Chapter 4

A Sociocultural Theory of Writing

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The history of writing research and theory may be narrated in varied ways. Some reach back to the emergence of sophistic rhetoric among the ancient Greeks, whereas others point to the relatively recent development of focused research examining writing through psychological and anthropological methodologies. Emig’s (1971) case studies of the writing processes of high school students, along with Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen’s (1975) research on secondary students’ (ages 11–18) writing in U.K. schools (which shifted attention from normative issues of how people should write to descriptive questions, such as how to classify writing), pointed a new generation of researchers to questions of writing as a form of activity. Research on writing processes in the United States initially settled on cognitive processing theory (i.e., Flower & Hayes, 1981); however, that paradigm was soon critiqued as too narrow in its understanding of context and was eclipsed by studies that attended to social, historical, and political contexts of writing. Since then, empirical research on writing has increasingly turned to sociocultural theories and methods emerging from psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and semiotics.

Since the 1970s, sociocultural studies of writing have been quite heterogeneous, including anthropological studies of literate practices in typical (i.e., non-Western, non-industrialized, or marginalized) anthropological sites (e.g., Besnier, 1995; Heath, 1983; Ochs, 1988; Scollon & Scollon, 1981); cross-cultural psychological studies of the cognitive consequences of literacy (e.g., Scribner & Cole, 1981); examination of writing practices in scientific and other workplaces (e.g., Bazerman, 1988; Beaufort, 1999; Latour, 1999; Myers, 1990; Suchman, 2000; Swales, 1998); accounts of writing in relation to electronic media in schools and workplaces (e.g., Geisler, 2003; Hawisher & Selle, 1999; Heath & Luff, 2000; Nardi, 1995); tracing of writing across home, community, and other settings (e.g., Brandt, 2001; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Sheridan-Rabideau, 2001; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988); and educational studies of writing in classrooms from kindergarten through graduate school (e.g., Casanave, 2002; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Pare, 1999; Dyson, 1997; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Larson, 1999; Ivanic, 1998; Kamberolis, 2001; Lunsford, 2002; Michaels, 1987; Prior, 1998). Sociocultural theories represent the dominant paradigm for writing research today. This chapter is not intended as a comprehensive review of the literature; instead, it introduces the complex, interdisciplinary territory of sociocultural theory, explores some specific studies that illustrate how that theory has reshaped our understanding of writing, and, finally, considers future directions and challenges for sociocultural research on writing.
Key Tenets of Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory rejects the notion that human action is governed by some Neoplatonic realm of rules, whether the linguistic rules of English, the communicative norms of some discourse community, or cognitive scripts for acting in a particular situation. Sociocultural theory argues that activity is *situated* in concrete interactions that are simultaneously *improvised* locally and mediated by prefabricated, historically provided tools and practices, which range from machines, made objects, semiotic means (e.g., languages, genres, iconographies), and institutions to structured environments, domesticated animals and plants, and, indeed, people themselves. Mediated activity involves *externalization* (speech, writing, the manipulation and construction of objects and devices) and *co-action* (with other people, artifacts, and elements of the social–material environment) as well as *internalization* (perception, learning). Objects come to embody human activity as they register its consequences. Texts are inscribed, tools are made, routes are worn in the land, buildings are constructed, and other species are domesticated (now genetically altered); Human activity makes worlds, leaving the traces of human projects object-ified in those worlds, and then inhabits those evolving worlds. Even a lone individual thinking is co-acting with other people through artifacts fabricated elsewhere, at other times, mostly by other people. I do not, for example, fully internalize the car and the road when I drive, the computer and its graphic software when I draw with them, or the other person when I converse with her. In each case, action and cognition are distributed so I must learn to act-with. Distributed activity inevitably crosses so many social and historical boundaries that activity, people, and artifacts are always heterogeneous (not pure or ideal). Thus, activity is also *laminated*, with multiple frames or fields coexisting, relatively foregrounded or backgrounded (see Goffman, 1974, 1981; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Prior, 1998; Prior & Shipka, 2003). In activity, people are not only socialized (brought into alignment with others) as they appropriate cultural resources but also individualized as their particular appropriations historically accumulate to form a particular individual. Vygotsky (1987) argued that “the central tendency of the child’s development is not a gradual socialization introduced from the outside, but a gradual individualization that emerges on the foundation of the child’s internal socialization” (p. 259). In activity, *institutions* are made and remade, in part through making certain kinds of people who engage in certain kinds of practices for certain ends, in part through the production of object-ified worlds in which the institution becomes naturalized. However, the social world is also *personalized* as an individual’s particular biographically formed stances, values, and practices are taken up by other people and to varying extents are embedded in cultural resources. Finally, activity involves signs-in-use (linguistic or non-linguistic) that are concrete, historical, and dialogic, signs formed out of the materials at hand and in relation to historical chains of sign use.

