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## Berkeley Review of Education

### Title

Artifactual Critical Literacy: A New Perspective for Literacy Education

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6s0491j5>

### Journal

Berkeley Review of Education, 2(2)

### ISSN

1947-5578

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### Publication Date

2011-10-26

Peer reviewed

# Artifactual Critical Literacy: A New Perspective for Literacy Education

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## Abstract

*In this article, we propose a framework for literacy education, called artifactual critical literacy, which unites a material cultural studies approach together with critical literacy education. Critical literacy is a field that addresses imbalances of power and, in particular, pays attention to the voices of those who are less frequently heard. When critical literacy education is joined with a material cultural studies approach, which holds that cultural “stuff” (Miller, 2010) matters as a form of expression and also as embedded cultural practice, literacy practices such as hip hop and vernacular literacies are then given more attention alongside canonical texts. Stories connected to objects and home experience can provide a platform and starting point for text-making. Text-making can also be set within a framework that is multimodal and allows for a much wider concept of meaning making. In this article we combine practical examples with a new theoretical framework that brings these traditions together.*

*Keywords:* Artifactual Literacy, Critical Literacy, Multimodal Literacy

...we have the “blanket box” in my basement. The blanket box is our family heirloom. It contains photo albums, baby books, marriage licenses, death certificates, a mayonnaise jar full of hand written recipes, and a ton of stories. (Wihelm, 2003, p. 87)

*KP: And you also talked about an old suitcase?*

*RK: Yes, mum’s, I do believe she has still got it. I will ask her. I remember very vividly as a child this brown leather suitcase with all these labels on it. I assume they had labels at that time—they weren’t the kind you could take off—and mum saying dad had used it for several years, and this is all the places he had gone to—I think she’s got it somewhere.*

(Interview, RK, Rotherham, South Yorkshire, UK September 19, 2006)

When Ruksana told the story of her father’s family suitcase, with labels on it from all over the world, she was evoking the tales of her family’s migrations across continents that were instantiated within the story of the suitcase. Artifactual critical literacy is an approach that combines a focus on objects, and the stories attached to them, with an understanding of how different stories have different purchase in particular locations. Some stories are more powerful than others in that they are more visible. However, we wish to highlight less visible stories. These are sometimes

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linked to experience and to objects in the home, like Ruksana's family suitcase or the blanket box in Wilhelm's (2003) study. By bringing together the material with the situated, we can understand how children experience home literacy practices in a way that accounts for material culture (the things that lie around us in everyday life) and lived experience.

Critical literacy has been an emerging but promising conceptual framework for literacy scholars, particularly those engaging at grassroots levels in out-of-school contexts with students who experience marginalization and disempowerment in many areas of their lives, as exemplified in US-based studies that look at the implementation of literacy research for social change (e.g., Blackburn & Clark, 2007; Kinloch, 2007; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Nieto, 2002; Rogers, Morley, Kramer, & the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group, 2009). Critical literacy is particularly helpful in interrogating inequalities of power in relation to textual practices (Janks, 2010; Nieto, 2002; Richardson, 2006). A critical literacy perspective also draws on critical social theory and postmodernism to interrogate wider issues of social class, race, and ethnicity (Kinloch, 2007). Writing in the home is inscribed not only within toys and books but also on images, and it can be found in visual and linguistic formats on video games and digital equipment. As literacy practices are changing and becoming more materially situated and focus more on the digital, critical literacy continues to be useful in interrogating emerging digital texts (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Moje, 2009).

Our framework begins with a critical perspective and a realization, from the New Literacy Studies, that literacy itself is ideological and linked to power structures (Street, 2008). We then extend this, following Kress (1997), to multimodality as a situating framework for literacy. Multimodality is the understanding that we express meaning in different modes, that is, through gesture, visual media, oral media, and writing. We discuss multimodal texts within a critical literacy framework, as Janks (2010) has begun to do in her work analyzing multimodal texts in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Literacy itself can be found within everyday storytelling and educators can harness that storytelling to support literacy development. Everyday objects, which we call *artifacts*, can be critical in supporting this process and creating a space for storytelling. Thus, with a focus on multimodality (the study of communication in many forms), semiotics (the study of signs in society), and everyday material cultural studies (the study of material culture), the idea of critical literacy can be extended to incorporate these new directions.

We therefore propose an approach that examines objects and their meanings in everyday life and also acknowledges the situated nature of texts in places and communities. We have labelled this approach *artifactual*. From seeing literacy as a situated social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984) and understanding that literacy practices are themselves materially constituted, we have now moved to a theory of *artifactual* literacy.

Our framework draws on concepts and tools from critical literacy, but makes this approach more explicitly tied to the "funds of knowledge," that is, everyday stories, practices, and experiences that students bring to classrooms, specifically those funds of knowledge that are linked to material culture, to artifacts (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This framework acknowledges the lived complexities of communities, providing a methodology for thinking about heritage, timescales, and community spaces in new and empowering ways that can be brought back into literacy education.

In this article we begin our discussion by describing critical literacy and its place in the New Literacy Studies. We link critical literacy with theories from Critical Race Theory (CRT). We consider how texts are situated and how they can be interrogated using approaches from critical literacy in which issues of power and voice are rendered salient. We then bring in theory from material cultural studies to explain and explore the notion of the artifactual. We consider how theory from semiotics and multimodality can inform an understanding of texts in context, and how a multimodal analysis can extend the reach of a critical literacy approach. We link this to material cultural studies and the situated nature of signs by which the everyday is a material experience that is brought into meaning making. In order to exemplify this theory, we introduce two case studies that fit with how we are applying this framework.

