Teaching Anthropology RAI

2022, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 11-21.

"What's Going on Here?" Reflections on Brian Street's Contribution to Literacy Education

Anna Robinson-Pant
University of East Anglia

Abstract
As a teacher and researcher of literacy, Brian Street introduced ethnographic inquiry to two quite different communities: adult literacy practitioners in India, Ethiopia and Uganda, and university students in the UK and USA. Through re-visiting his teaching materials and approaches, the article explores how he mediated key concepts within anthropology – such as 'context' and an 'ethnographic frame of mind' – through practical activities with university students and adult educators. Within higher education, Street's research on academic literacies both emerged from and built on engagement with students and colleagues around the notion of literacy as a social practice shaped by institutional hierarchies and cultures. In development projects, Street extended his early (1984) research in Iran on multiple literacies, including what he termed UNESCO "essay-text literacy", into a hands-on programme for literacy trainers to investigate everyday literacies often overlooked by formal adult literacy initiatives. Street's active engagement in literacy teaching and learning resulted in methodological innovation, particularly the development of 'ethnographic style' methods. Arguing that applied anthropology was often seen as having a one-directional relationship with education, Street demonstrated that education could also make an intellectual contribution to anthropology in terms of deepening understanding of literacy, language and learning within the discipline.

Keywords: ethnographic style, anthropology, literacy, academic literacies, international development

Introduction

Anyone who was taught by Brian will chuckle at the memories evoked by this phrase – perhaps recalling an in-depth discussion of an extract from their fieldnotes that they had carelessly pasted into a draft thesis chapter. Or a shared journey in a taxi when Brian would try to engage the driver in a conversation about how he worked out his routes and fares. "What's going on here?" was an invitation to stand back from the obvious, the immediate action and adopt an ethnographer's stance – to observe action from the outside, or "in inverted commas", as a former student recalls him saying (Coffey 2013). Writing this piece has coincided with the shift to blended working in my university – and in practical terms, having to clear out twenty-plus years of paper from my office room. The heaps of files revealed drafts of my PhD thesis, with Brian's inimitable handwritten comments, his course reading lists from Sussex and King's, numerous articles in various stages that he had shared (in the days before e-circulation) and reports on literacy projects that we worked on together, plus several failed research funding proposals. Feeling daunted by the challenge of capturing Brian's wide-ranging contribution to literacy education – not to mention the task of sorting out my archives - I suddenly realised that I had some valuable material. Here was the 'data' that I was seeking to make sense of, offering insights into Brian's contribution as a teacher and researcher of literacy.

This article is an attempt to take up Brian's question "what is the data telling us?" and to reflect on "what's going on here?" through re-visiting his teaching materials and approaches to introducing adult literacy practitioners and education students to ethnographic inquiry. I have chosen two "telling cases"[1] (Mitchell 1984) to explore how he introduced ideas about literacy from an anthropological perspective to two very different communities. The first case study is about doctoral teaching through exploring his role as supervisor in UK and US universities, and the second focuses on his work with adult literacy policy makers and trainers in the Global South. As a PhD student who entered academia after a career in international development, I have also worked within both domains –

[1] Brian often drew on Mitchell's distinction between a "telling" and a "typical" case to introduce ideas to students and practitioners about how to theorise from ethnographic findings – see his chapter in Roberts et al (2001: 96-97) and accounts in the LETTER project which I will discuss later in this article.

and, in Brian's words (in the foreword to my published thesis), "represent that new breed of 'practical epistemologist'" (Street, 2001: vii)[2].

Looking back at Brian's writing, I realise that many of his beliefs and values were ahead of his time – the "practical epistemologists on the cusp of theory and practice" (unpublished paper) have in some ways become central in today's UK university discourses around 'research impact'. Similarly, his argument for the need to look at what anthropology can offer to education – and the starting point that "anthropology doesn't "own" the word "ethnography"" (Street, 2004: 1) now needs to be historically situated and understood as during a time when the discipline appeared under threat[3]. Street challenged this defensive or inward-looking stance in his editorial to the Special Issue of *Anthropology Today* on Anthropology and Education, "Anthropologists in the UK have done very little to engage professional educationalists and their theories systematically" (ibid). Significantly, he emphasised that the links between the disciplines should be "symbiotic rather than one directional", asking "what have anthropologists learned and what can they yet learn, from educationalists?" (ibid). This article sets out to understand how Brian facilitated this "symbiotic" process of learning – in university classrooms and development projects - and reflect on the implications for today.

