15 Access to Written Culture: Social Participation and Appropriation of Knowledge in Everyday Reading and Writing Events

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This paper looks at the influence of access to the social practices on which attaining literacy is dependent. The paper begins with the story of a young woman who only had two years of schooling, Carolina, the limited access to literate materials with which she grew up, and the social motivations which pushed her to achieve literacy in adulthood. Then a sociocultural discussion of the conceptual relationships among the appropriation of, participation in, and access to social practices and literate materials is presented. In the third section, the investigative methods used to contextualize the example that follows are described. The fourth section is a case study of Ana, a woman who lives in one of the communities studied, and her journey to access, participate in, and appropriate the literate materials available to her as a part of her social context. In the final section, the results of this work and its implications for research on community access to literate materials are discussed in order to make the recommendation that to better understand the distribution of reading and writing resources in a social context, it is necessary to develop a research agenda that takes a closer look at learning to read and write in the social world.

I just learned about the thermometer. Because I would look and say, "Well, how is my son?" I told [the nurse] 'Gustavo had a high fever.' 'What was it?' 'It's very important for you to know how high it was.' She told me, 'Look, here, you can take this thermometer.' What I still need to buy, but they say it's very expensive, is a monitor, so I can check his blood pressure.

– Carolina, 36 years old

As a little girl, Carolina attended school for only a couple of years and learned very little about reading and writing.[1] When one of her children was diagnosed with chronic renal insufficiency and doctors identified him as a candidate for a renal transplant, Carolina began an intensive learning process concerning renal physiology, procedures, dialysis care, and asepsis as well as medicine administration. The public hospital offered her courses to help her understand her son's health condition, the risks associated with a transplant, and the care he would need. To properly care for her child, Carolina learned how to read instructions, verify medicines, and complete specific procedures, such as reading the thermometer, monitoring mobile dialysis equipment, and regulating intravenous fluids. She successfully cared for her child because she was surrounded by people who were knowledgeable about her son's health condition and who offered her the support she needed as she learned how to use medical equipment, administer his medication, and evaluate his symptoms.

Accessing social practices depends, in large part, on the possibility of participating in them with the support of people who know about and utilize them on a regular basis. For this reason, this article examines the concept of access to social practices from the perspective of sociocultural theory and presents a case study analysis to illustrate the analytical possibilities of the concepts of *appropriation, participation, and access*. Specifically, this work explores access to writing as a social process where interaction among people is a necessary condition for learning to read and write. Additionally, it takes a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes literacy (*alfabetización*) as something more than the learning of rudimentary reading and writing practices; to be literate (*alfabetizado*) refers to people who use written language to participate in the social world. In this way, to become literate (*alfabetizarse*) means learning to navigate written language—genres, discourses, meanings, words, and letters—in a manner that is deliberate and intentional to participate in events that are culturally valued and to relate with others (Dyson, 1997; Heath, 1983).

First, it is important to establish the difference between the material conditions related to reading and writing practices—the *availability* of written culture —and the social conditions required to make use of and appropriate reading and writing practices—the *access* to written culture. Both terms are used to distinguish the distribution of the materials pertaining to written

language from the social processes underlying their appropriation, dissemination, and use. *Availability* refers to the physical presence of printed materials and the infrastructure to distribute them (libraries, bookstores, magazines, newspapers, post offices, etc.) while *access* refers to the opportunities available to participate in events related to written language (situations when the person positions themselves in front of other readers and writers) to learn to read and write (Kalman, 2004). The mere presence of books in a library, for example, does not promote reading; it is the circulation and use of books among readers that promotes reading. To think about access to reading, it is necessary to comprehend what encourages users to visit libraries, to learn about the conversations between the librarian and the users, and understand what happens amidst bookshelves and reading tables. In this way, we can talk informedly about access to written language in the context of a library. Similarly, the availability of a literacy program that is open to anyone in the community suggests merely a physical presence. Access to reading and writing, however, involves what happens during study sessions, the significance of the activities, the relationships among participants, the interpretative options for texts, and the ways in which individuals appropriate written language (Andrade et al., 2000; Chartier, 1997; Kalman, 2004; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Soifer et al., 1990).

This conceptualization assumes that the availability of printed materials influences the development of opportunities to access reading and writing practices and vice versa; however, it also assumes that the physical presence of printed materials is not sufficient to disseminate written culture. In the same way, schools are often perceived as privileged spaces in which to access reading and writing, but they are not the only places where access to literate materials occurs. For that reason, it is important to recognize other contexts where reading and writing are used in communicative situations, considering them as places for learning these skills. Access to written language occurs not only in formal education settings but also in everyday use. In all communities, spaces exist where reading and writing are communicative activities interconnected to day-to-day social practices. In these spaces, there are expectations for who reads, who writes, and how and when one engages in these practices. Moreover, it is possible to find writing practices long-established in these communities as well as newer writing practices which foreshadow emerging uses of written language (Kalman, 2004).

This work is divided into four sections: the first section includes a theoretical discussion with the goal of understanding the conceptual relationship among appropriation, participation, and access; the second section briefly describes the investigative methods used to contextualize the example that

follows; the third section is a case study of Ana, a woman who lives in one of the communities studied; and the final section, via the conclusion, presents a discussion of the many issues raised and their implications for research on community access to literate materials.

