1 Literacy practices in working life

This article aims to shed some light on the reading and writing that go on in ordinary workplaces in Sweden at the beginning of the third millennium. It will also discuss some theoretical frames and concepts that can help us understand the role of written texts, and the meaning of ‘literacy’, in today’s working life. Results from the project Literacy Practices in Working Life are then presented. The project is funded by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) 2002–2004.¹

1.1 Concepts and theories of reading and writing

For anyone interested in the role of written communication at work, the concept of ‘literacy’ seems almost inevitable. The meaning of ‘literacy’ has been heavily debated over the last few decades. Traditionally, literacy has been conceived as a rather cognitive phenomenon, connecting writing to logic and abstract thinking. Researchers in this tradition tended to treat literacy as one single, autonomous thing, stressing the skill of the individual. Terms such as ‘adult literacy’ consequently often refer to studies of *levels* of literacy among people, or to different kinds of programs aimed at remedying illiteracy or reading and writing difficulties among underprivileged groups.

The New Literacy studies challenge the social constructions of literacy, claiming that literacy can never be understood as objective and ideologically neutral (Street, 1984; Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996). In this view, every use of writing is shaped in and by its social context. Street (1984) defines literacy as “the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” (Street, 1984, p. 1). Consequently, New Literacy researchers talk about literacies, in the plural,
instead of literacy, and they are often interested in what has been called vernacular literacy, or everyday reading and writing (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Research into what is known as workplace literacy has traditionally tended to understand literacy in the autonomous, absolute way. There has been a tendency to focus on individual skills, or rather on the lack of such skills. (For a discussion of the ideological content of a concept such as ‘skill’, see Hull 1997.) The ability to read and write has often been decontextualised, which means that workers have been tested in experiments carried out in clinical environments. Here, subjects have been exposed to texts which are taken out of their contexts or even constructed for the occasion and then been asked to carry out different tasks, often within a limited period of time. Furthermore, the traditional workplace literacy framework has largely implied a one-sided focus on “blue collar” work, strictly separated from business communication or professional discourse – which have been studied by scholars with other research interests and theoretical approaches.

In this project we subscribe to the social view of ‘literacy’ as described by Hull: “…literacy is conceived as a set of social or cultural practices which are intimately bound to context” (Hull, 1997, p. 352). This is why we have chosen to talk about literacy practices in working life instead of workplace literacy. This choice also includes a methodological standpoint, where ethnography is an important source of inspiration. (For more on methodology, see below.)

1.2 Aims and focus

The project aims to explore what (and in what situations) people read and write in common occupations in Sweden today. We want to broaden as well as deepen the understanding of the significance of written discourse in modern working life.

This broadening is achieved, first, by studying occupations that have not been the focus of earlier research of this kind. Investigations using ethnographic approaches and focused on reading and writing as social practices have mainly directed their interest to academic or corporate environments, while we study non-academic occupations. Second, we broaden the view by choosing occupations that many people have and, third, we cover several sectors, different kinds of work organisations and different types of work content. As a point of departure in choosing the areas for the case studies, the three largest occupational sectors in the year 2000 were used: the manufacturing industry (800,000 people employed), trade and transport (770,000) and health care (770,000). Deepened understanding is attempted by studying reading and writing in specific situational contexts. Through case studies we hope to find the factors that affect (and generate) uses of writing on the job.
Sociologists and other researchers of working life sometimes divide occupations into groups, depending on the main content or focus of the work. Kohn & Schooler (1983, pp. 23–26) talk about three groups, where the first is primarily focused on reading or writing, the second involves working with one’s hands, using tools, using or repairing machines and the third is directed towards dealing with people. This division resembles the one made by Reich (1991), who groups the labour market into 1) “symbolic-analytic” services, 2) routine production services and 3) “in-person” services. Occupations that are largely focused on reading and writing – symbolic-analytic services – are not the primary concern of the project. However the two remaining groupings, working with things or routine services on one hand and working with people or in-person services on the other, are of importance for the discussion of our findings.

Case studies have been carried out through the summer of 2004 in the following workplaces:

- A nursing home for the elderly, where two assistant nurses were studied (Karlsson & Ledin, 2004).
- Two construction sites, where one carpenter and two concrete workers were studied (Karlsson, 2003a; 2004 Karlsson & Ledin, 2004).
- A transport company, where a truck driver was studied (Karlsson, 2003b).
- A shop, where a shop assistant was studied (Karlsson, 2004).

