

What are Writing Practices? Unpacking writing skills

Literacy researchers Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981), through their landmark study of writing in the Vai culture, theorized the act of writing within a *practice* framework. Their concept of *practice* illuminated how understanding the nature of writing requires situating it within the recurrent and goal-directed writing activities of the culture practicing it. Such an investigative and conceptual move served as a response to prevailing paradigms of writing's relationship to cognition and culture, which attempted to extrapolate a thin theory of literacy that universalized writing.

In other words, writing is more than speech without context, and it's also more than merely a technical, generalizable skill. Instead, writing has dynamic, recurrent contexts, and researchers need better ways to understand how individuals integrate writing acts within their cultural contexts. This insight should not surprise many of you in this class who study and practice technical communication. As list 3 exemplifies, the person who wrote it did so with the actual space in mind, so they could more efficiently shop for their groceries. In effect, the grocery list became much more user-friendly over time.

What I want you to take away from this handout, (and this class!), is how Scribner and Cole's conceptual framework will help you explain and study how an individual's writing activity utilizes particular *writing technologies* and *culturally-shared knowledge and sign systems* that have been accumulating over time to become culturally important or appropriate to produce *recurrent, goal-directed skills*. In short, you cannot fully understand the consequences of a particular literacy (its skills) without first identifying these properties of it, and how it is taken up by individuals *in situ* (cf. Scribner & Cole, p. 237).

Writing practices – the cultural knowledge, material technology, and skills binding a writing task – are always historically-shaped, socially-packaged, yet manifest in diverse context-specific ways. Here are some specific excerpts from Scribner and Cole's book, which may prove useful to you:

- By practice we mean a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge. We use the term 'skill' to refer to the coordinated sets of actions involved in applying this knowledge in particular settings. A practice, then, consists of three components: technology, knowledge, and skills. (p. 236)

- The notion of practice guides the way we seek to understand literacy. Instead of focusing exclusively on the technology of a writing system and its reputed consequences ('alphabetic literacy fosters abstraction,' for example), we approach literacy as a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it. (p. 236)
- All literacy practices we have described among the Vai may be analyzed in this way. We discover that all, even the most rudimentary (keeping a family album), involve many different types of knowledge and multiple sets of skills. (p. 237)
- But as our conceptual model implies and our evidence confirms, cognitive skills, no less than perceptual or motor or linguistic skills, are intimately bound up with the nature of practices that require them. Thus, in order to identify the consequences of literacy, we need to conduct such an analysis, we need to understand the larger social system that generates certain kinds of practices (and not others) and poses particular tasks for these practices (and not others). From this perspective, inquiries into the cognitive consequences of literacy are inquiries into the impact of socially organized practices in other domains (trade, agriculture) on practices involving writing (keeping lists of sales, exchanging goods by letter). (p. 237)

References

Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.