Access to Writing: A Sociocultural Perspective

A sociocultural perspective helps us understand the relationship between human activity in the social world and the processes embedded in the appropriation of social practices. According to Wertsch (1991, p. 6) "the basic goal of a sociocultural approach to mind is to create an account of human mental processes that recognizes the essential relationship between these processes and their cultural, historical, and institutional settings." While classical theories propose that the individual mind can dominate cognitive processes through internalization and manipulation of structures, sociocultural theory situates learning processes in the context of participation in social activities while emphasizing the construction of knowledge mediated by the different perspectives, knowledge, and abilities that participants bring with them to interactional events. Literacy (*alfabetización*) is an excellent example because it involves an individual's different related levels of cognitive processes, cultural technology, and social instructions where different forms of reading and writing are used and developed (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990).

Sociocultural studies of literacy generally seek to describe and explain phenomena related to written language practices in specific situations, the learning processes and appropriation of reading and writing, the historical transformation of using written language, and the relationship between writing and society. In all of this, an emphasis is placed on debates related to power relations, literacy discourse ideologies, and the social distribution of written language. One of the most relevant findings in recent scholarship is an analysis of the differences in the various uses of reading and writing, which are linked to the particularities of the context, the purpose, the intended effects, the readers' position in relation to other readers, and the ideas and meanings that guide the participation. In this manner, the concepts which undergird written language practices consider the social uses of reading and writing as well as people's perceptions of these practices (Barton & Ivanic, 1991; Besnier, 1995; Canieso-Doronila, 1996; Ferdman et al., 1994; Kalman, 1999, 2001, 2004; McDermott & Tybor, 1995; Moss, 1994; Street, 1993, 1995; Stromquist, 1997; Wagner, 1993).

Within the current scholarship, there are several studies about written culture that have been carried out in Mexico. Gloria Hernández (2003), for

example, has studied writing practices among adolescents where marginalized writing practices, such as graffiti and tags or "bombas," which are used to identify gang members. Farr (1994) and Vargas (2000) have investigated writing and reading appropriation within immigrant communities emphasizing the importance of letters. Elsie Rockwell (1992) centers her analysis on the links between orality and writing in the narrative practices of a rural area, highlighting how writing influences oral interaction and is used as a resource for negotiations and controversy.

Discussions about the plurality of forms, uses, practices, purposes, and beliefs about writing focuses on the organization of reading and writing as social activities. The analysis delineates different opportunities to participate within these social activities as well as diverse intervention modalities that readers and writers construct. This interest in analyzing characteristics and complexities resides in comprehending the importance of the multiplicities of written language and the processes that lead to the appropriation, distribution, and placement within the broader organization of human social activities.

In schools, teachers organize activities for the teaching and learning of written language. In contrast, reading and writing events that emerge in daily life often have communicative purposes and for this reason, they are important contexts for the appropriation of a variety of uses of written culture. It is through participation in these events that an individual learns non-school related uses of reading and writing. As a theoretical notion, participation refers to the process of intervening in a social activity, in addition to the relationships established between different individuals. In this manner, the significance of actions encompasses both the actions of the actors in social contexts and the connections between them; participation is intertwined with the context insofar as it denotes the various ways of intervening in a specific situation and, at the same time, in its construction. These two concepts, context and participation, are suggestive theoretical tools for understanding access to written language and some aspects of its appropriation (see Dyson, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; McDermott & Tybor, 1995; Street, 1993; Wenger, 1998).

Studies published by sociolinguists like Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1984), Gumperz and Hymes (1986), Cook-Gumperz (1986), Duranti (1992), Heath (1983), and Saville-Troike (1982) offer substantial insights with which to comprehend how reading and writing are carried out in specific interactive social contexts and how to analyze different forms of participation. They argue that, in collective situations, various participants contribute knowledge and awareness, use cultural, material and mental tools, and collaborate, in one way or another, to achieve a communicative goal where written language plays a central role.

From this perspective, it is through interaction that a context is built, understood as the specific circumstances that result from the dynamic interaction between participants in a communicative situation. The fundamental concern underlying the study of interventions in reading and writing events emerges from the interest in understanding them as social practices more so than a conjunction of discrete skills that center on the mechanical manipulation of isolated elements in a text. Instead, a series of questions arises regarding who reads and writes, when they do so, and what their motives or purposes are. How are readers and writers defined in relation to texts? Why do they read and write? What are they in search of when they do so? What are the institutional constraints that govern their reading and writing? How do they read and write? What are the social and cognitive processes that define their practices? (Resnick, 1990).

In communicative events that involve reading and writing, there emerge opportunities to access written language. These events illustrate how social life shapes reading and writing and, in turn, how reading and writing shape social life. Similarly, access depends on the particularities of reading and writing practices discovered through events; when participating in the use of written language, nuances are revealed, and the processes of meaning construction are distinguished; knowledge circulates, the use of technologies is demonstrated, and skills, information, and language resources flow.

Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that social practices are composed of peripheral and substantial activities. Through gradual engagement, the apprentice gets closer to the nucleus of an activity and fully appropriates the practices. In this type of analysis, the focal point is the tension that exists between social agents and cultural tools (Wertsch, 1998). Until now, an important part of these studies has focused on how the social actor accepts these tools and learns how to use them. However, Wenger (1998) cautiously points out participation is not synonymous with collaboration: these relations can be troubled, harmonious, intimate, political, cooperative, or competitive.[2]

Thus, access to written culture is constructed within an interactive context which makes appropriation possible. Vygotsky's (1978) theory emphasized that participation in social activities mediates knowledge development. Through interaction with others, the apprentice gains access to social practices and

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2   Wertsch (1998, p. 144) also highlights the complexity of intersubjective relations: "Cultural tools are not always facilitators of mediated action, and agents do not invariably accept and use them; rather, an agent's stance toward a mediational means is characterized by resistance or even outright rejection. Indeed, in certain settings this may be the rule rather than the exception. Resistance and rejection still constitute a relationship between agent and mediational means …, they still may have a major impact on the development of the agent."

internalizes external social processes as an organic component of the practice. In this sense, learning occurs, first, on the level of social experience mediated by cultural symbolic systems, particularly human language, and second, on the level of individual cognition (Hicks, 1996).[3] In the learning process, the apprentice appropriates the interactive process in order to extend the knowledge to social interactive participation within the intersubjective space; this is a constitutive part of intrasubjective understanding (Cazden, 1996; Hicks 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1991).

Language (oral and written) has a central role in this conceptualization of learning and Vygotsky considers it one of the most powerful cultural tools. Hicks (1996) highlights that the movement from the exterior to the interior implies an active transformation process and not a mechanical copy of the experience, as a part of the process of construction of thought or interior voice. As the social actor internalizes the social discourse, they reorient it toward their own experiences and purposes.

For Bakhtin (1981), learning implies the appropriation of discourses, that is, the process of making other people's words one's own. He posits that language always belongs, even partially, to others:

> It [the word] becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language…, but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (pp. 293-94).

This author's theory highlights the dialogic nature of human thought by noting that "for the individual consciousness, [language] lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). For this reason, one of the premises in sociocultural theory is that individual thought and knowledge are also social as they are products appropriated from diverse discourse forms and shared experiences filled with the meanings and statements from others. Hicks (1996, p. 107) observes that

> Whereas in Vygotsky's writing *internalization* emerges as a central theoretical construct, a process by which developmental

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3   Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) wrote that each aspect of development appears two times: "first, at the social level and then at the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then within the individual (intrapsychological)."

change occurs, in Bakhtin's work *appropriation* emerges as a similarly important construct. However, appropriation for Bakhtin entails something more along the lines of conversation, entailing active response. As the individual speaker-thinker engages in activity that involves the discourses of her culture, she also forms a dialogic response to those discourses. Individual thinking, therefore, exists on this rather fluid boundary between the self and the other, between social discourses and one's active response to them. Appropriation engenders a dialogic form of consciousness…; the individual constructs new forms of response at the same time that she appropriates the discourses of her social world.

The process of appropriation, then, is also intersubjective: in the acquisition of literacy, the knowledge and the use of cultural written practices are constructed via interaction with other readers and writers in situations where oral language is key to achieve closeness to reading, writing and their eventual understanding. The acts of reading and writing occur in socially organized contexts where written language is a necessary tool to achieve communicative purposes. In Bakhtin's theory, appropriation is the subject's response to social interaction and not a mechanical reproduction of it: it's the product of an active mind that reconstructs and creates meaning of events from a subjective history and position.

Chartier (1997, p. 89) suggests that to understand appropriation one must concentrate on concrete conditions and processes as appropriation is the result of multiple uses and ways of approaching texts, including their placement within the original social and institutional demands that gave rise to their creation. In accordance with this suggestion, I present the following excerpt from an observation to illustrate the concepts of participation, access, and appropriation as well as the relationship among them:[4]

It was 10:00 in the morning and Beatriz, the volunteer instructor, had not arrived yet. The six participants had entered the classroom and they sat in chairs surrounding the table, they greeted each other and chatted as they waited. Five, ten, fifteen minutes pass until finally at 10:20, Beatriz arrives. She says hello quickly and starts having one-on-one conversations with each of the women. With the first one, she stops for a

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4   Observations carried out during a literacy group session with elderly participants in an urban area west of Mexico City.

moment to look over her exercise book and later assigns the task from the following exercise on another page and gives her a brief explanation. She then moves to the next woman and goes through the same process. While she is with one woman, the rest waits or talks with each other. One of the women, sitting near me, takes out of her purse printed pages of a simplified version of the first books from the Old Testament and tells her neighbor that she was reading "my Ten Commandments, chapter VIII on Heuristics and Analogy of faith." She shows the text and discusses a bit on what it says. Another woman tries to resolve some of the problems in the math book but becomes distracted and begins talking with her neighbor who is also passively waiting for the instructor to review her homework and assign a new page. The women who are reading the Ten Commandments continue commenting on it and the owner of the text places it near her neighbor so they can read it together.

Another woman, to my right, waits for the instructor without doing anything. After almost 20 minutes since the class started, the instructor meets with her and assigns a page with problems. She asks about how to resolve them. One of the women from the "Ten Commandments" now is without a task and yawns. The instructor runs to help another participant.

Beatriz, the instructor, now approaches the woman sitting to my right and assigns a Spanish exercise. An excerpt of the exercise is as follows:[5]

> **For each sentence, select an appropriate synonym from the list. Check for agreement between words. Note the example.**
>
> 1. Lupe liked _____ flowers.
>   *red*
>
> 2. When I was _____ I had fun at the carnival.
>   *a little girl*
>
> 3. On All Saints' Day, we went to the _____ to take marigold flowers.
>   *graveyard*
>
> *(An example and a list of synonyms were given)*

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5   Only a fragment from page 153 of the textbook is reproduced (INEA-SEP, 1994).