2 The three-step method

Our method can be described as a combination of ethnographic fieldwork, spatial semiotics and discourse analysis. It consists of three steps:

1. A shadowing study, highlighting the situational and chronological aspects of literacy.
2. A site study, highlighting the spatial conditions and aspects of literacy.
3. A text study, highlighting text patterns and relating them to the results of the shadowing study and the site study.

In the shadowing study, one individual is followed – ‘shadowed’ – during one working day. This type of observation lies somewhere between participant observation and ‘the fly on the wall’ approach, since we do not really take part

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2 Two bachelor’s degree theses have also been written in connection with the project. In one, a nursery school teacher was studied while, in the other, the focus was on IT support work.
in the work that is carried out. Neither do we try to be invisible. The observer follows the worker around, takes field notes and photographs and asks necessary questions. More regular interviews are carried out at lunch breaks or on separate occasions.

The aim of the observation is to create a rather detailed account of the working day, what tasks are being carried out, where and in what way. Since we have a special interest in the use of writing, we specifically look for events and activities where the worker reads or writes. Following Heath (1983, p. 386), we refer to each of these events as a literacy event – in our definition, every event where writing has a role, i.e. is used in some way, in reading, writing or talking about what is written.

The site study is carried out in connection with the observation, with the literacy environment in focus. This is a way of describing uses of writing in relation to the spatial conditions of work. The observer notes here where literacy events take place and looks for patterns relating types of literacy events to specific places. Questions to be asked are: In what spatial environments does the person work during the day? In which of these do literacy events take place? Where do we find texts?

The third question addresses a central aspect of the literacy environment(s) of a workplace, what we call text aggregation points. A text aggregation point is a place where texts are stored or displayed. It is reasonable to assume that the text aggregation points of a workplace correspond with the different functions texts might have.

All texts that are used by the individual worker during the observation day are collected (copied or photographed) and added to the text corpus of the project. So far, selected texts have been analysed in various ways, mainly in order to explore what seems to be occupation-specific text structures. Methods and categories from systemic-functional grammar (Halliday, 1994) and visual semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) have been used since the social semiotic framework has proved to be fruitful, both for analysing visual and linguistic meaning making and for exploring different perspectives and social positions constructed in texts.

In the following section, some of the initial results will be summarised and discussed.

3 Literacy events and environments

When observation data from the four case studies mentioned above are compared, we can say a number of things about how reading and writing can be used in different occupations.

At the nursing home, most reading is carried out in the morning in order for workers to catch up on things. Since the assistant nurses work in shifts, they
need to convey information about what happened during the night or the day, for
the next nurse to be able to follow and create continuity for the residents.
Writing is thus carried out at the end of the day in order to document and pass
information on. Reading and writing also occur during the working day in
documenting the residents’ drinks and medications.

On both construction sites, reading occurs mainly when there are problems to
be solved, but also (to a rather limited extent) to get instructions (see Figure 1 in
Appendix). The builders read much less than the assistant nurses, and write even
less. Most writing is done to document the work at the end of the day. This
documentation differs from that carried out by the nurses, who document for
each other in order to manage their daily work. The builders document for other
purposes, because quality and environmental policies force them to, or because
they need the documentation later in wage negotiations.

The truck driver both reads and writes more than the builders do, and his
literacy practices resemble those of the assistant nurses in many ways. Reading
and writing frame the working day as well as separate projects. He reads to plan
for loading and to document how he has adjusted the number of loading units as
well as how many he gets in return. He hands over documents to the clients and
they both sign them. At the end of the day, he documents his work (hours
worked, miles travelled, stops made) and the refuelling.

In the shop, reading and writing seem much more irregular, and it is more
difficult to discern projects or phases that relate to or are delimited by specific
literacy events. The shop assistant reads the weekly information letter and the
Christmas strategy when she has a moment, makes signs when needed, writes
telephone notes after phone calls, corrects receipts and documents complaints as
customers show up, and she balances the till” at the close of the day.