Becoming a Literacy Ethnographer: the Academic Domain

I started a PhD in Education at the University of Sussex in the mid-1990s, having previously worked as a trainer with literacy facilitators and teachers in Nepal and then moved into planning and policy roles with various international NGOs. I first encountered Brian through reading his book *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Street, 1984) and realised a PhD under his supervision would be an exciting opportunity to develop a new lens on my professional work. Although I could not join the Anthropology Department where he taught (since I did not have the required undergraduate degree in anthropology), he suggested that I base myself in the School of Education and he could supervise me from there. I now see that at a broader level, this was also a practical step forward in relation to Brian's argument "for a more symbiotic relationship between the fields" [of education and anthropology] (Street 2004: 1).

In those first few months, my anthropological training began in earnest – firstly through joining Brian's Masters and undergraduate classes where I gained hands-on experience of conducting participant observation in the university nursery as part of the linguistic ethnography module. Looking back at his reading lists for the MA Anthropology and Literacy course, the first part focused on "theories of communication and ideology as they underlie different conceptions and descriptions of literacy"[4]. Approaches to literacy were analysed from the different disciplines of Psychology, Linguistics and History, "relating them to anthropological theories regarding political and ideological processes as well as to specific ethnography". In the second part of the course, students were introduced to "the politics of literacy and development". This is where they/we learned to apply theories to practice and recognise ideological assumptions, as Brian's introduction to the reading list explained:

> Current Unesco and national government Literacy Programmes and Campaigns make use of the theories we have been examining, though often implicitly. The first task is to attempt to make the underlying theories explicit so they can be tested and analysed. We need to be particularly conscious of the socio-economic structures and the political and ideological interests from which the programmes and official statements about them arise and which affect the uses to which they are put.

This idea of hidden or implicit theories and making these visible was central to Brian's work with literacy policy makers too.

I had come into academia steeped in development policy discourses – not least the common assumption of a "great divide" (Goody 1968) between literacy and illiteracy. To my surprise, Brian insisted to me that "everyone holds theories of literacy", not only academics! Through a series of tasks that he set me each supervision meeting, I gradually began to uncover the theories of literacy that had informed my own role as a practitioner and policy maker. He suggested that I bring a text from the NGO where I had been working and write about it

[2] See also Street's later discussions drawing on Barnett and Griffin's (1997) concept of the "practical epistemologist": "the role of the researcher is to be that of a 'practical epistemologist', involving critical engagement in real world projects and action, doing 'participatory' work" (Robinson-Pant and Street, 2012: 77).
[3] In the longer first draft of his editorial, Street is even stronger on this point, citing Peacock's (1997) challenge to fellow anthropologists in the USA not to "risk extinction".
[4] Full references for quotations like this from unpublished reading lists or drafts are not included in the reference list.

by applying ideas from the anthropological literature that I was reading. It was a funding proposal for an action research project on literacy and I began to unpeel the layers of the onion, writing about the assumptions that I now identified as problematic. For instance, I wrote:

> …there is no mention of the literacies that already exist in the local context before the literacy programme is implemented. Literacy is seen as necessary for women to take part in 'development'…the underlying ideology of the literacy programme is that women should form groups, get out of the home and send their children to school! The terminology of Freire and 'literacy for empowerment' hides the very functional objectives of the literacy course.

Ironically, only a few months beforehand, I had been writing similar proposals and reports for this NGO – but I was now beginning to adopt an outsider perspective on their practices. Brian's handwritten comments on my drafts (no track-change in those days!) encouraged me to be reflexive, asking "on whose terms?" when I talked about "the project's appropriateness". Later, on my fieldnotes sent (by post!) from Nepal, he commented "what were your pedagogical assumptions?" or "why are you judging their teaching?" when I was writing about programmes and classroom situations with my former 'teacher' or 'policy maker' hat on. He also gently introduced new layers of analysis to me through his comments. Next to my frequent references to 'language' in my fieldnotes, he wrote: "you need a language of descriptors here – language/dialect/register/script".