### **Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy theory has drawn on a number of traditions but specifically encounters literacy as ideologically situated. Recent international studies have focused on critical literacy as situated in the context of post-apartheid South Africa (Janks, 2010), and in relation to place and space in the context of climate change in Australia (Comber, 2010). There have also been studies in Central and South America, for example in Mexico (Kalman, 1999) and Brazil where the work of Paulo Freire (1970) originated (Bartlett, 2005). Critical literacy pedagogies can lead to an interrogation of canonical texts, often from home and community settings, that then open up new spaces in which young people can draw on their funds of knowledge and cultural capital (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Lee, 2007; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Richardson, 2006). This engagement with out-of-school texts can then offer “third spaces” where these literacies are valued alongside canonical texts and young people’s out-of-school literacy practices are recognized (Moje et al., 2004). A focus on young people’s funds of knowledge and a disentangling of power relations needed to be extended to recognize young people’s entanglements with objects outside school. Our theoretical model, *artifactual critical literacy*, can support young people’s funds of knowledge in a very practical way by honoring home experience.

Critical literacy educators such as Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) have explored literacy as a site where imbalances of power can be addressed through analyzing complex literacy texts and bringing them together with popular cultural texts such as hip-hop. In this process, literacy is seen as ideologically situated, with some texts being more privileged in school settings than others. The argument that literacy is ideological is drawn from the New Literacy Studies, which sees literacy as a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984, 1993, 2008). Critical literacy has also drawn on Freire’s (1970) concept of critical consciousness-raising in relation to conditions of employment and thereby has been linked to literacy with a wider move for social justice for disenfranchised groups (Lavia & Moore, 2010; Rogers et al., 2009). Critical race theory (CRT) can be used to interrogate theories of race and critique norms of representation to challenge taken-for-granted legal and representational structures (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). CRT builds on storytelling and a focus on voice in education to foreground identities that are often made voiceless (Ladson-Billings, 1998). A specific focus on *story* is combined with an interest in everyday and vernacular forms of knowledge. Following work by Lee (2007), who proposed culturally responsive pedagogies to challenge deficit models of instruction in urban schools, we argue for a sustained engagement with everyday literacies. Writing is inscribed within different kinds of material

objects, and reading can be on-screen, on phones, and instantiated into different digital and material cultural artifacts. Some of these artifacts are more highly valued than others; for example, while the suitcase is valuable for Ruksana, it does not have so much currency in the outside world, whereas a gold necklace might have currency as a marker of value. Texts, like artifacts, carry traces of power relationships within them; for example, public texts such as newspaper articles are recognized as important whereas home writing, particularly by young people, is less visible within contemporary cultures.

Critical literacy directly engages with, and interrogates, concepts of social justice. The consequence of this is that critical literacy pedagogies acknowledge the political and ideological nature of literacy practices. These approaches recognize that literacy or literacies (thus acknowledging the multiple nature of literacy) are themselves social practices, bound up with issues of power and social control (Janks, 2010; Street, 1984). A critical literacy pedagogy is needed to look within but also beyond texts to consider where they are situated.

Scholars using critical literacy pedagogy have interrogated texts as sites of power imbalances. The process of reading texts critically can create shifts in understanding and social structures (Janks, 2010). Janks presented an interdependent model for critical literacy that focused on power, access, diversity, and design, looking at ways in which critical literacy pedagogy can interrogate different combinations of these in a way that then can position students in more powerful ways in relation to dominant literacies and give them a voice as meaning makers (Janks, 2010, p. 171). This approach draws on previous research that also studied texts as ideologically situated and therefore capable of being broken apart. Muspratt, Luke, and Freebody (1997) showed how this could be done with a focus on texts as a source of power and provided a methodology for interrogating texts that uncovered the processes and practices of ideologies with discourses. They identified four approaches to frame texts: code breaker (reading and decoding text); meaning maker (understanding meanings in texts); text user (what the texts does and how it does it – design and content issues); and perhaps the most important piece of their framework, text critic (critically framing text content and design) (Muspratt et al., 1997). The framework shifts the focus from a normative model of texts (linked to schooling) to the examination of a range of models and repertoires of practice that accompany such a model.

This text-based approach to critical literacy can then be taken out of the classroom into communities. This is what Comber (2010) and Rogers et al. (2009) have done, in that they advocate a focus on critical inquiry and analysis in order to create a problem-solving, inclusive space within classrooms and communities that can shift and sustain change. In the case of Rogers' work, this stance is particularly focused on the notion of *teacher inquiry*, whereby a circle of change, involving questioning, considering data, and then creating new kinds of questions can emerge (Rogers et al., 2009). This kind of process model relies on a much wider notion of text, and a multiplicity of responses to these texts. This form of critical literacy is active, questioning, and directly concerned with social change. It combines a focus on environmental communicative practices with a multiliteracies perspective that utilizes the idea of students as active designers of meaning and environmental campaigners in a situated, place-infused context. Comber describes this approach as one of "critical pedagogy of place" (Comber, 2010, p. 45).

Critical literacy has more recently been allied with multimodality, first in the “multiliteracies” framework that Cope and Kalantzis (2000) outlined, with a final goal of *transformed practice* through the process of design, and secondly in the realization that multimodality and its forms are also “ideological,” that is, the forming of multimodal texts is equally ideologically situated (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007; Street, 2008). This approach recognizes that multimodal texts themselves are ideological, that is, through the choice of font, color, and, with digital texts in particular, image plus sound. An approach based on multimodality looks at texts in a wider way, that is, at texts that are visual and multimodal, incorporating sound, visual image, felt texture, and material qualities (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). This move, uniting New Literacy Studies with multimodality, together with an ethnographic approach to meaning making (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Pahl, 2004; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007; Street, 1993), makes up the framework we call *artifactual critical literacy*.