The literacy events can be further explored if they are related to literacy
environments and text aggregation points. At the nursing home, the literacy
events are strongly spatially organised and tied to a number of text aggregation
points. Texts with different functions are kept or displayed in separate places.
For instance, texts documenting medication and other daily routines are posted
on the inside of the cupboard door in the room of each resident. Texts with a
more reflective function, such as poems or proverbs, are displayed on a bulletin
board.

The construction sites are more temporary work environments and –
especially when it comes to the renovation of older houses – often other
people’s work environments. The construction company actually brings some of
their own environment with them: the site huts. Here we find the only stable text
aggregation point, namely the office. However, this is seldom used by the
builders, but rather by the managers and foremen. The texts that the carpenter

\footnote{She does not actually count the cash – this is done in the morning – but she operates the
balancing program in the computer and prints a page with the total sums.}
and concrete workers use are moved around as the building process progresses. Drawings and other instruction documents are often placed on the floor in the room or part of the building that is being constructed. Except for the office, there are no salient text aggregation points. It seems that texts are stored to a lesser extent than at the nursing home.

The truck driver’s work is also mobile, in the sense that he moves around during the day. The observed driver starts and finishes at one important text aggregation point, the warehouse office, where he collects and returns the papers he uses during the day. In between these two literacy events, his cab is his office. Although the cab was not originally designed for literate activities, the driver has transformed it into a well-organised text aggregation point and a place for reading and writing. Texts for different purposes are kept in different locations, and those used frequently are kept on the middle seat, which is used as a desk (see Figure 2 in Appendix). Unlike the construction workers, the driver works most of the day at or in close relation to different text aggregation points.

The shop as a literacy environment proves to be different in many ways. Most importantly, it is divided into public and backstage areas (cf. Scollon & Scollon, 2003, pp. 168–174), which results in two types of working environments, with different goals and purposes. The public area is clearly designed for the customers and for the activity of shopping. All texts displayed target the customers, who move around freely and use written signs to navigate through the store. Except for the tills, or cash registers, there are no staff-only areas in the store, although there is a small desk called the ‘power bar’ with a computer terminal and some equipment for making signs. Of the two, the tills are the more elaborate text aggregation points. Here we find files and binders, saved receipts of different kinds, service bills, complaint notes and more. At the ‘power bar’ the shop assistants sometimes read on the intranet or make signs, but no texts are stored here as it cannot be seen as a point where workers go to find a specific text.

In the backstage area, we find a different kind of literacy environment. Here, the texts are not used to guide people around. Rather, texts with different functions are stored in specific places in order to be easily found. In the backstage area we find the office, which is the workplace of the two managers. However, the shop assistants sometimes enter the office to check the status of the tills and to do the balance at the end of the day. Outside the office, each employee has a pigeon hole. Close to the lunch area, all weekly letters are displayed on a bulletin board together with other kinds of corporate information. On the door to the locker room, a long list is displayed, showing the financial goals, called the ‘budget’, for each day until Christmas (see Figure 3 in Appendix).

Of the different workplaces, the nursing home appears to be the most spatially organised one from a literacy point of view, together with the shop. In both cases, texts are not tied to individuals, and they therefore need to be stored in
ways that facilitate their use. At the nursing home, texts are more or less hidden from the residents, while at the shop, there is a public area where texts are used to guide the customers through the shop. Construction and transport work are both mobile, and texts need to be moved around. Text aggregation points are thus much more temporary, but they are still set up and used. It seems that the more collective literacy practices are and the less texts are tied to specific people, the more stable literacy environments are needed.

4 Texts

The collected texts have been analysed in various explorative ways. The first, overall question we have asked is: What kinds of texts are used (for what purposes)? To answer this, different functional typologies have been elaborated (more on this below). Another main question, guiding the more detailed analysis of different texts, is how work is represented in texts. Here we have studied expressions for time and place (chronotope), participants and processes. A third aspect is more closely related to their use and focuses on how texts (and users) interact. Examples of concepts used in such analyses are heteroglossia and re-contextualisation. (See Karlsson, 2004a, for an analysis in English comparing construction texts with texts from hobby magazines.)

Some results from the four case studies will be very briefly summarised here.