Whilst I was starting my PhD, Brian was also moving into a new area of research – academic literacies. He was conducting a large research project at the university, interviewing students and lecturers about their understanding and reading of specific feedback on essays. Alongside the formal project, Brian began to investigate his own assumptions and academic literacy practices and as part of this reflexive process, he wrote a paper which he explained was "to make explicit my own conception of 'academic literacy' as an anthropology lecturer". The paper included a passage from a book by Godfrey Lienhardt[5] called *Social Anthropology,* which Brian used with students applying to do anthropology to "give them an idea of the kinds of things we are trying to do in seminars"[6]. He explained how the students learned to connect the abstract ideas and the institution of 'potlatch' described by Lienhardt[7] with their own experiences of giving Christmas cards. The paper also analysed the "distancing strategies", how the author "hid behind the text", and noted:

> Lienhardt's text involves a number of 'voices'… such mingling of texts and voices is a key part of how we communicate in both oral and written mode and university should be a prime site for the elaboration of such skills. However, students have argued that this process mostly remains hidden… in the absence of explicitness, variety becomes a problem rather than a resource.

This recognition that relationships of power and inequality shaped the interaction between students and academics was central to Brian's determination not only to document practices, but also to initiate change in the Academy.

Brian shared this writing-in-progress at a seminar with anthropology PhD students and explained that his paper was deliberately not finished so that we could contribute too. I must admit that I was puzzled by this invitation – although I had welcomed the opportunity to critique development discourses, I still regarded ethnography (and literacy) as 'out there' in development organisations like UNESCO, rather than closer to home in the university. As a novice academic, I did not feel sufficiently confident to write a section of the paper but welcomed Brian's attempts to make these hidden power relationships explicit and to democratise knowledge. The circulated paper

---

[5] Godfrey Lienhardt was an important mentor for Brian, dating from when he taught him at the Institute of Social Anthropology in Oxford.

[6] The quotations here are from the early drafts of the paper that was later published as a chapter in this book: Street, Brian V. (1999) Academic Literacies, in C. Jones; Brian V. Street (eds.). *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. pp. 193–227. The drafts are quite different from the published version (notably the title which was 'Academic Literacy: a case study'). So I have chosen to quote here from the drafts instead, as this is a historical account of the development of Street's ideas around academic literacies (note plural rather than singular in the published title).

[7] In the extract from Lienhardt's book that is attached to the 'academy literacy' paper, 'potlatch' is described as follows: "One of the most familiar anthropological examples of the non-economical use of wealth as to be found among the Indians of the coasts of British Colombia in an institution called *potlatch*. These Indians, immensely rich by the standards of even the wealthiest subsistence economies, had a most elaborate system of rank and status. This was largely maintained by display and competition in gargantuan feasting and entertainments, where from time to time persons of distinction would *potlatch* – that is, give away or even destroy vast quantities of their possessions." (Lienhardt, 1964: 79).

later included sections by some more experienced colleagues, responding and commenting on his analysis – including Mary Lea[8] who questioned how many students would "feel confident to use personal anecdotes" like Brian did. Howes suggested that "there are different academic literacies for different academic audiences" – challenging the title of Brian's paper which was originally 'Academic Literacy' (singular). Brian later developed a more 'hands-on' approach to teaching academic literacies through workshops at the University of Pennsylvania which resulted in his (2009) "hidden features" paper – where students circulated their writing on laptops for peers to analyse features such as voice, stance, signalling and structure. At a celebration of Brian's role as a doctoral supervisor in 2013, many of his former students recalled his advice and detailed feedback on their academic writing – particularly suggestions to "take the reader by the hand and guide them through the text" (Costley 2013) and that "a thesis should not be like a detective story, delaying the moment of discovery to the end" (Moss 2013). What we also remembered is how attentively Brian listened to us and read our work, "his absolute interest in seeing what you saw and following your logic, rather than imposing his own" (ibid).

As a literacy scholar, Brian greatly enjoyed this kind of active written and oral interaction around texts, particularly in order to challenge and discover his own assumptions and biases. He encouraged his students to explore how texts spoke to (or against) each other, and his course reading lists reflected this too. He shared with us an article he had recently written reviewing three volumes "on the methodological issues raised by ethnographic research into language and education" (Street, 1993a: 165). His account points to the ways in which a reading of one text can raise new questions about another, and develops new insights about and ideas for ethnography through the comparative analysis. He explained:

> A 'reading' that uses these authors and volumes 'intertextually' can, then, enrich our sense of what is involved in research on reading at a time when many of the old uncertainties have been shaken while at the same time raising many fruitful areas for further research (ibid: 174).