### Artifactual Literacy

In this section, we describe more closely the concept of the artifactual. In our work we combine an interest in people’s everyday entanglements with objects—the things they hold dear and can narrate in other contexts—together with a recognition that literacy itself is artifactual. In its material forms (e.g., as text instantiated within a screen, a mobile phone, a colored notebook, within a rucksack or inside a decorated diary) literacy has material qualities. If we pay attention to lists, postcards, shop signs, graffiti, text messages, tattoos, Facebook updates, jottings, and scrawls that are found in the everyday, we focus on both the local and the global, the situated and the ephemeral. Writing is inscribed in all of these objects, and many texts such as books are also “thing-like” in their status. They can be understood materially; that is, a piece of writing that is sewn can be understood in relation to a tradition of textiles in the home. We bring together an interest in objects and their stories with a recognition that literacy is material in itself. Thus we concur with Miller (2008, 2010) that while many people might see everyday and mundane objects as inconsequential, we want to redress the balance and move toward the material both in recognizing the inherent “thing-like” status of literacy (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) and in the things people bring to their text-making processes. Artifactual literacy allows meaning makers to bring in objects to educational contexts, and makes more explicit the role of material objects in literacy and their thing-like status. It is a lens that can materialize literacy and make visible stories that link to objects (Hurdley, 2006). It is also textual and multimodal, drawing on theories from semiotics in that it sees the text as materially situated in a wider cultural space.

We draw on semiotics in that we see signs as embedded within a community (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). This means that we are able to understand that all meaning making, all sign making is in itself significant textually. We have taken from Kress (1997) an appreciation of the ongoing landscape of semiosis, by which children make meaning, quite naturally, from all kinds of “stuff” in all kinds of ways. Writing and literacy activities can be found embedded within material objects such as embroidery and craft objects such as book marks, and can be found strewn across homes in ways that weave writing in the fabric of the everyday. Miller (2010) argues that things “work by being invisible and unremarked upon, a state they usually achieve by being familiar and taken for granted” (p. 50). We focus on the mundane as a site for meaning making. If critical literacy provides a lens to interrogate out-of-

school texts, we would like to include the material and the artifactual into those entanglements.

Cultural artifacts bring a new dimension into literacy learning. Bartlett (2005) describes how “the ongoing process of learning and employing literacies and responding to social positioning requires critical identity work that is accomplished through engagement with cultural artifacts” (pp. 1-2). Cultural artifacts invoke figured worlds that can support different kinds of identity narratives (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). These cultural artifacts can include texts, and can also be connected to social worlds outside the classroom as a site for learning. Bartlett’s argument that meaning making relies on a life-long entanglement with cultural objects resonates for us. Moreover, the links made in narratives between these cultural artifacts and identities can inform our understanding of texts as realized in the classroom. We argue that texts themselves are material, multimodal, and often linked to everyday objects. Their positioning within other cultural worlds construct and shape identities in practice and can alter or shift the positionings or cultural platforms from which texts are made. By paying attention to these shifts and positionings, a more critical approach to text-making, rooted in the everyday world of cultural artifacts, comes into play.

#### **Artifactual Critical Literacies**

In our joint work (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007), we have found that material culture, brought into classrooms from the home and conceptualized as “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2005), can have a powerful lever to support literacy learning in educational contexts in that material culture signals identities. While we have used the term “funds of knowledge” in our work, we also have looked more deeply, using ethnographic studies, at homes and communities, finding the term “habitus” from Bourdieu (1990) useful. The term *habitus* is used to describe enduring patterns or dispositions, passed on across generations and manifested in a number of fields such as home, school, and community. What the concept of habitus offers is an account of social reality inside and outside ourselves—in people and in artifacts. The habitus is often instantiated within treasured artifacts, home possessions that might signal a way of life, such as a sewing machine, or stand for an experience, such as migration, for example, in the form of an old suitcase (Pahl & Pollard, 2008). These artifacts can be used to elicit stories within school and community settings. In our research studies, we have listened to students talk about their artifacts. The process of listening creates new spaces for literacy learning. Artifacts give power to meaning makers. They can lever power for learners, particularly learners who feel at the margins of formal schooling. Some texts link more closely to everyday life than others; for example, film and the experience of film can move across from the everyday to more formal teaching modes more readily than some other forms (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Potter, 2010). An artifactual critical literacies framework shifts more agency to meaning makers and foregrounds the process of identity construction in relation to textual practices.

#### **Identities in Process: Inequalities of Place and Space**

In our earlier work (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007), we traced how identities built up slowly in relation to text-making, looking particularly at the concept of “sedimented identities” in texts. We now extend that work as we also consider identities in relation to space and place (Holland et al., 1998). Recent work in conceptualizing identities in

relation to space and place has involved a consideration of both rural and urban contexts. In rural contexts, the work of Corbett (2007), Edmondson (2003), and Brooke (2003) articulates the dilemmas for those who choose to stay and those who move away. Moving to where the work opportunities are can have fragmenting effects in communities which are connected in more felt, that is more embodied and situated, ways to place and space. Corbett (2007) described how these changes resulted in shifts in identity construction. In urban spaces, policy makers often invoke deficit discourses (e.g., “at risk”) that consider how some neighborhoods are “better” than others, and there needs to be a challenge in relation to concepts of identity that push against these assumptions (e.g., Lipman, 2008). Part of the reasons for these difficulties is a strongly neo-liberal agenda. Sociologists have considered ways in which this neo-liberal agenda has shaped identities in different ways. Giddens (1991) argues that identities have become more reflexive, as people are able to navigate new spaces in new ways. However, it could be argued that these reflexive, reflective identities, which offer a multiplicity of choices as to which identities are possible, are only realizable in spaces where there are ways of experiencing choice. While Giddens sees identity as a modernist project, Bauman (2000) sees identities as much more transient and postmodern. Identities are subjectively realized, fragmented, and dispersed. However, a postmodern notion of identity implies a choice. In neighborhoods that experience poverty it is hard to have a choice when there is little to choose from (Comber, 2010).

In an artifactual critical literacies framework, we understand identities to be closely bound up with place. The constraints of place, the difficulties of poor transport links, and inadequate access to fresh food and libraries hold back possibilities for change. A vision of identities that enables new ways of being and doing is only possible when there are transport systems that enable that transition to become possible. Leaving a community can also have hidden consequences for identities, as Corbett’s (2007) work reminds us that education can involve moving away from home and leaving familiar identities behind. The sociological approach of Sennett and Cobb (1973), who talk of the “hidden injuries of class,” is useful in analyzing how some people carry the traces of their experience of social class within them. For example, in her study of Appalachian white working class people Hicks (2002) described how these hidden injuries shape the literacy trajectories of the girls she studied.