Mapping Sociocultural Theory: A History of Three Entangled Traditions

Sociocultural theory has multiple, tangled histories that produce a complex interdisciplinary territory and diverse terminology. One central figure is Lev Vygotsky, who in the few short years of his active career in the Soviet Union before his death in 1934, produced a rich set of studies, theories, methods, and goals for research. Vygotsky (1978, 1987) proposed understanding human consciousness as sociohistorically produced, treated learning/development as a confluence of histories (phylogensis, cultural genesis, and ontogenesis), and initiated research on the emergence of writing in childhood, as well as on ways that writing mediates problem solving and memory. Research that has continued the development of Vygotsky’s ideas is sometimes simply referred to as *Vygotskian* or *neo-Vygotskian*. James Wertsch (1991), a leading Western proponent of Vygotsky’s theories, prefers the term sociocultural to emphasize the importance of cultural mediation in human development. A. N. Leont’ev (1981), a colleague of Vygotsky’s, often referred to sociohistoric theory to emphasize the importance of concrete histories—of the species, of cultural groups, of psychological systems. He named his own contribution to this line activ-
Ity theory, arguing that durable, socially motivated activity is the appropriate unit of analysis for study of the affective and motivating spheres of consciousness that Vygotsky identified as fundamental in his last major work (Thinking and Speech), Yrjo Engeström (1987, 1993), who is arguably the leading activity theorist in the world today, and Michael Cole (1996), who has been central to promoting the work of Vygotsky and Alexander Luria, Vygotsky’s closest associate, prefer cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as the broad name and often specify the unit of analysis as activity systems. Drawing on sociobiologic theory in her cross-cultural studies of children’s apprenticeship into thinking and action, Barbara Rogoff (1990) emphasizes the multichannel (verbal and nonverbal), intersubjective character of guided participation in cultural practices. Because of the emphasis on the mediated nature of cognition and action, many of these ideas are also discussed as examples of distributed cognition (e.g., Salomon, 1993) or of functional systems (e.g., Hutchins, 1995). Somewhat poetically, del Rio and Alvarez (1995) talk of functional systems as architectures for mind and agency.

Similar variations in emphasis and naming can be traced in other sociocultural traditions. Views of language (or, more generally, signs) as situated, dialogic, and indexical, developed by Voloshinov (1973, 1976) and then extended by Bakhtin (1981, 1986), are referred to as dialogic or Bakhtinian. For their anthropological study of apprenticeship, Lave and Wenger (1991) offer a theory of situated learning in communities of practice. To capture the structured improvisation of social life, Bourdieu (1977, 1990) offers key notions of practice, habitus, and cultural capital. Researchers routinely draw from diverse sociocultural traditions and figures. In developing his notion of discourse genres to address the tacit, embodied nature of communication, Hanks (1996) blends Silverstein’s (1985) dialogic theory (which emphasizes functional and metapragmatic dimensions of communication) with Bourdieu’s notions of practice and habitus. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) blend practice theory with Bakhtinian and Vygotskian work as they explore self and identity in figured worlds. At this point, readers may be wondering if there really is such a creature as sociocultural theory. There is.