The instructions from the book signal that the user should write the synonym to the word located under the line. For example, in the first line, *red* is synonymous with *crimson*; in the second line they should write *child* as a synonym to *little girl*. The woman was unsure about what to do. She reads with much difficulty the word *red*. Finally, she begins pronouncing each letter /r/ /e/ and ends up copying it on the line. She proceeds to the next sentence but doesn't know how to solve it. She needs help from the instructor and waits several minutes until she has her attention. Beatriz reads the phrase and the instructions out loud and tells her, "just write there, *child*, *child*." She leaves the participant and proceeds to help another. The woman copies *child* and later for the third sentence, she copies, with difficulty, *graveyard*, taking about an entire minute.

While brief, this example allows us to put into action several of the theoretical points developed previously. The women, once gathered in class, wait for their instructor's arrival to begin learning activities. Once the instructor arrives, all of the students (with the exception of one) wait for Beatriz to visit with them one-on-one, to revise their homework (if applicable) and to assign a new activity. For logistical reasons, Beatriz cannot dedicate much time to each of her students; she is barely able to provide a quick explanation, indicate what needs to be done, before proceeding with the next student.

In this description of the study session, there are two small reading and writing events taking place. In one, two women read and discuss together a simplified version of the Bible. They begin by commenting on the "Ten Commandments" and end with reading and pointing out the text together. In the other, one of the participants struggles to complete a grammatical exercise but does not understand the instructions very well nor the purpose. The instructor, due to the speed with which she must execute her work, also does not catch nor understand the purpose of the exercise. Thus, an attempt to expand the user's vocabulary turns into a copying exercise where reading the full sentence becomes unnecessary. In this case, the significance of the text is limited to the procedures asked of the student: the instructional materials, through their directions, isolate the lexical aspect, while the instructor gave it meaning through mechanical and exact reproduction.

In the case of biblical text reading, the participants are the ones who define the activity. While it was not possible to capture their conversation, they looked engaged and interested as they talked, flipped through the text, pointed out, and placed it in such a way where they could share it. The owner gave her peer access to the text through conversation and shared reading. Both intervened equally as participants, exchanging knowledge, discussing nuances, signaling written excerpts, and reading together. In this case, the construction

process of meaning-making centered on the text and what each participant could interpret from it according to their own readings and knowledge of the religion more than from the fragmentation or manipulation of some parts of the language.

In the previously described event where the teacher was in charge, the asymmetry between the participants is evident: the woman waits for the instructor to instruct which activity she will complete and later, when she encounters difficulties resolving the problem, she needs the instructor again. Through this exercise, the woman accesses a version of written language that is different from the readers of the "Ten Commandments;" in this case, written language is an objective that is manipulated for specific pedagogic ends that result in its fragmentation to isolate the use of nouns and synonyms. Apparently, due to her scarce knowledge or familiarity with the exercise, the student depended on the instructor to resolve it; and the instructor, due to lack of time (or understanding) did not respond to her students' questions and resorted to copying as the writing activity.

Focusing on the tensions between the agents and the cultural tools allows us to see the forms of intervention, the accessibility of written language, the relationships among participants, and the different ways of approaching and resolving reading and writing situations. With this stark example it is not possible to know with certainty the specific appropriation of each participant, but we can speculate that the readers of the "Ten Commandments" experimented with reading in a very different way than the woman with the exercises book. Without a doubt, the differences are highlighted in relation to the dependence or independence of the readers; the use of the materials; the purpose of the activities and ways of resolving them. Considering that it is the experience with the materials and benefits of interacting with other readers and writers where the construction of knowledge about the culture of writing occurs, it is valid to assume that the participants' learning was different and that they appropriated distinct versions of written culture.

Brief Description of the Project

The information and data used in this study is from a series of group studies from the Instituto Nacional de Educación para los Adultos (INEA, *National Institute of Adult Education)* in a place that I will call Aguazul in the community of Santa María. This work began as a basic research project with the goal of learning about written language practices in a semi-urban community in Mexico City. My intention was to explore from there the different social spaces where reading and writing happen. I immersed myself in the community

by forming connections with the instructor with the goal of meeting some of the women in the group and through them, gaining access to and learning about different aspects and members of the local community. My presence was justified as support to the instructor from INEA; I was there to assist her with the work of the group.[6]

In 1998 and part of 1999, almost every week, I attended the meetings and met with the women in the group for between two and three hours. I observed their classes, talked with them, and assisted the instructor as needed.[7] Through these interactions, the women in the group and I developed a friendly and trusting relationship. They called me "maestra" (teacher) and with a sense of trust, they showed me the work they developed in the class. They also invited me over to their houses to have lunch as well as take part in their parties and celebrations.

During this time, six of the women participated in the sessions, but only four of them attended on a regular basis. By the time I began my visits, they had already been meeting, with some regularity, for a span of 18 months. Their efforts to learn to read and write had been repeatedly frustrated, in part due to the continual turnover of instructors; an instructor would visit, help them for one or two months, and then disappear. Each time a volunteer would abandon them, the INEA would take weeks and at times months to send another volunteer instructor. When a new instructor finally arrived, they would start all over again from the beginning by teaching the names of the letters, how to trace them, how to arrange them together to form direct syllables (ba, be, bi, bo, bu) and how to read typical sentences intended to decode syllables ("A big bird boiled a banana"). Previous to my participation in the group, four different instructors had joined the group and at times the interval of time between one and another was four months.