Identities can also shift through migration. Appadurai (1996) argues that migratory experiences shape identities, enabling both the transformation of the habitus and new adaptations to be made possible. When people migrate, they carry with them the sedimented identity (Rowse & Pahl, 2007) narratives that shaped their lives in their former country. Here, we would propose a theory of identity that both acknowledges the past, the “sedimented identities” that people carry with them, but offers a potential for transformation, which can then move people across diasporas into new spaces. This theory of identity is tied to everyday realities within community contexts. The concept of “decolonizing community contexts” (Lavia & Moore, 2010) through informed research for social justice is one we consider important for a research methodology that draws on artifactual critical literacies. This kind of methodology would necessarily focus on stories, as entwined with artifacts, as a way of opening up listening opportunities within communities.



### **Storytelling as a Way of Creating Learning Spaces**

Artifactual critical literacy rests on the idea that objects relate to stories that have leverage in different settings. The process of valuing cultural artifacts—objects, symbols, narratives, or images inscribed by the collective attribution of meaning (Bartlett, 2005)—can help redress power imbalances. People carry their narratives with them, and these experiences constantly change. Gruenewald (2003) stresses the importance of people telling their own stories and linking these to connect communities. By telling different kinds of stories in community contexts, communities themselves can change through the collective representation of these stories.

Scholars have highlighted how spaces that honor non-traditional identities can be opened up to support those students marginalized by mainstream schooling (see Kinloch, 2007; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). The work of Gutierrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejada (1999) has outlined ways in which artifacts can create “third spaces” for students who might experience disaffection from mainstream schooling. Moje et al. (2004) have retheorized literacy practices across home, school, and community, and suggesting that the concept of “third space” can be used as a site where two different types of knowledge, home and school can be brought together to create content area knowledge. Moll and colleagues have considered the practices and home cultures of Hispanic students in creating new spaces where these identities can be built upon in literacy education (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Alvermann and McLean (2007) documented the life stories and accompanying texts and artifacts of Caribbean youth and how these stories map onto their identity construction in the United States. This construction of space and identities provides a platform from which students can access literate identities. Critical literacy is about mobilizing that platform using texts; artifactual critical literacy is about mobilizing that platform through artifacts. We argue that artifacts themselves are never neutral, and we have brought in from social anthropology and material cultural studies an understanding of materiality as infused with power and situated in particular practices (Miller, 2005, 2010). Therefore, like critical literacy, the study of artifactual literacies brings a redress of power about through interrogation of how these objects work in different spaces, and in connection with texts.

### **The Materiality of Artifactual Critical Literacy**

A central contribution of the artifactual critical literacies framework is a focus on literacy as profoundly material, thus combining a social practice view of literacy with insights from material cultural studies. Studies from an anthropological perspective (see Miller, 2010; Pink, 2004) have seen materiality and the everyday, the sensory and the in-place, as tracers for understanding social practice. Objects “make people” and structure their lives: “Things, not, mind you, individual things, but the whole system of things, with their internal order, make us the people we are” (Miller, 2010, p. 53).

As much as we focus on texts in our work, we also focus on objects. Objects have been studied by social anthropologists as tracers of the relationships people have with the world (Miller, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2010). Objects can be biographical (Hoskins, 1998) and evoke powerful emotions and relationships (Csikszentimihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). They can link to stories (Hurdley, 2006) and carry ideas (Turkle, 2007), as well as signal status (Shankar, 2006). Focusing on this stuff, the

material life of the everyday is a way of recognising the embodied situated nature of the world, the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). In our work, we have used ethnography to interrogate the everyday and recognise its situated and sensory nature (Pink, 2009). The everyday is a way of redressing the balance away from the more decontextualized, “autonomous” school literacy (Street, 1993) and to the messy, more complex world of meaning making out of school. Therefore, in working with young people on critical literacy, we have found it important to signal the thing-ness of people’s lives.

We argue that more attention needs to be paid to anthropologically situated accounts of home cultures in school settings. Previous studies such as Heath (1983), Street (1993), and others have used anthropology to explore everyday language and literacy practices; however, since these studies, there have been great changes in the representational landscape that necessitates an urgent understanding of communication as material and multimodal (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Moje, 2009). Social semiotics, which sees literacy practices as embedded within a wider world of sign making in cultural spaces (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), adds a needed dimension to the ideological contribution of the New Literacy Studies. By seeing literacy as material, the embodied presence of signs in spaces, as traced by scholars such as Scollon and Scollon (2003), we can elaborate an artifactual understanding of the world. A social semiotic approach sees signs as constructed in relation to communities and across meaning making systems (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Kress (1997) drew on semiotics to produce an account of multimodality that saw meaning making being forged from the “stuff” around us, as people constantly engage in semiosis (Kress, 1997, p. 7). Signs, he argues, are “motivated relations of form and meaning” (p.12), and children constantly make and transform those signs as they engage with meaning making (p. 13).

Artifactual critical literacy thus combines an understanding of how literacy practices within homes and communities are materially situated, together with an understanding of the multimodal nature of textual practices, alongside the use of the ethnographic as a mode of inquiry for these practices. An artifactual critical literacy approach best levers agency in favor of meaning makers and their lived experience, their habitus, and argues that the links across from the everyday to text-making are powerful for educators (Rowse & Pahl, 2007). In the case studies below we outline how this can be achieved with two examples: one, a community exhibition that led to a set of teaching and learning resources; the other, a digital story by one teen meaning maker. These studies connect the theoretical perspective outlined above with a methodological approach that can be used by researchers as well as educators.

### **Methodologies for Artifactual Critical Literacy**

In our research we have focused on the identities of the meaning makers in situated contexts (Rowse & Pahl, 2007). This has included a holistic research vision including a focus on the identities of the researchers, those involved in the material manifestations of the studies, for example, artists and web designers, the students in the case studies as well as teachers and research participants. Uncovering and honoring these identities has involved an ethnographic approach, that is, an approach that accounts for identities in cultural spaces, listening to and recording home practices, timescales, and spatial dimensions, the ecological nature of communities (Green & Bloome, 1997; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Ethnography can provide detailed accounts of lives in practice, “thick description” of practices (Geertz, 1993).