Brian's humour (often at his own expense) shines through, making the reader feel they are there in the room with this distinguished company of researchers:

> Reading his [Hammersley's] text is like taking a cold shower and I find it useful to recall at moments when I am basking in the warm glow of my favourite platitudes and commitments: a short, sharp shock of the Hammersley kind can be refreshing as well as unnerving (ibid).

This structured introduction to a community of literacy researchers through their writing was accompanied by invitations to real life networks, conferences, meetings and of course, social events. The informal learning and participation in literacy research communities was perhaps the most important, yet 'hidden' way in which his students learned to become literacy ethnographers.

A quick scan of Brian's reading lists, notes on supervision and feedback on drafts reveals the word 'power' repeated again and again. A 1994 seminar paper urged the need for researchers to "pay more attention to relationships between language, meaning and power in their social contexts". Brian's aim as a supervisor was to introduce his students to ways of making hidden power relations explicit – whether within the Academy or literacy campaigns in development – observing that "the issues involved are those of epistemology (who controls knowledge and how; who has the right to give voice) and of identity" (Street, Academic Literacy draft paper). Many years later, he extended his academic literacies work – including exploring ways to address the geopolitics of academic writing - beyond the UK and US Academy through collaboration with Dr. Maria Lucia Castanheira and colleagues at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte in Brazil (see Castanheira et al 2015). What was striking to me as a student was that he not only talked about democratising knowledge, but he practised it in every aspect of his life.

Learning to be an Ethnographer Outside the University: the Development Domain

Moving to consider Brian's contribution to literacy education outside the Academy, I will explore my second case study which focuses on practitioners (teachers, literacy facilitators and trainers) in development projects in the Global South. Brian had a continuing interest in what ethnography could offer professionals outside academia and students in disciplines beyond anthropology. The Ealing Ethnography project offers an example of how an interdisciplinary team of anthropologists, educationalists and language specialists worked together to

[8] Lea was co-researcher on the academic literacies project with Brian Street researching with students and lecturers at the University of Sussex in the 1990s: see Lea and Street (1998).

design a programme introducing ethnography to language students on their year abroad[9]. An important starting point for this project was the "distinction between the discipline of anthropology and the ethnography as a method" (Roberts et al, 2001: 11) and the insistence that the aim was not to turn language students (or their teachers) into anthropologists. Rather, the emphasis was on learning through ethnography:

> the idea is that they can acquire some theoretical concepts and ethnographic skills so that they are able to understand the local cultural practices sufficiently to write an ethnographic project, rather than undertake a full-scale ethnography (ibid).

This project could be seen as an early forerunner to innovative professional development projects currently discussed in this journal – for instance, McDonough's (2021: 70) article reflects on introducing participant observation to trainee teachers, observing that "being able to think anthropologically helps teacher candidates become better teachers".

As the anthropology specialist on the Ealing project, Brian took the lead in introducing ethnography to the team and his chapter in their book on 'Ethnography for Linguists' presents a succinct account of 'what is going on' through the ethnographic experience of the learners. Drawing on three "fundamental concepts: epistemological relativity, reflexivity and critical consciousness" (Roberts et al, 2001: 93), he analysed how the students on this programme were introduced to "epistemological levels and not just issues of technique and method" (ibid). For instance, an incident in a restaurant where a diner leaves money on the table which their friend (rather than the waiter) later pockets, is used to discuss the idea of epistemological relativity and the culturally relative concepts of tipping, stealing and friendship. The Ealing project can be seen as condensing the longer term, intensive training in ethnography offered within university anthropology departments, but it was still situated and shaped by academic institutional practices (not least, assessment, as the course was run by Thames Valley University). However, later Brian took the central ideas of taking an ethnographic perspective into the different context of literacy and development projects (outside formal academic institutions), particularly the concept of an ethnographic way of thinking. He described how "to develop an ethnographic frame of mind" (ibid: 35) and emphasised the "need to start looking at their own worlds in an anthropological way" (ibid: 45) – seeing ethnography as a means of developing curriculum, teaching and learning.