Sociocultural theory has emerged out of three intensely interacting traditions: Marxism, pragmatism, and phenomenology. Each has fought against binaries: materialism versus idealism, nature versus humanity, the mind versus the body, the individual versus the collective. Marx’s (Marx & Engels, 1976) “Theses on Feuerbach” rejected both materialism and materialism with its call to study “human sensuous activity, practice” (p. 6) and its assertion that people are not only materially produced but also produce themselves materially. References to this foundational text appear across practice-oriented approaches, at critical points, for example, in Bourdieu (1977), Leont’ev (1981), and Voloshinov (1976). Marx viewed society as built up from its concrete historical base and sought to replace cultural dogma with science:

The social structure and the state are continuously evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, however, of these individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people’s imagination, but as they actually are, i.e., as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions, and conditions independent of their will. (Marx & Engels, 1976, pp. 35–36; emphasis in original)

In developing his pragmatic account of education, Dewey (1916) described society as constantly re woven in joint activity in specific environments, through which people come to form common understandings, aims, dispositions, and skills. Central to this reweaving is an environment, “every domesticated plant and animal, every tool, every utensil, every appliance, every manufactured article, every aesthetic decoration, every work of art,” remade by human activity (p. 37). Dewey argues that this world of artifacts allows children to attain rapidly what humanity took ages to develop, that with such artifacts, “the dice have been loaded” (p. 37). Schutz’s phenomenological sociology has been particularly influential for studies of practice, informing such kind figures as Garfinkel (1967) and Goffman (1974). For Schutz (1967), the here-and-now is an improvisational achievement, but it does not stand alone: It is socially structured. Schutz describes a social world of layered zones: directly experienced intersubjective social reality, the world of contemporaries, and the
...merged out of idioms: Marxism, phenomenology, Each materialism ver- humanitv, the individual ver-Marx & Engels, "rejected both with its call to tivity, practice" people are not ut also produce reponses to this across practical points, for 1977), Leon'tev (1976). Marx from its concrete replace cultural state are contin- process of definite use individuals, not own or other peoey actually are, i.e., sially, and hence as material limits, pres-号 independent of s, 1976, pp. 33-36; ic account of edu- scribed society as nt activity in spe- which people x-experiences, ral. Central to this ent, "every domes- tary model, every manufactured decoration, every human activity (p. this world of arti- attain rapidly what develop, that with have been loaded" sociological sociology fluential for studies such key figures as offman (1974). For -and-now is an im- but it does not y structured. Schutz of layered zones: di- subjective social re- mporaries, and the worlds of predecessors and successors. The world of contemporaries is layered as well, including people I am now in face-to-face interaction with, people I have met, people I know of but have not met, people I know of in an abstract way, collective entities (e.g., the state), objective configurations of meaning (e.g., the grammar of English), and artifacts (pp. 180-181). Like Vygotsky and Dewey, Schutz views tools as carriers of social history: "A tool is a thing-in-order-to; it serves a purpose and for the sake of this purpose it was produced" (p. 201). Schutz and Luckmann (1973) state that subjective elements of knowledge are only taken into the social stock of knowledge by objectivation, "the embodiment of subjective processes in the objects and events of the everyday life-world" (p. 264).

The most prominent line of sociocultural theory is traced to calls in the 1920s by Vygotsky and Voloshin for Marxist re-conceptualizations of psychology and linguistics as disciplines whose proper object is the concrete historical activity of persons-in-societies. Vygotsky's (1978) fundamental question was how we become human through day-to-day engagements in the cultural practices of our communities and institutions. He argued that in such engagements we encounter, selectively appropriate, use, and refashion for others' use, material and semiotic resources that have been developed historically. Voloshinov (1973) critiqued theories of language, like those of Saussure, that assume some abstract system (of shared rules and a shared lexicon) governs performance. He argued that such systematization makes living languages dead, turning dynamic streams of socially charged discourse into abstract signals, emptied of all but a fixed denotative sense, uttered by no one, nowhere, at no time. Voloshinov's conclusion that language "is a purely historical phenomenon" (p. 82) explains why he and Bakhtin rejected the trope that language resides in some Neo-platonic realm of dictionaries, grammar books, and guides to social etiquette (whether located in society, the brain, or our genes).

Anthropology and sociology have distilled these traditions in theory and research on cultural practice. Hanks (1996) notes that much research in anthropological linguistics has been shaped by the Prague School's uptake of basic phenomenological tenets: that language is only one mode of human communication, that use of language must be understood as historically specific (not a product of general systematic knowledge or rules), that meaning is intersubjectively arrived at by people drawing on linguistic and non-linguistic experience, and that much of communication is tacit and silent. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) draws on phenomenology to emphasize the complex, improvised nature of individual perception and action, while at the same time displaying a Marxist attention to activity, the organization of work (formal and informal), and objectification (i.e., the historical accumulation of material, social, and cultural capital).