Uncovering ethnographic understandings is about understanding practices in contexts and bringing a perspective that asks, “what is going on here?” in a spirit of genuine inquiry (Heath & Street, 2008). We acknowledge that the timeframes of ethnography can vary; however, as Jeffrey & Troman (2004) argue, a shorter timeframe can still result in a study that has elements of a fuller ethnography. Building up a picture of participants’ lives and acquiring an “emic” understanding of practice has been critical to our work, in that this process then excavates identities to develop an understanding of their material realities. In this way, artifacts are understood as being “in practice,” and carrying meanings that can then be levered into storytelling and then into literacy. Tracing identities within this process and uncovering how fractal parts of the habitus can be found sedimented within multimodal texts (see below, Case Study 2) has been a vital part of this process. In turn, this process of uncovering identities has led to ways of informing literacy education so that teachers, working with meaning makers, privilege material culture and reflect on the impact of this methodology. This has meant that alongside ethnographic approaches, we have included an action research methodology that creates action from the initial studies. Rogers et al. (2009) have advocated the concept of teacher inquiry to create new ways of creating resources for learning. This action research circle has been strongly informed by our ethnographic understandings. In addition, we ourselves have been “in the space” of our studies, living and working alongside our participants. This acknowledgement of space and place in our work has been important for the ways in which we have interpreted the artifactual literacies presented in this article. The analytic framework for the analysis of the studies has been informed by ethnography. Analytic insights for both studies were obtained by a fine combing of the dataset, and then a recursive model in which participants checked interpretations.

### **Artifactual Critical Literacy: Case Studies of Practice**

We now introduce two case studies. One was a study of objects and stories from five families of British Asian heritage, leading to an exhibition in the UK called *Ferham Families*. The other was a project called *Artifactual English* in which 20 ninth-grade high school students in a suburban town in the US who created films and other multimedia productions connected to objects in the home, leading to a portfolio.

### **Case Studies’ Analytic Framework**

In developing the analytic framework for the case studies, we understood literacy to be a social practice and used the idea of “practice” as a unit of study (Bourdieu, 1990; Street, 1984). Furthermore, we drew from a multimodal perspective (Kress, 1997), understanding texts to be multimodal and embedded within the material world (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Thus, shards of the habitus could be found embedded within different modal choices at different moments in meaning making (Bourdieu, 1990). In order to describe the process of tracing imbalances of power in meaning making, we employed a critical literacy lens (Janks, 2010; Rogers et al., 2009). Finally, we focused on materiality within our analytic framework, looking at the situated nature of the artifact from a material cultural studies perspective (Csikszentimihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Hurdley, 2006; Miller, 2008;).

Artifactual critical literacy can open up the opportunity to look at artifacts in a more critical way, as situated within threads of power and linked to both local and global spaces. An object can be carried across contexts. It is possible to then create listening spaces that honor the exchange of artifacts and thereby create opportunities

for critical literacy activities. Critical literacy education involves a process that relies on building communities to create dialogues and listening opportunities, developing critical stances using the four resources model, creating a space for critical inquiry and analysis, and opening up new pedagogical spaces through a multimodal approach, and then creating action, advocacy, and social change through that process (Comber, 2010; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; Rogers et al., 2009). Objects from local and global contexts can then become the subject of text-making, shared and collaboratively and materially realized in community contexts (Pahl, 2010).

### **Case Study 1: Art, Identity and Power**

The Ferham Families project was an exhibition of narratives and objects from the homes of a group of families who all lived in the Ferham area of Rotherham, South Yorkshire (Pahl, 2010; Pahl & Pollard, 2008; Pahl with Pollard & Rafiq, 2009). Rotherham, a town in South Yorkshire, UK which used to gain its prosperity from the steel mills and coal mining industry that has slowly declined since the 1960s, now ranks as one of the more deprived communities in the UK. The study was conducted in Ferham, a neighborhood that is cut off from the town center by a large freeway, but is nevertheless a part of Rotherham town. In Ferham, housing is mostly small terraced housing and the neighborhood has a Victorian feel. In the 1950s and 1960s many men from Pakistan came to the UK to find work in the steel industry, where jobs were plentiful. After a few years, the men brought their wives from Pakistan, and gradually, over time, families settled, and their children were educated in schools in Rotherham. There are now three, if not four, generations of these original families living in the terraced housing around Rotherham. This pattern of settlement is common in many other Northern English towns such as Sheffield, Bradford, and Manchester.

The aims of the project were to explore what objects were special to families of Pakistani origin who lived in the Ferham area and to investigate the stories that they could tell about their family history. There were two main families whose objects were displayed in the exhibition, though for the sake of space, we discuss only one family in this case study. The K family included one grandmother (the grandfather had passed away), four grown children in their 40s, and their children, who ranged from toddlers to teens. The grandparents had migrated from the Pashtun regions of Pakistan in the 1960s to settle in Rotherham. Each of the four grown-up children participated fully in the project as did the young children. The exhibition of the family's objects and stories produced a wealth of historical and cultural material, which was then turned into an exhibition, held at the Rotherham Art Gallery in April 2007. Zahir Rafiq, artist on the project, also held a series of workshops with the children to create a digital presentation, which was then uploaded onto a website, also including the family stories and objects. This website is now called Every Object Tells a Story<sup>2</sup> and is a visual display of the family stories and objects. Zahir Rafiq was initially asked to design a website but also to design a visual presentation to be incorporated into the final exhibition. A key part of the project was that it involved three generations of one family. The transitions and transformations of these different individuals across the generations and across two countries was a focus of the exhibition. The families were involved in the design of the website, and the children

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<sup>2</sup> [www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk](http://www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk)

donated their toys to the exhibition. Enduring artifacts, practices, and values handed down over time, such as gold, weddings, and the family heritage, were explored in the project and displayed in the exhibition together with contemporary objects.