Brian had contributed consultancy advice on literacy to UNESCO and mentoring to individuals working with NGO projects in the Global South over many years. However, this was often around introducing practitioners and policy makers to different concepts of literacy (see UNESCO 2003), rather than the kind of 'hands-on' ethnographic experience that the team had developed through the Ealing project. By contrast, the LETTER project (Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic Research: enhancing everyday literacies and numeracies) provided an opportunity to develop ethnographic training for those designing literacy curricula, through a partnership with adult education specialists: Alan Rogers, Dave Baker (offering mathematics expertise), Malini Ghose (based with Nirantar in India), Rafat Nabi[10] (based in Pakistan), Alemayehu Gebre (in Ethiopia) and George Openjuru (Uganda). An article by Street, Rogers and Baker (2006) explains how the idea for the project emerged from the NGO Nirantar's work in India and their discussions with women literacy learners when trainers were surprised to hear rivers described as "animate" (see Nirantar 1997). The NGO workers realised that they "needed training in how to uncover the existing epistemologies of the women they worked with" (ibid: 32). Like the Ealing project, LETTER set out to train the participants (in this case, adult literacy trainers) in ethnographic-style methods, particularly to emphasise the "epistemological dimension of the ethnographic enterprise"[11]. The aim was to help them "identify local cultural meanings in context, reflect upon their own assumptions and values, and then design curriculum and pedagogy that will build on such local knowledge" (ibid: 33). The authors of the LETTER publications insisted that this approach was not about "trying to make the adult literacy facilitators into anthropologists, just helping them to make use of ethnographic perspectives" (Openjuru et al, 2016: 24)

---

[9] The project, co-directed by Celia Roberts and Michael Byram, is written up in detail as a case study in the Roberts et al (2001) book *Language Learners as Ethnographers* and the training guidance and complete set of materials are available here: https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters/lara-project-materials/.

[10] See Nabi, Rogers and Street (2009) for an account of this research.

[11] Castanheira (from informal discussion in 2021) suggests this useful alternative phrase, which brings attention to the idea "that what was always at stake was the understanding of epistemological concepts" and that this was why "the learning theory and ways of doing were not disassociated".

Using the approach of teachers as ethnographers, the team developed a training programme which combined academic inputs (on ethnography and adult literacy/learning) and experiential learning. Literacy practitioners were introduced to ethnographic approaches to collecting information about how communities were engaging with literacy and numeracy in their everyday lives. This activity was then the basis for developing a critical perspective on existing literacy programmes, as well as developing new approaches in their own context. Underpinned by Freirean principles that adults are not "empty vessels", LETTER – unlike many adult literacy and development programmes - did not start from the deficit assumption that people are not literate. As the authors explained in relation to an ethnographic approach to literacy: "Rather, it seeks to discover what literacy activities there are in any society and how people relate to these activities" (Gebre et al 2009: 14). Like my own induction as a PhD student into anthropological perspectives on literacy, Brian emphasised the idea of "hidden literacies" (in the case of the university, this was the taken-for-granted academic literacy values and practices) and theories, making the invisible visible.

The written accounts of LETTER detail not only the practical tools for collecting information about everyday literacy practices, but also the importance of learning an ethnographic way of seeing the world, noting: "An ethnographic stance, once acquired, remains with one for life. Ethnography is a frame of mind, not a special activity" (ibid: 14). The training encouraged reflexivity, including in the way that participants wrote up their findings as case studies, advising them to "avoid generalisation and personal judgement. The aim is to state what actually happened rather than what generally happens" (ibid: 34). What is striking in this context is that the team did not hold back from introducing 'theory' to this non-academic group of participants, stating that the aim of LETTER was partly to "test the 'great statements' we all make about literacy and numeracy" (ibid: 9). The most important theoretical lens brought to the findings was around power, encouraging participants to look at how local literacy practices and texts were connected to and shaped by relationships of power in their community. This meant asking questions around control and ownership of texts through observation of literacy events, as Openjuru et al (2016) noted in relation to the workshops in Uganda: "A literacy as social practice view looks at the element of power in the activity – who created the event and the text; who controls it? What does it mean in this context? Who has the power to name and define it?" (ibid: 12). It is worth noting that facilitating this kind of critical analysis connects closely with the participatory development movement, which addresses issues around ownership and voice in international development initiatives.

