Reading in a social context

The reading process has tended to be characterised primarily as psychological, cognitive and individual. Baynham presents this understanding of literacy as typified by ‘the solitary writer struggling to create meanings…which can be recreated by the solitary reader’ (Baynham 1995: 4). This is a view which I aim to challenge in this book, through examination of the ways in which readers collaborate to derive meaning from text. We see the mediation of social and cultural factors, not just at the micro level of negotiated interpretation of texts but more widely. First, at a macro-societal level there are culturally different understandings of what it means to ‘do schooling’, of which literacy instruction is a major part. Alexander (2000) in his extensive study of schooling in five countries, talks of the ‘web of inherited ideas and values, habits and customs, institutions and world views which make one country, or one region or one group, distinct from another’ (Alexander 2000: 5). There are also, more specifically, differing understandings of what it means to be a reader and writer, as Brice-Heath’s famous (1983) study of two socioeconomically different communities in the United States showed. Brice-Heath describes the different ‘ways with words’ of a black and white working class community, Trackton and Roadville, respectively. In addition she compares the verbal repertoires and styles of these groups with a third group, the ‘mainstreamers’, or middle-class townspeople. ‘Ways with words’ are linked to a whole range of identities. I recall recently talking to Jamila, a nine-year-old Muslim girl, whose family came from Afghanistan, about the books she read at home. When I asked if she could bring something in Arabic to read the following week she replied, clearly alluding to the Koran: ‘You’re supposed to take lots of care of it. It’s supposed to be above you, above your legs. I have to go somewhere else to read. I go to this lady’s house.’ Further conversations confirmed that Jamila’s ways of reading were context specific and closely linked to the salience of different identities in different social settings. She felt it inappropriate to bring religious texts to school.
Jamila’s case recalls Street’s well-known conceptualisation of literacy as autonomous or ideological (Street 1984). The autonomous model assumes a universal-skills basis to literacy, while the ideological model sees literacy as inherently variable and culturally mediated. Street’s emphasis on literacy as situated social and cultural practice, reflected in its typically favoured pluralisation as ‘literacies’, set the scene for rich debate about the variability and culture dependency of literacy and has evolved into extensive studies of literacy practices cross-culturally, under the auspices of the New Literacies Studies (e.g. Street 1995; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton et al. 2000). In these studies there is a preference for the study of vernacular literacies which move beyond the confines of schooling, although notable exceptions to this tendency are seen in the work of Baynham (1995), Gregory (1996), Gregory and Williams (2000) and Baker and Freebody (2001), all of whom in different ways, locate their accounts of reading behaviour within classroom studies of literacy instruction or report the interrelationships of home and school.

My aim here is to look less at practices than processes, or rather to point to the ways in which they interact. I will also focus largely on print literacy and the continued value of sustained reading of linear text. This is in the light of a current preference for the new modalities, where the emphasis is rather on multimodality and the increasing importance of visual literacy and the new technologies, which involve different, non-linear ways, of drawing from text (cf. e.g. Cope and Kalantzis 2000). My plea however, is that orthodox reading and writing should maintain its place centre stage in literacy instruction for a number of reasons. First, many of the new modalities are to a large extent parasitic on the old. Arguably, for instance, using e-mail communication means carefully balancing the features which make it a mixture of spoken and written discourse. Skill in orthodox writing and reading is a prerequisite for effective handling of this relatively new medium. Second, there are clear advantages in terms of critical language study for maintaining a place for print literacy. One is that knowledge of the grammar of written language, best gained from extensive exposure to print, constitutes a resource not only to analyse texts but, as Halliday points out (1996: 350), is ‘a critical resource for asking questions about (texts): why is the grammar organized as it is? Why has written language evolved in this way?’ As a more stable medium than ephemeral modalities such as bodily communication or visual signalling systems, it makes aspects of the grammar more accessible to learners. Moreover, the new literacy has not seen the demise of the old: within Britain, more books are published than ever before. Along with a whole range of other printed material they remain easily obtainable, reproducible, relatively cheap, and, uniquely, pleasurable. So, in their different ways, are newspapers and magazines. We need not scorn the modest, familiar and accessible world of print, at the same time as we welcome the worlds of hypernet, e-mail and text messaging.