Ruksana, one of the grown-up daughters, with children of her own, explored with us the enduring value of gold in her life. She explained in an interview the importance of gold in creating and upholding family values:

As regards gold, culturally a girl is always given gold when she gets married as well as looking nice, because you wear the gold with your outfit, your wedding outfit, it is for a rainy day as well in case anything happens and you go, oh we'll sell the gold, not only are you given gold, you are given other things in the dowry, and that is like your part of your inheritance from your parents so you kind of take your inheritance with you when you get married. (Interview, Ruksana)

However, the object Ruksana chose to display in the cabinet was a pair of recently sprayed gold elephants (see Figure 1), chosen to match her interior design plans,

I always have gold spray in the house and I decided to spray the elephants because they were just cream and they didn't match my candlesticks and I decided to spray them gold, (laughs) (Interview, Ruksana)



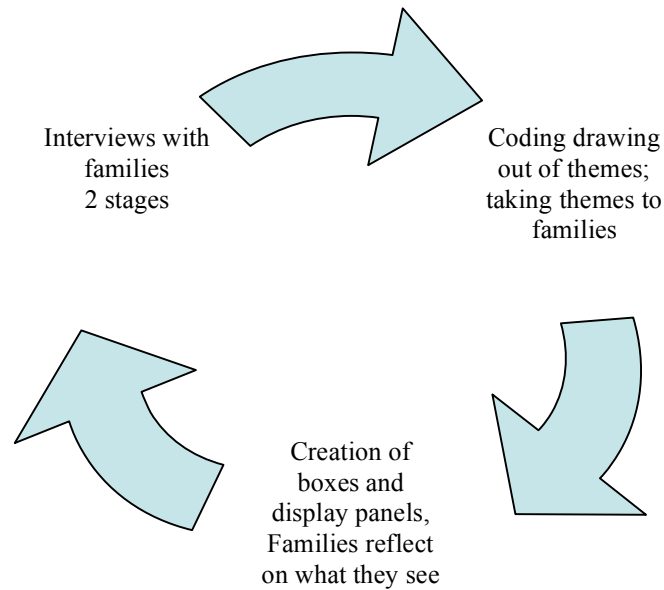
*Figure 1: Gold elephant*

The elephant simultaneously realized Ruksana's identity as an interior designer, foregrounding her aesthetic sense, but at the same time signalled her valuing of her family, its culture, and practices. This object harnessed many identities and spoke complex, multilingual stories across diasporas.

The exhibition also focused on current identities and practices that the grandchildren engaged with such as football, toys, wrestling, and computer games. The process of creating a community exhibition began with the researchers conducting long ethnographic interviews in the homes of a small group of families. The interviews drew out key themes that were common to the families but that the broader community could relate to. These themes included family values, the

changing nature of objects in the context of migration, and the importance of valuing different objects in different generations. The themes were then expressed through objects such as gold, textiles, toys, and the family Koran.

The process of creating these themes involved long discussions when the team took the coded interviews back to the families. Figure 2 represents the process as cyclical as the themes were constructed and then re-constructed with discussions with the families over time.



*Figure 2:* The process of constructing and reconstructing key themes

What was special to this project was spending time in homes, talking to the families, and finding out about their objects. Their stories gave a vivid picture of the struggle the families experienced to adapt to the new conditions in Rotherham. The stories connected to the objects constantly shifted during our interactions, and the researchers' relationship with the families created an interpretative lens that itself shaped the stories.

The artist on the project, Zahir Rafiq, saw the project as a way to effect social change. His work on the Ferham Families project, in representing artifacts from British Asian families and developing them into a website and museum exhibition, was part of this:

Zahir: If it wasn't for projects like Ferham Families, that kind of thing wouldn't happen and be part of public art work. It has given me lots of opportunities to show my other skills as a designer. (Pahl, Pollard, & Rafiq, 2009, p. 91)

Artists like Zahir who interrogate power relations through art and artifacts can draw on work in critical literacy to create new representations of identity, which can then be used within educational settings. Students could then be encouraged to discuss artifacts in relation to experiences of migration, of how new ways of looking at identities can be brought in. These discussions can be recorded and then students could write their own artifact stories in relation to these different kinds of discussions.

The key with artifactual critical literacy is to ask questions of different kinds of objects that then offer students space to tell their stories. In this case study, the focus on the objects made visible family histories and realized stories that could then be heard by others. The resulting teacher resource pack, which was developed after the ethnographic project, drew on the idea of “Every object tells a story” to use this methodology as part of critical literacy education with new migrants and learners in a variety of settings including family literacy, and school contexts. This project combined a focus on family stories together with a digital resource (the website), a teacher’s pack (also on the website), and a methodology for literacy education that could be used by others. Educators who used the pack described students bringing in special objects and finding a place within the class for the first time. This is the key principle of artifactual critical literacy education: it harnesses home experience using objects as a conduit (Miller, 2008) and allows students to materialize their experience and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) either in the form of oral storytelling or in visual terms (such as exhibitions and displays) thus transforming identity narratives (Bennett, 2005) and providing a critical lens to existing texts and practices (Comber, 2010; Janks, 2010).

### **Case Study 2: Fractured Habitus in a Digital Artifact**

The second case study serves as an example of how digital texts can indeed be artifactual and can be used to critically frame design and production practices. The case study derives from a three-month project in which student participants designed and produced digital stories about a journey. Rowsell analyzed how bits or fractures of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) become embedded in digital texts and described the process as follows:

fractal habitus represents the parts of self that students (subconsciously and perhaps even consciously) sediment into texts. Fractal habitus is palpable in physical, material features in texts such as images, colours, camera angles that express habitus as an unfolding of the everyday. (Grenfell, Bloome, Hardy, Pahl, Rowsell, & Street, 2012, p. 120)

This case study discusses how participants actively embed fractures of habitus into their digital stories to make them artifacts of self.