The age of the participants was between 30 to 55 years old. Their years of previous schooling also varied; however, in general terms, there were two

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6   In the study groups organized and supported by INEA instructors are volunteers. If they oversee literacy groups, they must have at least six years of schooling; if they support people in their primary or secondary studies, they must have at least nine years of schooling. The volunteers do not have any formal training to teach, not even as community educators, nor do they receive regular guidance from INEA. They arrive to the groups to achieve their work as best as possible; on occasion, they attend meetings where general information about new orientations or a change in curriculum is provided. INEA also does not own or provide physical spaces for classes to take place; this depends on the community members who can lend a room, a patio, a hallway, or any other appropriate space.

7   The recording of data through these visits consisted of observation notes, transcription of the audio recordings in the classes, the gathering of handwritten and printed materials, as well as photographs.

groups: those who lacked schooling or attended school for one year and those who attended school for more than three years. When this study group started, some participants were unable to write their name and others could but did not know the different letters of the alphabet. There were two women who, despite having precarious prior schooling, were able—according to them—to spell and write simple texts. Two of them would sell products from a catalog and had to register their sales and complete order forms. All the women, without exception, possessed knowledge about some reading and writing uses and used written language by themselves or with the help of a mediator (Kalman, 1999).

An important indicator of the women's economic situation was their domestic economy. Their income was rather limited, and they had to make do with little money. They needed to be cautious with their expenses: in fact, at the start of the group, not everyone had pencils and notebooks, and they did not have the resources to purchase them. The head of the family—the husband, if there was one—usually earned a minimum wage as a salesperson or in some cases, had two jobs, as a construction worker or driver. Some of the women complemented the household income with small businesses (vegetable stands, small stores, catalog sales, knitting sweaters or sewing clothes to sell); others depended on the monetary income their husbands or children would send from working in the United States of America.

"I Knew How to Write Them, Crooked, But I Wrote Them": The Appropriation of Written Practices in Daily Contexts

The protagonist of this case study is Ana, a resident of Aguazul, a community that surrounds Carolina's village—the woman described in the beginning of this article. In her native Veracruz, as a little girl, Ana never attended school as her father believed this activity was only intended for men; according to him, women who attended school inevitably ended up with problems. Thus, Ana considered herself foreign to the uses of written language and to schooled individuals.

When she built up the courage to talk, she confessed timidly, that she could follow instructions found in knitting magazines, review her children's report cards, and write lists to purchase merchandise for her little store. Via postal mail, she received and recognized the formatting of public services bills and commercial advertisements and in her house she had a special place where she stored important documents. She was also capable of interpreting posters and other announcements located on walls around her neighborhood.

In her daily life, Ana demonstrates a series of highly subtle and meticulously crafted written language practices, almost invisible to an untrained eye. Evidently, her reading and writing practices did not align with the majority of the clear and expected signs of a literate person, such as reading the newspaper, producing and interpreting documents in professional contexts, regular reception and sending of correspondence, and reading of literary works like novels, stories, and poetry. However, she is fully capable of responding to the demands posed by the texts she encounters in her everyday life. Throughout the years, little by little, reading and writing moved into her life, occupying small niches or activities where written words gain social relevance and meaning.

The following paragraphs present situations related to written culture that Ana encountered and illustrate the different forms of social interaction in which she participated. With each one, I seek to emphasize the access to written culture (the opportunity to learn the uses and nuances of writing, of approaching to reading and writing, reading and writing with others, as well as the circulation and fluidity of knowledge, information, and resources) and to infer some of the aspects related to its appropriation, especially those related to the conditions and processes of meaning-making revealed in its use. I draw on excerpts from the records elaborated on during the visits with the study group or from the interviews I conducted. I present her words in a textual manner while adjusting transcriptions only to facilitate reading. In the codification of interactions, I only left what was strictly necessary while editing irrelevant parts noting the absence with ellipsis … and eliminating filler words ("Um" and "like," etc.).[8]

Wenger (1998) argued that learning is the result of personal trajectories from different social situations, resulting in personal differences in learning development. The examples noted from Ana's life do not constitute her complete life trajectory as many experiences were omitted; however, a couple of aspects from her childhood are noted in relation to school and important life experiences are explored between 1995-1998.

Ana grew up in a rural community where from an early age, she began to participate in domestic chores. Her work was hard, money scarce, and her family's well-being depended on all of their family members contributing to the household. According to Ana, her parents valued family-related work rather than a formal education and believed that "those who attended school only wasted their time." In her town, girls did not typically attend school because parents believed they would become lazy. Barbara, Ana's niece and a

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8   For the extension of syllables I used double colon (::); ellipsis in parentheses to signal omissions of phrases or repetitive commentary or irrelevant; and brackets to clarify ([ ]).

participant in the group, often received this message from parents: "you only go to school to do who knows what. It's better for you to do this or that instead of learning meaningless things."

As an adult, Ana wishes for her children to have opportunities to attend school and believes that a formal education could provide a better life. She shares that she sends her children to school to

> be better than us, go, because we didn't have schooling, we didn't have the tools to defend ourselves. I tell my children, "if you don't take advantage of what is given to you … it's on you." I tell them, "we wish we would have been told 'homework! Sons, what did you do or what will you do?'" But, no, not this … I tell my children, "you, you protest, you even talk back to us." I tell them, "you should have grown up in the times we grew up, we couldn't even make eye contact. If they gave us an order and we would get up, and look them in their eyes, oh man! [they'd hit us] with whatever object. Okay, what are you looking at? Walk!" And like that.