Marxism, pragmatics, and phenomenology have converged on key points. Each has sought to understand human activity through close attention to concrete, everyday practices/histories and has attended to ways that histories enter situations embedded in artifacts. Inverting the old social order, each has argued that human thought and action are not explicable in terms of abstract universals, not governed from above. Each sees the everyday world not as a pale shadow of the real and potent, but as a rich, historically continuous ground for human action. Each senses consciousness as a key term and seeks to wrest understanding from an ideological fog of political and religious dogma by focusing on the actual practices of people and attending to how people are socialized into cultural patterns of perception, thought, and action. Although variously mapped, the coalescence of a sociocultural approach encompassing these three traditions is apparent in a number of other overviews (see Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Gee, 2000; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Hanks, 1996; Rogoff, 2003). In short, weaving together these three traditions should not be understood as a mark of eclecticism, but as a reflection of deep coherences in stance, as well as of intense historical dialogues among key figures across the traditions.

4. A Sociocultural Theory of Writing

Sociocultural approaches to writing reject the simple equation of writing with material texts or acts of inscription, seeing writing as chains of short- and long-term production, representation, reception, and distribution.
Writing involves dialogic processes of invention. Texts, as artifacts-in-activity, and the inscription of linguistic signs in some medium are parts of streams of mediated, distributed, and multimodal activity. Even a lone writer is using an array of socioculturally provided resources (languages, genres, knowledge, motives, technologies of inscription and distribution) that extend beyond the moment of transcription and that cross modes and media (reading, writing, talk, visual representation, material objectification). Texts and moments of inscription are no more autonomous than the spray thrown up by the white water in a river, and like that spray, literate acts today are far downstream from their sociocultural origins. Seeing writing as distributed and mediated means recognizing that all writing is collaborative, involving divisions of labor and forms of coauthorship. As in Schutz’s (1967) account (discussed earlier) of the world of contemporaries, these divisions of labor may range from direct, face-to-face coproduction of texts to the provision of very anonymous resources (e.g., the word text). One important corollary of this view is the recognition that teachers in schools are always coauthors (often dominant ones) in students’ writing as teachers take up many roles in the authorship function (deciding to write, setting deadlines, specifying style and topic, structuring the writing process, offering specific words and phrases). The fact that students are typically held fully accountable as authors is thus an interesting cultural practice (pointing to both power and the subject-producing dimensions of writing in school—the proleptic invitation to assume authorship and to accept its ideology). Contrary to prototypical images of writing and reading as private acts separated in space and time, sociocultural research has called attention to the many instances of face-to-face writing: co-writing of texts, writing on the chalkboard, graffiti, and so on. The role of such face-to-face writing and reading, mediated by talk, in children’s early appropriations of literate practice remains to be explored.

Sociocultural theory argues for viewing writing as a mode of social action, not simply a means of communication. Writing participates in making particular kinds of people, institutions, and cultures, as well as indexing them. From Bazerman’s (1988) studies of the slow historical formation of scientific report genres to Kamberelis’s (1999) study of the ontogenetic emergence of genre in children’s writing, North American genre theory (see Bazerman & Prior, 2005) illustrates this dual focus on situated meaning and social action. Miller (1984) and Bazerman (1988) took up Schutz’s notion of typification to explore how genres work to order the world, to constitute persons and social formations, to typify both construals of what is going on and means of moving forward. Bazerman’s framework also drew heavily on Bakhtin’s (1986) discussion of speech genres as dialogic utterances and the Vygotskian understanding that mediatized means (in this case, genres) produce people and culture. The next sections explore selected studies to give a flavor for the research program that has grown over the past three decades examining writing as a sociocultural practice. I have mapped these studies into three themes: redrawing the oral–literate divide, emerging schooled literacies, and writing in college and beyond. These three areas are offered as a tool, not as a rule, as neither mutually exclusive nor comprehensive. They are intended to give a feel for the range of ways that sociocultural theory has been taken up in specific studies of literate activity and for the picture of writing that has been emerging from such research.