Analysing the contribution of ethnography to literacy through the LETTER project, a significant element was to encourage practitioners to look at literacy from *outside* programmes and institutions and to begin by investigating social practices around, for instance, religion, markets or agriculture. As the authors explain, their starting point was "what does our work as teachers of literacy to adults look like if we view 'literacy' as social practice? In particular, we are asking what kinds of literacy are going on in this community, in this culture?" (ibid: 13). The focus throughout the fieldwork activities was on understanding 'context' and exploring/discussing local meanings and uses of literacy. As I will explain later in this article, 'context' here connected with a broader understanding of ideological frameworks, rather than only the immediately observable situation. Taking this step outside the literacy classroom – and seeing what was going on – needs to be understood in relation to the dominance of 'top-down' and "schooled literacy" (Street and Street 1995[12]) policy approaches to adult literacy and learning in most national programmes. Significantly, the LETTER programme worked outside formal government programmes so raises questions (like other innovative small-scale initiatives) about how it could be scaled up or embedded in institutional practice. However, the materials and principles developed for training literacy practitioners in ethnographic methods would be valuable in other practitioner contexts too. Whilst Brian drew on some of his teaching resources used in the university classroom – notably the turtle and the fish fable[13] (familiar to all his students!) to introduce ideas about ethnographers communicating/constructing knowledge across cultures – he also developed accessible definitions of ethnography and literacy for working with development practitioners.

Brian took the distinction between 'ethnographic-style' and 'ethnographic' from Green and Bloome (1997), and he developed this into a key idea within his work with policy makers and practitioners in development projects. In Openjuru et al (2016), he explained that "an ethnographic style goes much further than just using some ethnographic tools. It means adopting an ethnographic perspective, a de-centring, removing power from the researcher..." (ibid: 23). Recalling his earlier challenge to anthropologists not only to see what is offered to

[12] Street's discussion of the "schooling of literacy" in formal education relates closely to his earlier (1984) discussion of UNESCO "essay text literacy" in literacy programmes.
[13] Read this Buddhist fable on https://discourse.suttacentral.net/t/the-fish-and-the-turtle-is-nibbana-nothingness/8517

education, but also what they can learn from educationalists (Street, 2004), perhaps the answer lies in this adaptation of ethnography to an applied educational context. Whilst anthropologists may see "ethnographic-style" as being dumbed down or less rigorous ethnography, Brian was attempting to convey the essence of an ethnographic approach to those outside anthropology. The "so what?" question which arose in relation to ethnographic data was as important to Brian as the initial "what's going on here?" The ethnographic-style approach developed with literacy practitioners started from the purpose, the 'so what' of research, and critically considered the elements within ethnography that could inform adult learning and curriculum. His contribution to literacy education within the international development domain was to challenge the more usual assumption amongst anthropologists that ethnographic research should be conducted first and applied later. Instead, the context of use/application shaped the ways in which practitioners learned through and conducted ethnography.

Comparing the Two Domains: What is Going on Here?

Looking at these two case studies – of literacy education in the university classroom as compared to development projects – we can see that Brian had a similar starting point in terms of making implicit theories explicit, whether this was assumptions around 'good' academic writing or the reification of 'literacy' in development policy and schools. By exploring ways of encouraging people to adopt "an ethnographic frame of mind", Brian avoided a technicist approach to methods and focused on the process, the purpose of participant observation being to learn alternative ways of seeing and knowing – or to use his words, understanding other peoples' 'theories'. Unusually in the development context, where 'research' tends to mean 'evaluation' and collecting statistics, Brian was keen to extend the practitioners' "ethnographic frame of mind" beyond the data collection stage to learn how to analyse, interpret and, most importantly, write up their findings. This is where 'literacy education' had a double meaning as literacy trainers were also learning new literacy practices and how to critically reflect on their writing in relation to the intended audience (the LETTER programme included advice on how to 'frame' their case study so that it would be understood by the reader). Brian drew on Mitchell's (1984) notion of the "telling" rather than "typical" case to challenge the more usual tendency to generalise statistically in development texts.

Collaboration across cultures, disciplines and institutions was integral to Brian's approach to literacy education in both domains. In the academic domain, as an anthropologist, he connected across disciplines (particularly linguistics and education) and university departments to investigate not only how literacy ethnography could enhance university teaching, but also to deepen understanding into established academic practices. In the development domain, his close partnerships with adult educators and adult learning specialist, Alan Rogers, enabled him to learn how to develop stronger synergies between research and pedagogy. In the academic domain, he was himself a 'practitioner' and his ethnographic research (particularly his reflexive approach to communicative practices and academic writing) directly informed his teaching, In the development domain however, he recognised that he was at one step removed, and he worked closely with adult educator colleagues to mediate theoretical and methodological concepts.