At the nursing home, we find texts for organisation, information and reflection. The texts that are used during the day are not only directly work-related. Poems and non-fiction literature are also found. The poems and proverbs are displayed on bulletin boards which the nurses have a quick glance at during the day. Books of different kinds are used to activate the residents. Two text types have been studied in more detail: the nurses’ journal and a medication list. The semantic focus here is on time and place, which are both important categories in the work organisation of the assistant nurses. Their main goal can be said to be the maintenance of continuity for the residents, and they therefore need to transfer experiences that are crucial for the residents’ social as well as medical care. The semantic category of participant is problematic in these texts, out of consideration for the integrity of the residents. When it comes to references to people and descriptions of illnesses, moods and other personal conditions, a strong tendency of heterogeneity is found in the journal. We find the voice of the medical doctor, the resident and the more neutral observer in the same text.

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4 The need to create continuity for a third party, and the way writing is used to achieve this, is also seen in the investigation of the nursery school, except that here the teacher communicates with the parents rather than with her colleagues.
At the construction site, a comparatively limited number of text types or genres were found. Since the construction workers spend time in environments which are normally used for other purposes, they also come across texts which are not directly related to their work but are still needed (such as name lists on entry phones). The most widely used text was the drawing, together with other production information papers and reinforcement specifications. In these texts, there is a strong semantic focus on objects and materials. Things are specified according to type, quality and measurements. Buildings and rooms are described with a focus on their attributes, i.e. walls, doors and windows. The category of time is implicit, although the order in which things need to be done is crucial for the work. The texts are ‘homoglossic’ rather than heteroglossic, and one participant’s perspective (the architect’s) dominates. Thus, a large amount of re-contextualisation is required from the builders. (See Karlsson, 2004a.)

In the truck, we found texts for planning and documentation. This is similar to the texts at the nursing home, but in the transport study the same texts are used for both purposes. They change their functions as they are used by the driver. In these texts we see a semantic focus on objects, as in the construction texts. But here, the objects are seen from different perspectives in different texts – as loading units and goods with different liability to damage in the cargo information and the waybill, as food in the invoice. The texts are ‘open’, i.e. made to be modified. This is expressed by blank spaces and columns, sometimes with dotted lines.

The texts in the shop can be divided into policy texts and more instrumental working texts. Policy texts were also found at the other workplaces, but they were not used, merely displayed on bulletin boards or stored in binders. In the shop, the ‘weekly letter’ from the head office is actually read. Other policy texts are displayed in very prominent places, on the door that leads into the shop from the stockroom or on the inside of the door to the bathroom. Lots of little notes also distinguish the text corpus from the shop from the others. We find different semantic foci in different texts. The instrumental work texts (receipts, service bills and signs) focus on names (people and brands) and value (price). Policy texts focus on processes. The policy texts are highly heteroglossic and create a number of identities for the staff relative to both the customers and the company.

To sum up, we find both similarities and differences between the texts that are used in the workplaces studied. Functionally, we find texts for planning and documenting in all the case studies, but we also find texts with functions that seem more or less unique to the specific tasks they are used to fulfil. We find texts with consistent semantic foci and a homogeneous perspective, which need re-contextualisation in order to function in different situations, but also texts that shift semantic focus and overall meaning during the day as well as texts with many voices that reflect the many roles and identities that their users take on. Semantically, some texts (especially in the construction and transport study) focus on objects and classifications, while others (mainly at the nursing home,
but also in transport) focus on time and place. Texts that focus on processes and participants – i.e. the prototypical components of a narrative – are rarer, although they do occur. One example is the journal and the poems at the nursing home. Another is the ‘weekly letter’ in the shop. All these are as yet preliminary observations, which need to be further explored in future text studies.

5 Discussion

What factors in work content and work organisation might generate (different) use(s) of writing? This is a question that we need to address in order to understand the results of the observations: the differences as well as the similarities. For a start, we can consider the ways the working days are organised in the different occupations. What factors govern what is to be done when?

At the nursing home, the main organising principle is the routines of the residents: getting up, getting dressed, eating, drinking, taking medications and so forth. The day, starting in the morning and ending in the evening, is thus the main unit, and the different phases follow the basic needs of humans during this period. However, since the assistants work in shifts, the work shift is also a relevant unit. The nurse who works the night shift probably starts his or her workday by reading the journal, just like those working the day shift.