For Ana, the decision to not be sent to school was a part of the hard life she endured where children lived in fear of their parents who exercised their authority with intransigence and violence. Ana wished to distance herself from her town and on various occasions her father owed money and would send her to work in the city to assist the family with economic hardships. This did not worry Ana because she preferred domestic labor in the city over staying in her rural town because in her home town the labor was exhausting and without pay. Ana preferred urban life: "I was over here because I found it easier. I would work but I found it more… yes, more beautiful and easy." She married when she was still a teenager and once she had two small children, she decided to live in Aguazul.

Her life continued at home with her children and with the chores expected of a young mother. She never shared that she needed to read or write. Perhaps her most important concern in this regard was reading public transportation billboards. She would rarely travel out of town and her husband could read and write sufficiently well to resolve any situation that would arise. However, when her children started school, she encountered a new situation: signing report cards. Each month the teacher would schedule a parent-teacher conference to discuss their children's academic progress. The teacher would turn in the report cards to the mothers who needed to sign them. Ana attended the meetings and participated in them in a particular way as she narrates in this excerpt from the interview:

Ana: You walk in and the teachers tell you how your child is doing and all that. Well, later the signing of the report cards comes up … well, they give it to you and tell you that in such a month you need to sign.

> Researcher: And, you look over the grades?
>
> Ana: Yes.
>
> R: and how do you look over them?
>
> Ana: I only, only understand the red ones, those are failing … I, my son, is only in second grade and failed one class. This one... math.
>
> R: How did you know it was math class?
>
> Ana: Because he told me... I told him that I saw the little five in red. And yes, he told me
>
> …
>
> R: And what happens if you don't sign it?
>
> Ana: Well, nothing happens. It's just that, well, they write that the child doesn't have someone to support him.
>
> R: Well, and if you say "I am not signing this because my child tells me it is incorrect."
>
> Ana: Oh, well, they deduct points from his score.
>
> …
>
> R: And how would you sign?
>
> Ana: When I didn't know, I would ask one of my classmates to sign it for me and she would write my name and that's it. Now, thank God that I can write my name.

By participating in parent-teacher conferences, Ana learned about the importance of attendance and signing report cards. Although she did not physically do it, she intervened in a socially relevant way to receive her child's evaluations and leave a signature indicating her awareness. She learned the color codes to differentiate the classes her child passed from those he failed. And, she resolved the issue of signing by seeking assistance from another person who could sign on her behalf, providing the role of mediator of written language. She also learned that the different ways that mothers participated could have social consequences for the kids: if a mother did not sign the report card, the child was designated as lacking support; if she questioned the teacher's judgment or the assigned grade, she believed her child would receive negative consequences based on her actions and attitude.

Ana fully appropriated the situation and acted according to her understanding of it: for her, it was very important that her children attend school and she oriented her participation in such a way that she did not make decisions or take actions she believed would put their education at risk. In this context, the exigencies of reading and writing were well-defined and she resolved them satisfactorily. Her criteria for reading report cards centered on differentiating between pass/fail without considering the specific passing grades or an average. She verified that the report card contained her printed name in the space indicated without worrying whether the signature should be written specifically by her or on her behalf. The appropriation of this practice is unique to Ana because she needed to satisfy a specific language requirement in her daily life. She determined the nature of her task and resolved the situation using various resources: the mediation of the other women and her son, their attendance and participation in meetings, and the decoding of colors. She began to read report cards through her participation in a specific social situation, thereby appropriating necessary practices and expected ways of interacting.

In 1995, when Ana was approximately 36 years old, she joined a study group from INEA for the first time. She attended classes for several months and began to learn how to trace letters, assign sounds to letters, and formulate syllables. During this time period, she became pregnant again, and she said that it became "shocking," so she stopped attending classes. When her son was a couple of months old, one of her sisters-in-law, who owned a little store in town directly in front of Ana's house, decided to leave the store to Ana. Since starting her new job, she encountered several new situations that required the use of reading and writing. As the manager of a store, Ana had to perform specific functions, such as responding to customers and stocking the store. The first function was typically not an issue for her if customers paid her immediately because she was able to calculate their total mentally, especially if the customers only purchased a couple of items. However, if they asked for merchandise on credit, she needed to record it in some manner. On these occasions, she usually asked her children to write the credited account, but if they weren't home, she needed to remember what the customer had taken until one of her children was available to help her. Generally, she had a good memory, but there were times Ana omitted items when she tried to remember and dictate the list later on.