Brian's approach with both students and development actors was not to challenge their assumptions directly (as I described with my own induction into different ways of looking at literacy and development) but as former PhD student, Simon Coffey explained, "he gently and patiently nudged my conceptual understanding" (Coffey 2013). Whilst this worked well for students and possibly literacy practitioners on the ground, I wonder now if it was too subtle for international policy makers in literacy and development. Brian's aim of "complicating" how we see the world and his indirect ways of challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about literacy would not fit easily within international policy discourses where certainties and direct statements are more welcome. However, as I continue to work with UNESCO, I have observed that as a teacher Brian succeeded in introducing the concept of literacy as a social practice and an "ethnographic mindset" to some individual development policy makers, even if it is not possible for them to reflect this fully in official documents or reports. As Brian often commented, it is not only about how policy makers write about literacy but about learning to read about literacy in a different way too. As he pointed out, it is generally accepted that people need to learn how to read quantitative data, and policy makers may require an introduction to how to read ethnographic research so that data is not dismissed as 'anecdotal'. This is another example of how Brian's work in the literacy development domain could also contribute to the academic domain, including the teaching of anthropology, where it may be assumed that ethnographic texts 'speak' in a similar way to multiple audiences.

Re-Evaluating 'Context' in Literacy Research and Practice

Brian's (1984) seminal book *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, based on his ethnographic research in Iran, argues strongly against "UNESCO essay text literacy" and the stereotypes of 'illiterates' that have informed many teaching/learning programmes. Challenging the idea that people passively 'receive' literacy, Street proposed that they have their own theories and ideologies which influence how they "take hold" (Kulick and Stroud 1993) of literacy. Arguing against scholars (Ong 1982, Goody, 1968) who focused on the "consequences" of literacy, he asserted in his introduction to the book that "the skills and concepts that accompany literacy acquisition … do not stem in some automatic way from the inherent qualities of literacy… but are aspects of a specific ideology" (Street, 1984:1). Here he emphasised the need to look at the "broader parameters of context" (ibid: 15) in order to understand the meanings of literacy.

In his later work, he continued to expand on this idea of context as being not just that which is observable, but relating to conceptual systems too. In the introduction to *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy* (1993b), he explained that "central to development of this conceptual apparatus for the study of literacy is a re-evaluation of 'context' in linguistic analysis" (p 13). Arguing that within linguistics, 'context' has often been taken in a limited sense to refer to the immediate "context of utterance", he suggested that there is "little point… unless one knows the broader social and conceptual framework that gives it meaning" (ibid: 15). This distinction between the immediate visible context and the broader, more dynamic meaning of 'context' as relating to conceptual systems could be related to the limitations that he identified in his discussion of the notion of 'literacy event'. He suggested that this concept was "helpful" for researchers and practitioners who could then focus on a particular situation that involves reading, writing and/or texts and "begin to draw out its characteristics" (ibid) – and this was certainly a practical starting point for many of the LETTER activities. However, he warned against the danger of using literacy event on its own – that "it remains descriptive and – from an anthropological point of view – it does not tell us how meanings are constructed" (Street 2001b: 11). This is where the concept of 'literacy practices' is needed as he explained: "The concept of *literacy practices* attempts both to handle the events and the patterns around literacy and to *link* them to something broader of a cultural and social kind" (ibid). His explanation that 'context' here was more than the observable ("those models we cannot get at simply by sitting on a wall with a video" (ibid)) points to the purpose and value of ethnography within literacy studies: "we have to start talking to people, listening to them and linking their immediate experience out to other things that they do as well" (ibid).

Taking these ideas about context back to my earlier analysis of the two case studies, what is striking is Brian's attempt to shift students' and literacy practitioners' attention beyond the immediate observable situation captured through participant observation – particularly through his questioning "what is going on here?" In much educational writing on schools and literacy programmes, 'contextualised' teaching and learning or curriculum refers to taking account of a student's home 'culture', rather than engaging with relationships of inequality and power. In both domains – academia and development policy – Brian was starting from a broader understanding of 'context' as embracing ideologies and "implicit theories". His writing on literacy campaigns – the recognition that "literacy is being transferred from a different culture, so that those receiving it will be more conscious of the nature and power of that culture than of the mere technical aspects of reading and writing" (Street 1995: 30) – could have equally applied to the university, where he observed a similar gap between students and lecturers. By rejecting Malinowski's fixed and static "context of situation" or "Goffman-inspired 'interactionism'" (Street 1993b: 15), aspects of context that are directly observable, Street proposed that the important dimension of context was around dynamism and change. The educator's role was not simply to recognise and fit in to a certain social context which (like culture, see Street 1993c) is perceived as 'out there'. Rather, the attention to ideology through a broader dynamic concept of context is intended to make visible and transform power inequalities.