Redrawing the Oral–Literate Divide

In early sociocultural studies of writing, Luria and Vygotsky looked developmentally at the emergence of writing, noting the intersections of drawing, scribbling, and writing, and the role of writing in remediating psychological systems having to do with memory and problem solving. Whereas Western rhetoric, following Plato, came to see writing as a rationale for ignoring the rhetorical canon of memory, Vygotsky identified writing as key to a revolutionary reorganization of memory, the externalization of memory in written texts being a prime example of mediated activity. Luria’s (1976) studies in Uzbekistan in the 1930s informed cross-cultural psychology’s studies, decades later, of literate/schooled and illiterate/unschooled minds in practice.

Scribner and Cole (1981) reported their complex series of ethnographic experiments with the Vai people of Liberia in the 1970s.
Their study of literacy, schooling, social contexts, and cognitive performance on a variety of tasks proved to be seminal in debates about the consequences of literacy, particularly alphabetic literacies, because they were able to take advantage of the natural laboratory of the Vai culture, where three dominant forms of literacy coexisted, each associated with different scripts, different modes of learning/instruction, different patterns of use, and different cultural significations. Vai literates used an independently developed syllabary that was taught and learned in everyday social relationships. Vai was used for diverse purposes, including letter writing, record keeping, literary and historical writing, religious practices, and representing foreign languages. It was socially limited (with fewer than 30% of adults able to read and write Vai), chirographic (handwritten), rarely used for government communication, and often known to individuals who had attended little or no Western schooling. Quranic literacy, in contrast, was learned formally (but not in Western schools) and emphasized rote memorization of the Quran in Arabic (a foreign language with an alphabetic script). While some used Arabic literacy for a wide range of activities, the dominant use was religious. Arabic script was typically encountered in print form in the Quran and other key Arabic texts. English (again, a foreign language with an alphabetic script) was learned in Western-style schools and used for a range of activities similar to Vai, except rarely to represent other languages. However, English was also used for government communication and appeared in a wide range of print texts and genres. Among the Vai, then, were individuals who had only one of these literacies along with those who were bi-, tri-, or multiliterates and others who were nonliterate; individuals who had attended Western and/or Quranic schools and those who had not; and individuals who were routinely involved in modern, urban activities and others who were traditional and rural. This diverse cultural landscape provided an opportunity to untangle the cognitive, behavioral, and ideological consequences of schooling, modern life, and literacy (in general, or in the form of particular types of scripts).

Scribner and Cole (1981; Scribner, 1997) found that literacy did not have unique general consequences; instead, specific practices ("recurrent, goal-oriented sequences of activities") were associated with specific consequences, such as a certain kind of memorization (incremental) being associated with Quranic literacy; syllogistic reasoning, with English literacy; and certain kinds of verbal integration, with Vai. They concluded that the appropriate unit of analysis was not literacy, but literate practices, the "socially organized . . . use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it," practices that involve "not simply knowing how to read and write in a particular script but applying that knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (Scribner & Cole, p. 236). Extending the studies of Vygotsky and Luria, Scribner and Cole's work displays a basic sociocultural methodology (ethnography mixed with ethnographically informed tasks, analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively). Their study still stands as a clear argument for seeing literacy as situated, mediated sociocultural practices, as motivated and socially organized activity. It also set the agenda for subsequent research into literacy practices in a variety of specific sociocultural settings.

Besnier (1993) looked at literacy on Nukulaelae atoll, home to about 350 Polynesians who were multilingual, had achieved close to universal but fairly basic literacy, and had near-universal but limited education (only 5% had attended secondary school). The Nukulaelae had a nonindigenous literacy, their script introduced by Western or Western-trained Samoan missionaries. For most Nukulaelae, literacy was used for interpersonal, personal, and familial purposes. Besnier's inventory of genres included letters, telegrams, invitations to feasts, sermons, lists (especially for record keeping), genealogies, minutes of meetings, song lyrics, names and slogans woven into mats for decoration, T-shirt illustrations, and graffiti. Besnier studied the Nukulaelae as a case of incipient literacy, literacy not widely and deeply woven into practices. He explored how the Nukulaelae adopted but also adapted literacy, how literacy altered but also accommodated earlier oral and nonverbal practices, and how literacy and orality continued to interact intensely. For example, Besnier analyzes ways that the sociocultural fact of separation—travel to other islands being a long-standing practice—and the uncharacteristically powerful expressions of emotion at departures were remediated in letter writ-
ing (both in affectively charged acts of writing the night before a ship visit and in the written expression of the letters). Here was a case in which written genres were markedly more emotional than oral. In addition to documenting processes of emergent literacy in this society, Besnier makes the broader point that literacy is wrapped up in multimodal semiotic practices in which cultural resources (texts, literate practices, identities, and ideologies) are creatively and improvisationally (re)worked in current activity.