She also needed to make the list of merchandise she needed to stock her store when distributors delivered products to her home, and she also needed to review and check the order and number of the items when they were delivered. In the first instance, Ana dictated the lists to her children and in the second, when deliveries were made, she relied on the delivery person to check the merchandise. The delivery person provided an invoice and Ana read it alongside him

(to review how many products were being delivered and at what price)

In 1998, she joined a study group again and attended classes regularly. In this class, study lessons and activities from INEA books were followed and it was an active group where there were a lot of conversations, solidarity, and mutual help among members. The members possessed diverse knowledge and reading and writing abilities and deployed them throughout the duration of the session. Because the instructor believed that everyone knew the letters and sounds, she began to teach materials from an elementary school level: she reviewed diverse content in Spanish, math, social studies, and science. They worked on exercises from the book, and at times the instructor dictated and at others she allowed them to write freely, without copying from the book or writing from dictation. They read collectively out loud and wrote together on the chalkboard. Ana participated actively in the class and completed her assigned homework. Her daughter, at times, reviewed her homework and pointed out when letters were missing or when she couldn't understand what was written. She would recommend she make copies so that she could begin "learning how to write words." Ana began to make copies at her store:

> Ana: Then, I would take … this one, for example, this thing and I would copy it … yes, because I only knew the letters or I knew how to write them, crooked, but I wrote them, but I didn't know how to read … they would ask for soap or a drink, and when the customer would leave, well, I would take the drink and I would copy the name … I was embarrassed as the store is fast, the customers come and go quickly. Mrs. Nora would say, "don't be afraid, you should write for you."
>
> R: and being afraid of what?
>
> Ana: Embarrassed, for example, that I miss letters and the customer is just there, waiting and (laughs).

In the context of the store, Ana developed a system to keep the accounts of neighbors who asked for store credit. In the first couple of classes at INEA, she learned to trace letters and she knew the conventional sound for most of them, although, as she mentioned, she would write them "crooked" or she might forget some. In the classes she was taking at the time of the interview, reading and writing were used for school activities (take dictation, complete activities in the notebook, and make a couple of copies) and, occasionally, they would write a letter, a list of ingredients, or a memory from their town of origin. Her daughter pointed out her mistakes in detail, where a letter was missing or where it wasn't understood clearly.
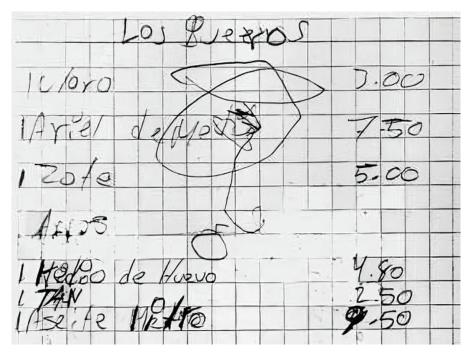
Figure 15.1 A List Written by Ana in Her Store

In the store, she already had a notebook where her children would make lists of the merchandise on credit and these served as a model so that Ana could also write her own lists. At first, she would wait to write until the customers left the window through which she sold items so that she could take each product to copy the name onto the list and write the price. She wasn't comfortable writing in front of others as she feared they would point out her errors; later, her friend Nora encouraged her to write while the customers were still present. One component that Ana added later to her list was the date (something she would write each time she attended her study group) as in some cases customers who received a pension or were wired money paid back the entire items credited once per month, In these cases, she would write the date: "to mutually remember what day the account started."

Ana actively intervened in the different practices linked with running her store with or without the ability to read and write. When she didn't read or write independently, she would seek mediators—her children and those who delivered her merchandise as informal notaries, which was a similar approach to how she handled her children's report cards (Kalman, 1999). Diverse situations converged so that she started using written language through self-initiative: her children, as they grew, could support her efforts to write by

providing specific information about correcting errors. She also used copying techniques for her own purposes, attended classes with her neighbors where they reviewed and produced different types of texts; in doing all of this, she learned a new way to use a known practice (copying) for authentic and necessary uses (recording items taken on credit). During this time period, she also traveled 30 minutes to a large warehouse where she would take the list of merchandise needed to stock her store. When companies sent products for delivery, she began to review the invoice in detail.

For Ana, the store turned into a socially important space where she began to gain access to significant texts (merchandise), the format and process of list productions, and specific and detailed information about writing. In this context, she drew on the necessary materials and opportunities to write. Ana's appropriation of this practice is characterized by her autonomy to complete the activity: she decided what to write and when and controlled the activity and determined when she completed each list. The value of her lists resided in using them to charge her neighbors and not an external evaluation of written conventions.

She gradually assumed responsibility and direction over this activity, moving from the periphery to the center of the activity where more substantial actions were carried out (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this case, she appropriated the practices of making lists, reconstructing them as a response to the concrete exigencies of running a store. Her appropriation of copying practices, the lists and dictations were not mechanical in nature but rather she enacted them and gave them their own meaning (Chartier, 1997). These symbolic practices organized the use of cultural tools, writing, and allowed Ana to develop new activities (Vygotsky, 1978).

Conclusion: New Pathways

In this work, I examined the notion of access to written language from a sociocultural theoretical perspective and I argued that access to written language is constructed through participating in distinct contexts where interaction with others makes the appropriation of reading and writing possible. The examples presented here illustrate the analytical possibilities of the concepts of appropriation, participation, and access, emphasizing the relation among the three. Here, the theoretical proposal is that through social interaction one has access to different aspects of written language. In other words, one can achieve proximity to the distinct dimensions within written language through which appropriation is made possible. In this way, access signals the social conditions needed for the appropriation of writing (the processes of interaction and concrete modalities

of meaning), and this is distinct from the material availability of written objects, either printed, manuscripts, or electronic.

The analysis of the examples presented illustrates various characteristics of access and appropriation, which deserve a more detailed investigation. First, the process of Ana's appropriation of the production and use of the lists to operate her store did not signal dominance of the practice (Wertsch, 1998). In a quick overview of her notebook, we can see her writing is tentative, her knowledge of conventional orthography emerging, and her control over the formatting is unstable: not all of the letters are perfectly formed, sometimes she did not write prices, and there are misspellings. However, we cannot question that Ana indeed knows what a list is, the various functions that it has in her store, or that if necessary she can produce one effectively. To appropriate this practice, Ana participated in multiple social situations where she had access to the necessary knowledge in order to learn.

