesture. Young people are also using new technologies to maintain social relationships through mobile phones and online social networking. On internet sites such as *YouTube*, *Bebo* and *Facebook*, youth are writing about themselves and to each other: uploading personal profiles, photos and films, and using text and symbols in inventive ways. Young people have quickly acquired the practice of mobile phone SMS text messaging and also use phones to relay (or store) instant action videos or photos. With text messaging, youth are reading and sending simple messages, in English and Indigenous languages, often using inventive shortcuts. The short-cut meaning-making style evident in SMS and online messaging is drawing on an established tradition of adolescent graffiti expression across remote Australia commonly representative of insidership and signifying belongingness (Kral, 2007b; Nicholls, 2000).

Conclusion

In newly literate circumstances, such as in very remote Aboriginal Australia, a tension exists between, on the one hand, trying to squeeze thousands of years of Western literacy evolution into a few generations, and on the other, trying to achieve commensurability with mainstream literacy and numeracy benchmarks in school-based testing. To assume that literacy is a simple skills acquisition process that can be delivered in a programmed way, in a short period of time, in a language not used by the learner in their speech community, and achieve outcomes commensurate with mainstream standards, is

unrealistic. Literacy is, as Clanchy illustrates, a gradual process. Furthermore, Street emphasises that to “eschew such gradualism” tends to lead to the failure of many literacy programs (Street, 1984, p. 114). Additionally, I would suggest that in the remote Aboriginal context failure tends to be attributed to individual behaviours rather than social circumstances.

In conclusion, I argue that literacy competence in the remote world should not be perceived in terms of failure as the circumstances could not be otherwise, given the social, cultural and historical conditions of the recent transition from an oral to a literate society. From this perspective it may still take a few generations for literacy to deeply penetrate family and community social practices and cultural processes and for all adults to acquire the kind of literacy required for participation in the real economy. In the meantime, for literacy to truly take hold in remote communities then, in addition to good schooling, attendance and improved health, literacy must also acquire meaning and purpose over the changing domains and practices that span a person’s life. For this literacy to be maintained and elaborated it must be meaningfully integrated into everyday social practice in a manner that extends beyond pedagogical settings, and the meaning and purpose of literacy must, in turn, be transmitted to the following generation. The new multimodal literacy practices of the youth generation described above alert us to the fact that in just a few generations a literate orientation has, in fact, evolved. The emerging social practices around digital technologies are inclusive of socially and culturally meaningful literacy practices. Although these practices may not represent the kind of academic literacies required for higher education, they do indicate that when literacy is required to communicate what matters, then young people are acquiring appropriate literacies and using them in everyday social practice.

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¹ Indigenous students from remote schools are now benchmarked using the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In the NAPLAN tests Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. The national tests give schools the ability to compare their students' achievements against national standards and with student achievement in other Australian states and territories.

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