In a more complex case, Kalman (1999) studied the mediated language practices of scribes and their clients at the Plaza de Santa Domingo in Mexico City. The scribes typed documents (e.g., contracts, tax forms, school assignments, love letters, petitions, letters of application), taking roles that ranged from pure typing through forms of joint composition, all the way to the role of primary composer (translating clients’ purposes into language and form). Kalman details cases of clients, ranging from a homeless man seeking a letter to help him enter a shelter to an engineer getting a letter typed to accompany a set of technical drawings he was delivering to a firm. She explores complex negotiations over texts, genres, identities, contextualizations, and forms of participation in composing. In this particular cultural context, she was able to explore how oral practices of dictating and joint oral composition were negotiated, how talk and text interacted, and how social identities and literacies shaped participation. Kalman found that many clients with limited control over decoding and encoding written language displayed considerable familiarity with literate practices and that the scribes, though quite literate, were not guaranteed cultural respect or financial security because of that competence.

Sociocultural studies of transitions from orality to literacy (whether in individual ontogenesis or the cultural genesis of a particular group) have represented a central site for sociocultural inquiry into writing. These studies have highlighted more complex relations between orality and literacy than had been imagined, often tracing ways writing is drafted, negotiated, and received through talk as well as ways that talk (as in sermons) is partially prefabricated through writing. They have often focused on literacy practices in home and community rather than only at school or work. In short, studies in this area have confirmed and extended Scribner and Cole’s (1981) accounts of literate practice as the socially organized activity of production, distribution, reception, and use of texts tied to specific purposes in specific contexts.

Emerging Schooled Literacies

In modern societies, school has played a leading and very visible role in promoting literacy. It is widely seen as the site where children learn to read and write, and it emerged as a robust factor in cross-cultural studies of psychological functioning (Rogoff, 1981; Scribner, 1997). Yet as Heath’s (1983) classic study of literacies in three U.S. communities showed, literate practices are first encountered in home and community, and the particular form of those practices can resonate or conflict with schooled literacies. Sociocultural studies of schooling, then, have sought to describe not only how writing is used and learned in school, but also how school writing is located in larger and deeper currents of sociocultural practice.

Continuing a series of studies of writing in elementary schools, Dyson (1997) draws on Bakhtin’s and Vygotsky’s theories to explore how children appropriate voices as they form imagined worlds through play, and how play and appropriation are central to the identities and social relations of the children. Following a class of students over 2 years (second to third grade), Dyson notes that, as composers, children “were not so much meaning makers as meaning negotiators, who adopt, resist, or stretch available words” (p. 4) and who in so doing work to alter the social and ideological “state of affairs” (Voloshinov, 1973) they have encountered. For example, Dyson traces the state of affairs in the third-grade class’s Author’s Theatre, where a student writes a text or script to be acted out, under his or her direction, with classmates. Author’s Theatre texts routinely drew on media characters and plots. Dyson, for example, traces what happens as traditions of male superheroes and Greek (white) gods and goddesses (whose texts were not only being read but also watched on TV series, like Hercules) were reappropriated by an African American girl, Tina, who constructs a new superhero, Venus Tina. In text, talk, and drawings, Venus Tina is a strong black female who flies
through the air on a magical (female) horse, rescuing children in trouble, transforming mean men into nice men, and making city parks safe and peaceful. Drawing, talking, writing, diverse words, images, and stories all come together in this tale. Writing here is a mode of participation in worlds of peer group, school, and society. Looking at ways that mass media shape children’s early appropriations of literacy, Dyson emphasizes the active agency of children, seeing them as not simply being formed as cultural beings but as living culturally and engaging in critical appropriations and reconstructions of the cultural tools and artifacts they encounter.