Second, the process of appropriation of Ana's list suggests that learning the practices of reading and writing requires that the learner understands the conjunction of actions integrated within an activity while appreciating, from different perspectives, the practices in all their complexity. Her approach to the list was not through a fragmented and artificially sequential understanding of its components: Ana learned about the use of the list and its function as a whole and began to develop the formal skills of list writing through a gradual process in response to specific situations and concrete conditions. She began to integrate the format, the tracing of letters, the awareness of brand names and products, the time of production, and the date of the list in accordance with her possibilities and the need to produce the list independently. This suggests that we should investigate in detail how learners construct various reading and writing practices, understand their processes of engagement with them, and examine how these practices connect to their daily lives. It is essential to identify the core components of these practices for learners, the challenges they face, and the decisions they must make. As we construct a detailed knowledgebase of the process of appropriation, the conditions that result in access, and the different forms of participation in writing events, we will gain greater clarity on the social mechanisms behind their distribution and how to influence them.

Third, access to writing culture occurs in a social space and involves the enactment of practices, the transparent use of materials, participation in meaning-making processes, the flow of pertinent information, and the circulation of various types of knowledge and expertise. The mere presence of written materials is necessary but not sufficient to grant access to reading and writing: access implies the coexistence and interaction with other readers and

writers—social processes that make practices and meanings visible. It is the possibility of encountering them that favors appropriation, which occurs as a result of multiple and varied experiences. These experiences culminate with the internalization and transformation of practices in service of learning purposes as illustrated in Ana's case.

It is necessary to understand how the different aspects of an activity become accessible to a novice user. Ana's example demonstrates that she integrated knowledge and procedures from different contexts and she mobilized them around her interest in writing lists required to operate her store. Apparently, access is not an exclusionary process, a complete replication of the diverse uses of written language; instead, it looks like a gradual recomposition of the different components dependent on communicative necessities. We know that in reading and writing events, practices are demonstrated for novices, and what is learned depends on what is made visible. An important question that we must explore is in what ways access is organized to promote appropriation and how do different aspects of a practice converge in the learning process.

Finally, it is important to note implications related to pedagogical reflection and action in this line of scholarly inquiry. For a long time, we have known that the way a beginner reader approaches reading and writing does not necessarily align with the fragmentation used by experts or language scholars (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1979). Understanding the various forms of participation, the construction of access, and the processes of appropriation of reading and writing from the perspective of those who engage with written language practices in everyday situations will enrich our pedagogical imagination. This, in turn, will help enhance the situations and activities intentionally designed to teach reading and writing. It should provide new elements to think about the use of teaching materials, further elaborate on new ways to interact around them, and to identify activities that are authentic and meaningful for learners, integrating them into both formal and informal educational settings. To more equitably distribute the richness of written culture, we need to make it accessible to everyone.

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Reflection

Looking back at my paper from 2003, I was pleasantly surprised to find ideas that I still consider relevant to the study of literacy today, although I admit I blushed a bit at some of my writing. This self-consciousness is evidence of what I have learned since I wrote this article and has to do with the papers

and books I have read, the conversations I have had with my colleagues and students, and where my work has taken me.

Recently I have been documenting the different ways researchers talk and think about access. I found that while scholars such as Jan Blommaert (2008, 2017), Jean Lave (2019), and Jennifer Morrell and Ernest Rowsell (Rowsell et al., 2017) discuss different types of access, they don't specifically conceptualize what it means. They seem to go with our everyday notion of access as "a means of approaching or entering a place or the right or opportunity to use or benefit from something" and construct their discussions from there (https://www.wordreference.com/definition/access).

In my work, however, starting with the book *Saber lo que es la letra* (*Discovering literacy*) and my 2003 paper, I offered a conceptualization of access. I defined it as the social conditions for participating in and appropriating social practices, and these conditions centered on the opportunities to interact with others and participate in situated activities. In conjunction with access, I proposed a conceptualization of availability, the material conditions necessary for appropriating practices. In 2003 it was important to me to distinguish the existence of a school from the social processes involved in education because some policymakers and some researchers in Mexico used the term "access" as simply having a seat in a classroom. The idea that the presence of a school in a community was enough to *give access* to education was widespread. It covered up the need for more nuanced analysis and critique about what goes on at school. The same with literacy: teaching the alphabet or distributing collections of books does not guarantee solid, inclusive, expansive appropriation of literacy practices. For that, we must attend to what we do with reading and writing. So, at the time, distinguishing the distribution of material goods from the social processes involved in learning (always recognizing they were tied together somehow) was helpful for me.

This is where my thinking has grown. I still believe it is necessary and essential in our analysis to have an eye on social processes and materialities, but now I understand that access and availability are dialectically linked and can only be grasped by looking at availability through the lens of access and access through the lens of availability. They are indistinguishable, and our material world is the result of complex social processes, and our social processes employ and often depend on culturally produced artifacts.

Access and availability are powerful concepts for examining the contexts, processes, and material conditions in play when acting in the social world. They provide pathways for understanding how knowledge is constructed and circulates in appropriation processes. In the context of literacy research, these ideas shed new light on reading and writing events.

– Judith Kalman

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