To contextualize the project, in the autumn of 2008, a group of ninth-grade students produced short films about a journey. The group of students took an English support class because they scored poorly on their grade eight proficiency test or they did not do well in the first marking period. Over two months, students devised, storyboarded, and edited short films relating a journey that they have experienced with Odysseus’ journey back to Ithaca. In this case study, Anthony (pseudonym) puts his own spin on the notion of a journey story by presenting a day in his life in a suburban town in New Jersey.

Anthony’s film begins with a series of valued objects and people – his dog hitting a tree as he jumps to catch a Frisbee; his room as his relaxing space; the family living and dining room and communal space, signaling family time and family rituals; his office in the basement as representative of a thinking space “to do homework and have quiet time” and to have independent time. The carousel of valued places and spaces sets up his connection to Odysseus and Odysseus’ strong ties to his wife and son in Ithaca. Anthony’s actual journey begins when he introduces the story of

Odysseus and cuts out any voice-over. There is only a visual of a large rocky promontory and the words, “Calypso’s Island: Where Odysseus began his journey.” No sound with an iconic visual signals a shift to his story’s relationship to *The Odyssey*. The visual launches Anthony’s story about how he navigates an average school day with commentaries on various aspects such as teachers, friends, and favorite (and least favorite) subjects. He revisits his valued spaces and places at home after traveling through his school day and circles back to where the narrative began, in his room, with his dog and a panorama of valued objects.

Anthony’s film provides insight into his valued spaces and artifacts. A key moment of fractal habitus in the film happens when Anthony presents his media center as his private, thinking space. Within his digital story, he navigates the viewer through the space as we come to understand how Anthony experiences and embodies the space through the way that he films footage and through his voiceover. Relative to the rest of the story, there is an extended discussion and scanning of Anthony’s media center during the short film clearly reflecting Anthony’s time investment and interest in media of all types.

In this case study we argue that Anthony embeds parts or fractures of his habitus into a digitized form to relate his own journey with that of Odysseus and that his selection of images, sounds, and effects reveal these fractures. Just as Bourdieu’s work focuses on the notion of habitus driving practice within structures in his Algerian studies, so too Anthony signals formative parts of his world as he moves through a typical day in his life, signaling people and generative practice related to his habitus. There is more to Anthony’s filmic narrative than charting time and movement or, simply put, a day in his life; there are fractures of his world that he regards as sediments of his identity, parts of himself that drive his practice. His dog, his parents and younger sister, his computer, situating his home using Google Earth, and looking at the distance from Princeton to his town—these fractures are fundamental to his identity and his sense of self. Such multimodal effects signify material aspects of texts that point to Anthony as a learner. Part of Anthony’s footage for his story involved pictures of local hubs such as Palmer Square, just off of Princeton’s main street (see Figure 3). Locating his everyday within local hubs demonstrates how ecological work accesses habitus. Each scene in Anthony’s digital story represents parts of his daily rites and practices, connected to the symbolic journey of Odysseus and his arduous voyage back to Ithaca. In terms of artifactual critical literacies, Anthony uses his digital text to relate how his identity manifests itself in space and place, therein representing a felt connection to his figured world (Holland et al., 1998) through a digitized artifact.





Figure 3: Community Hubs as Fractures of Habitus

What Anthony's digital story illustrates is how *artifactual critical literacy* as a methodological as well as theoretical approach reaps the most benefit of Anthony's multimodal sensibilities and competence in several respects. On one level, Anthony uses repertoires of practice in English class that he does not use in his written work (i.e., based on his grades in English), so there is an interest and engagement element to his digital story. On another level, the assignment illustrates a felt connection and understanding of other modes of expression and representation. That is, what engaged Anthony was applying visual and animation effects. Using the affordances of camera angles, Google Earth technologies, collages of digitized photographs, and sound effects pushed his narrative further than a written narrative would. As a result, the digital story's material and artifactual properties offered far more critical engagement and a post-production interview with Anthony supplied a meta-analysis of how he constructed and designed his multimodal composition (thereby reinforcing his own meta-appreciation of how modes produced meanings).

Anthony was in this support English class because he did not feel motivated by English. What this assignment did was draw on naturalized practices and ruling passions from his extensive computer use. Anthony drew more meaning and relevance from a by-gone text like *The Odyssey* by harnessing parts of lived history and dispositions to the epic tale. Visual modes, sounds, and his voiceover gave him more latitude to represent his connection to the canonical text. It was only through adopting an artifactual, critical lens to studying *The Odyssey* that Anthony experienced a felt connection to the story. By exploiting material qualities of sound – movement – pictures – written words and so on and physically depicting shards of habitus that Anthony had more engagement in his English studies. In critically engaging with his home as a text, and linking his work more closely with his everyday, Anthony moved into a new pedagogic space. The project built community through a focus on space and place; it drew in and motivated a learner by evoking his multimodal sensibilities; and finally, the project invited critical inquiry and analysis by depicting the power of familiar, valued artifacts to a meaning maker.

### **Pedagogical Implications of Uniting Artifacts With Critical Literacy**

This section explores some of the pedagogical implications of the case studies. Artifacts position learners differently, opening up modalities and subjectivities. Artifactual literacy and critical literacy complement each other because they both strive to empower learners and let in new stories. Moving from private, lived spaces to the public domains of schooling, artifacts gave participants in the study a place in schooling and moved them into content area literacy.

In order to make this approach relevant for teachers, we have drawn on Rogers and colleagues' (2009) critical literacy education framework, which focuses on four dimensions of critical literacy education: Building Community; Developing Critical Stances; Critical Inquiry and Analysis; Action, Advocacy and Social Change (p. 13). This process is circular and accompanies tools that can be applied to the process. Within these tools we would argue could be included a pedagogy of *artifactual critical literacy*.