Kamberelis (1999) offers detailed quantitative and interpretive analyses of children’s (K–second grade) appropriations of three genres (narrative, scientific report, and poem). Analyzing a number of textual features, he found that these young writers had surer knowledge of narrative genres and, across genres, a better grasp of general features than microtextual features. He also noted the marked hybrideity, especially the surprising blends of science and informational genres. In a detailed analysis of the talk and actions of two fourth graders as they dissect an owl pellet and then write up and present a report of their dissection, Kamberelis (2001) traces the hybrideity of discourse practices. Analyzing genres, footings, and power relations, Kamberelis highlights a wide variety of voices, especially the use of unframed direct quotes (“Scalpel”; “Beam me up, Scotty”) from the media. Kamberelis shows that this hybrideity not only produced a written report that both the teacher and the other students found successful, but also shifted the politics of the classroom.

Moll has explored the intersections of biliterate–bicultural educational and social contexts from a Vygotskian perspective. Contesting cultural deficit accounts of Hispanic students, Moll and Greenberg (1990) identified diverse funds of knowledge in students’ families and communities: knowledge of gardening, care of animals, car repair, music, building codes, religion, and so on. They note that these socially distributed funds are embedded in household and work activities, and that they involve specific literate and learning practices. Moll’s research has extended to re-mediating school instruction by organizing study groups (teachers and researchers) that seek to understand students’ everyday funds of knowledge and then find ways to apply that understanding to redesign instruction (Moll & Whitmore, 1993). Moll (2000) has explored the emergence of biliteracy, seeking to describe the benefits it can confer in a public climate more likely to focus on students’ deficits in the dominant code. He argues that writing is particularly valuable for children in creating imaginary worlds, worlds central to what he calls “the most important artifact created by children...themselves, the formation of their personalities” (p. 262).

Through a close, situated analysis of classroom discourse, small-group talk, and texts, Lunsford (2002) studied a summer writing program for high school students (mainly rising seniors) at a major university. The program sought to help students learn sophisticated strategies for written arguments by teaching Toulmin’s (1958) model (claim, evidence, warrant, qualifier) and the grammar of clarity (Williams, 1990), while offering rich support (lecture and small-group) for engagement with content and process. Lunsford analyzes the dialogic complexity of instructional terms even in this carefully theorized pedagogy. For example, students struggle to align Toulmin’s notion of claims (in arguments) with the notion of points (which emphasized textual organization), both of which were being actively taught in the program, but also with other concepts (topic sentence, thesis) they had encountered in English classes. Managing such dialogic complexity was no trivial issue. Lunsford finds similar complexity in the reading of students’ texts by peers and instructors, focusing particularly on the case of one student whose text acquired the reading that it was “contradictory,” perhaps in part because of particular peer responses, as well as particular ways it took up the task. In general, Lunsford’s analysis not only indicates the complexity of instruction in writing when seen as a practice, but also suggests how sociocultural analysis can identify processes that may promote or impede desired learning. Sociocultural studies of school focus on close analysis of specific classroom practices; of the talk, reading, writing, observation, and action that make up literate practices; and of the specific kinds of collaborative work school sponsors. Whether understood in terms of Vygotsky’s emphasis on how so-
talk in a sociology seminar, responding to a student's dissertation prospectus, enacted a distributed revision process, how (in the same seminar) a series of written responses and revisions across two texts (a conference paper and preliminary examination) led to (tacitly) coauthored texts that blended internally persuasive and authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981) for both the student and her professor, and how a student's paper for an American Studies seminar was linked to work in other seminars, to field research, and to experiences at home and in the community. Analysis of this last case led to research with undergraduates, graduate students, and professors to explore how writing is produced across a dispersed chain of events in varied settings. Prior and Shipka (2003) examine, for example, ways that writers, at all levels, actively selected and structured times and places for writing, chose ways of creating a particular attunement to the task (e.g., listening to certain music, drinking tea or coffee, finding a comfortable spot), sought out interactions with certain people (often friends or family not officially involved in the task) while perhaps avoiding others, and sometimes recruited earlier experiences and texts to the work at hand. As writers form and regulate worlds to regulate their own consciousness and actions, they do not just inhabit contexts, but actively produce "a lifeworld with a certain tone and feel, populated by certain people and their ideas, calibrated to a certain rhythm" (Prior & Shipka, 2003, pp. 230–231). These environment-selecting and -structuring practices highlight ways that individuals not only internalize social practices but also learn to produce them to shape their own and others' activity.