At the construction site, the day – defined by hours – is a less important unit, even though the builders who work outside are dependent on daylight. The main organising principle is instead the material production unit (the wall, the room, the floor), which in turn is related to a larger process including the work of others (electricians, painters). The supply of materials is also a crucial factor. When there are no iron bars, no reinforcement can be done. The production unit of course differs from a human being in many ways. Most importantly, in this perspective it does not need continuity and maintenance in the same way. Perhaps this is the reason why the builders document their different phases to a much lesser extent than the nurses do. They document in writing when much larger units are finished, and they do not do the documentation for themselves but because of regulations and administrative routines.

In the activity of transport, the work is governed largely by two principles: geographical conditions and the type of cargo. Geography is directly mirrored in the order of loading and the spatial arrangements in the car. Of course, the driver also has to decide what is most convenient route to take. Different types of cargo must also be loaded in different orders, since some goods need to be in cold storage as long as possible while others should be unloaded as soon as possible. Each delivery is regulated by the need for checking. The customer checks the number of units delivered and the driver checks the number of units in return. It is difficult to describe the work of the driver as principally thing- or people-oriented, but the concern for material goods and spatial conditions suggests a
thing-focus. The theme of most of the texts is also things of different kinds. The amount of reading and writing, however, is much greater than in construction, which is also thing-oriented. This can probably be explained by the relative freedom ascribed to the driver in his work. Work organisation in terms of more or less centralised power also seems to influence how writing is used.

The work in the shop is framed by opening and closing, even though no single shop assistant works the whole time the shop is opened. Between these limits, work organisation seems vague and fluid to the observer. We find no discernible phases or projects. Rather, there is a constant need to fill up boxes and stands, and the shop assistants are continuously subjected to the various needs of customers. If we instead consider their degree of freedom, as compared to that of the truck driver, we find that the shop work is highly centrally organised and that the planning and documentation tasks, which generate literacy events for the truck driver, are elevated to a higher level. This may explain why the shop assistant writes very little, apart from more or less personal memo notes. The reading, which is more frequent, is not needed for making choices about what to do, but can be seen as part of ongoing corporate identity work, where the company and the worker become one.

Gee, Hull & Lankshear (1996) write about how the ‘new capitalism’ has transformed the labour market. Whereas the old capitalism could be characterised by two groups of employees – low-level workers hired ‘from the neck down’ and middle managers – the new capitalism creates a labour market with fewer middle managers and thus a new type of worker, mainly created though what Gee, Hull & Lankshear call Discourse with a capital D. In Discourse, the company makes its goals and values explicit and part of the work.

Along with more local organisation principles and factors such as different units of production and the main object of work (things or people), more global aspects of the work order seem highly relevant for a discussion of the results of the project. In the new work order, such as has been described by Gee, Hull & Lankshear, discourse (or Discourse) plays new and increasingly important roles in global and local management and in the more individual identity-making among workers. No doubt, written texts are crucial in these processes. It will

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5 Gee, Hull & Lankshear use Discourse with a capital D “to distinguish it from ‘discourse’, which means ‘a stretch of spoken or written language’ or ‘language in use’. (…) A Discourse is composed of ways of talking, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects, in particular settings and at specific times, so as to display or to recognise a particular social identity.” (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996, p. 10.)
clearly be fruitful to further explore these aspects, among others, in text analyses of various kinds, both comparative – where texts from different occupations are juxtaposed – and more in-depth, where specific texts are analysed and related to situational and cultural contexts.

Thus far, based mainly on observation data, we suggest that a description of what it means to be literate in today’s working life includes the following components:

• the ability to re-contextualise texts (and make them relevant to specific tasks)

• the insight that texts, when used, often change functions and meanings

• the ability to change the function and meaning of certain texts

• the ability to understand and to use visually organised texts

• the insight that the location of texts contributes to their meaning

• if required, active participation in the discursive creation of the organisation, i.e. using texts to become a ‘partner’.

References


Appendix

Figure 1. One of the concrete workers reading the drawing

Figure 2. The truck driver, writing in his cab

Figure 3. A list of the ‘budget’ for each day until Christmas, displayed on the door to the locker room