#### **Building Community**

The concept of “building community” could include a focus on everyday routines and practices. Teachers could ask children to take pictures of everyday objects to bring into the classroom. They could find listening methodologies that united communities. Building communities can be enabled through artifactual means, whether these are museum exhibitions, web sites, art spaces, interventions and provocations using artifacts, or the creation of listening opportunities using digital tools such as digital storytelling. An artifactual critical literacy approach to building communities would target the material resources available in communities where there was a need for listening methodologies. For example, the Ferham Families project with Zahir Rafiq was specifically designed to show the community the valuable input the Pakistani British Asian families had given to the local community that included a number of different community groups. Artifacts that could be recognized within all homes served to unite communities in the museum exhibition. Building communities can be something that can be achieved across communities using artifacts. This approach can also be used to foster listening between students and teachers so that students whose voices are less heard in the classroom can claim space. In some ways, an artifactual approach to literacy created new, more equal roles between student and teacher.

#### **Building Critical Stances**

Building critical stances using an artifactual literacies approach can begin by students bringing in artifacts to interrogate using a critical literacies framework. As an exercise, objects can be interrogated for their meanings in relation to critical constructs and power relations and establishing a stance around objects. Different objects can be considered with relation to their value, the timescale attached to them, their production, mode, and relation to institutions of power. Objects then become visible in different ways. Building critical stances includes an understanding, through ethnography, of the context of community projects such as that of Ferham Families. By using local historical records and uncovering the histories of migration, a community can discover situated meanings and thereby challenge them. Zahir Rafiq's perspective was that it was important to challenge the racism within the communities he lived within through representation. By ethnographic work, meanings could be

uncovered that spoke to wider community members. For example, many community members displayed objects in glass cabinets or on mantelpieces. When this was described in the exhibition, many visitors who came from non-Pakistani backgrounds could relate to these stories. The story of the “gold” highlighted the importance of decorating in homes as well as the specific cultural value of gold for that family. Likewise, language can be a focus for building critical stances. By presenting different objects in different languages, it is possible to consider ways in which certain languages privilege certain meanings over others.

### **Critical Inquiry and Analysis**

Critical inquiry and analysis can stem from analyzing artifacts in such an interrogating way. For example, a local museum had a collection of objects that were originally from South Asia. A set of questions about the objects could be proposed that could then foster a spirit of critical inquiry and analysis around object collections in local museums. Artifacts have their own pedagogic potential in offering ways of telling stories, but they can also be placed within different settings to create juxtapositions that then inform learning in new ways. Artifacts can become pedagogic and work to develop critical inquiry and analysis through a discussion of these themes. Teachers can discuss an object’s:

- Value – in whose terms, why, interrogating consumer culture versus home values and cultures, disputing consumer notions of value in the marketplace
- Timescale – related to value, historical events, personal events, discussing the dissonances between home and school timescales, considering what events matter to us, key historical events, creating home timelines
- Space – local and global spaces, cultural spaces and public and private space, looking across domains of practice to value home objects in home spaces, using photography to find out more about these spaces
- Production – how was the artifact produced and what can we learn in relation to its production, the craft of the artifact and its provenance, the issue of the conditions of its production, globalization, and production
- Mode – discussion of its feel, shape, color, aural dimensions, and which mode is most dominant in the artifactual experience
- Relation to institutions of power – which Discourses materialize in the artifact and how particular ideologies surface in the artifact

The movement from critical stance to critical inquiry can be afforded through a program that develops a more sustained approach to artifactual critical literacy. For example, teachers and students could create Facebook profiles of characters in literary works, which would compel students to think in-character. Who would engage in conversations on a Wall? What is a character’s favorite novel? What is his or her favorite saying? Thinking in-character through contemporary social networking or digital communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) builds on skills students carry with them from hours spent online using Twitter, MySpace, or Facebook. In terms of thinking artifactually, creating Facebook pages for characters not only forces students to think in terms of literary characters, but also to think about stuff, objects, artifacts that they value, how they would visually mediate themselves, what kinds of multimodal rhetorical devices might they invoke to mediate their identities? Literary worlds can be lifted out by combining the digital and the artifactual.

### **Action, Advocacy, and Social Change**

Artifactual critical literacy can include a focus on social change through artifacts. For example, the exhibition created by the Ferham Families project enabled the local community, including schools, to recognize the families' achievements and to find their own object stories within the project, drawing on the "Every object tells a story" framework. These innovative practices opened up the families' home spaces to link to wider spaces of objects, stories and recognition of the similarities across cultural spaces, as all of us have valued objects and stories.

If we conceptualize critical artifactual literacy as being about creating new spaces, but drawing on the old to make the new, the following ideas could be developed:

- Bringing artifactual literacy into the classroom – re-designing the classroom to reflect the reality of the outside world
- Using artifacts to create social change (e.g., developing a campaign on school closure through creating digital artifacts that tell the story of the school)
- Moving the school into the community by creating an exhibition of artifacts and stories
- Using local spaces as resources for learning and developing resources that occupy a "third space," jointly owned by parents, students, community members, and teachers.

Ultimately, this involves recognizing the power of narrative when thinking about artifactual critical literacy. The power of artifacts to create a space for listening has immense resonance in this field. Teaching artifactual literacy is about finding a place in the classroom for these stories.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

If critical literacy is augmented with an artifactual approach, a material cultural studies lens is opened out. This lets in the everyday and a more outward approach to the teaching of critical literacy within the classroom. This does not just mean bringing in everyday objects, but interrogating meanings, values, and identities in ways that we have outlined. This creates a space for critical literacy education that demands an anthropologically situated methodological approach, as well as an eye on the rhythms of everyday practice, time, space, and context. Our approach then leads back to a focus on the enduring power of context in the study of everyday literacy practices (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). However, this time, rethinking context is not just about the importance of situating interaction, it is about the importance of allowing and recognizing that interaction, both inscribed and oral, is *materially* situated. We would argue that viewing interaction as materially situated has great implications for enhancing the transfer of learning and knowing between figured worlds through the affordances of material objects to travel and endure with their sedimented meanings. This situated meaning making can then be interrogated in new ways to create questions that address experiences such as migration, diversity, and urban and rural community cohesion.

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