Sociocultural research on scientific and sociotechnical workplaces has highlighted complexly situated literate practices. Latour and Woolgar (1986) studied laboratory science from an anthropological, practice-oriented, pragmatic perspective. In place of abstract epistemological principles for validating knowledge, they identified a wide variety of concrete practices and artifacts as they followed scientific objects from being ambiguous phenomena (e.g., a series of spikes registered on a meter) at the laboratory bench to debatable scientific claims in technical articles, to accepted facts and objects to be traded. In particular, Latour and Woolgar traced cascading chains of inscriptions: bench notes, measurements, labels, printouts, drafts, published articles, grant applications, vitas, and so on. In a study of an early technology start-up company, Bazarman (1999) examines the heterogeneous symbolic engineering Thomas Edison engaged in at Menlo Park. He shows that making an electric light involved multiple activity systems, each with its own rhetorical situations and strategies. For example, securing patents from the U.S. government involved different kinds of work from that of securing city officials' permits for tearing up streets and laying down electrical wires or securing funding from investors to support the work of invention. Patents demanded detailed, cited, and witnessed laboratory notebooks, city permits involved expensive dinners and gifts of stock, and capitalists wanted assurance of near-term success (which for a period led Edison to fake demonstrations). Bazarman offers a stunningly complex view of the rhetorical and practical activity involved in moving from imagined invention to stabilized product. Heath and Luff (2000) analyze practices in new sociotechnical workplaces such as the operations center of the London Underground, where workers sit side by side at multimedia consoles, watching screens that bring representations of information from global networks, talking face-to-face, typing in information, and talking over phones or radios to others at distant sites. Their phenomenological analysis focuses, on the one hand, on the workers' carefully tuned attention to the gaze, bodily orientation, and quiet vocalizations (e.g., sighs) of others—other a communicative system for coordination that has deep roots in the evolutionary past of our species—and, on the other hand, on questions of how to read and act on complex computer-mediated visual displays of data.

Studies of writing in college and the workplace make clear the vast complexity of literate activity in our present society and the need for writers to continually learn new genres and textual practices. This research should inform writing instruction from kindergarten through college. For example, learning five-paragraph essay forms without learning how to analyze new genres and attune to new writing practices amounts to
learning almost nothing of what will be needed as individuals follow their own sociohistoric trajectories.

Conclusion

At this point, it would be difficult to find situated studies of writing that do not at least gesture toward some sociocultural theory or cite the many writing researchers who have drawn on sociocultural theory and methodology in their own research. In general, sociocultural theory has become increasingly tightly knit as the phenomenological emphasis on making order in situated activity links up with the cultural-historical and pragmatic emphasis on the production of mediational means, artifacts, and people as a way of understanding how culture comes to be embodied in practice. Sociocultural theories of writing have found, however, that they cannot live easily within the borders of a folk notion of writing; so studies increasingly explore more semiotically rich units (I have proposed literate activity), in which an interest in writing leads to writing and reading, talk and listening, observation and action, and feeling and thinking in the world. Likewise, understanding what interests, constraints, and affordances have been built into our increasingly intelligent writing technologies calls for careful analysis of design practices, and writing with these technologies often segue seamlessly into multimedia practices that draw more on the language of film than print (Manovich, 2001). Sociocultural theories have also found that they cannot live easily in culturally bound spaces of writing (neither the lone writer in the garret nor the isolated classroom or workplace). Writing emerges out of far-flung historical networks, and the trajectories of a particular text trace delicate paths through overgrown sociohistoric landscapes. Finally, sociocultural research on writing has made it clear that much of the literate activity of writing is implicit and learned implicitly. If these discoveries are exciting, they are also disconcerting. Studies of writing face the need to trace and understand an increasingly complex semiotic phenomenon dispersed across widening spatiotemporal networks of activity and mediated by a growing array of tools. Moreover, writing is a phenomenon that seems ever more connected to who we are and who we will become. These significant challenges for sociocultural inquiry are far from trivial, but reaching greater understanding of the ways writing technologies and practices have shaped, and are shaping, people and societies is also a task that holds great promise to mediate many of our future activities.

References


I. THEORIES AND MODELS OF WRITING