Conclusion: Reflections on Brian Street's Contribution to Literacy Education

E.M. Forster's "only connect" is often mentioned as summing up Brian's approach to life – and to literacy. In the introduction to this article, I mentioned his challenge to anthropology to connect with education, as he perceived an assumption that the influence should be one-way, rather than facilitating a dialogue between the disciplines. Certainly, Brian's contribution to education is evident in the ways in which he introduced ethnographic approaches to colleagues in the university through his academic literacies work, and to adult educators in development organisations to encourage them to reflect on their practice and literacy curriculum. The value to pedagogy of a social practice approach to literacy is now widely recognised and is reflected in

several recent articles in this journal – for instance, Chattaraj (2020) argues "why anthropologists should teach writing", with insights about how participant observation "destabilises the authority of the written text" (ibid: 36). Similarly, the concept of literacy as a social practice and an ideological model of literacy has begun to be recognised within development policy discourses. However, Brian's ideas of multiple literacies and a continuum (rather than a divide) between literacy and orality introduce a complexity which is not easy to accommodate within literacy assessment regimes and large-scale planning. A similar challenge remains around how to introduce a broader understanding of 'context' into adult literacy and development policy, a field which has tended to downplay conflicting ideologies. The impact of Brian's ideas and contributing an "ethnographic frame of mind" is perhaps more evident at an individual level, amongst those who have learned alongside Brian through collaborative projects and training programmes like LETTER. This includes many people who have learned how to 'read' ethnographic accounts of literacy.

Brian's active engagement in literacy teaching and learning – whether in development projects or the university – has fed back into anthropology as a discipline too. In his *Anthropology Today* editorial, Brian referred to the 'applied' debates and the relationship between education and anthropology as part of "the wider engagement of anthropology with the public domain" (Street, 2004: 1). In this respect, his literacy work with practitioners illustrated an approach where action or impact was central, and ethnography was adapted to fit the purpose/aims of the participants. This resulted in methodological innovation and the development of "ethnographic-style" research methods. However, Brian also highlighted the potential "intellectual" contribution of education to anthropology, "especially in terms of our understanding of language and of learning" (ibid). This is perhaps our challenge now – to build on the conceptual learning about literacy and social change from projects like LETTER and to see our roles within practitioner and academic domains as closely intertwined. As Street so clearly stated:

> Research, then, has a task to do in making visible the complexity of local, everyday, community literacy practices and challenging dominant stereotypes and myopia. This indeed has become a major drive in my research, teaching and writing, both in the research community and in the public arena.14.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Maria Lucia Castanheira and Alan Rogers for their insightful comments and suggestions on the first draft of this paper.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Barnett, R. and A. Griffin (eds) (1997) *The end of knowledge in higher education,* London: Institute of Education

Castanheira, M.L., Street, B.V., Carvalho, G.T. (2015) Navigating across academic contexts: Campo and Angolan students in a Brazilian university. *Pedagogies*, 10 (1), 70-85.

Chattaraj, D. (2020) Anthropology and writing pedagogy: why anthropologists should teach writing, *Teaching Anthropology*, 9 (1), 35-43.

Coffey, S. (2013) Reflective piece in *Mentor, colleague and friend: Celebrating Brian Street, Memories and appreciations from his doctoral students*, June 22nd 2013.

Costley, T. (2013) Reflective piece in *Mentor, colleague and friend: Celebrating Brian Street, Memories and appreciations from his doctoral students*, June 22nd 2013.

Gebre, A., Rogers, A., Street, B., and G. Openjuru (2009) *Everyday literacies in Africa: Ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy practices in Ethiopia,* Kampala: Fountain Publishers, available at: http://www.balid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Ethiopia-whole-book-knj.pdf

[14] See unpublished paper by Street, 'Why research multiple literacy practices?': https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.505.777&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Goody, J. (1968) *Literacy in Traditional Societies,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Green, J. and D. Bloome (1997) Ethnography and ethnographers of and in education: a situated perspective, in Flood, J., Heath, S. and D. Lapp (eds) *A Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy through the Communicative and Visual Arts* (pp 181-202), New York: Simon and Shuster Macmillan.

Kulick, D. and C. Stroud (1993) Conceptions and uses of literacy in a Papua New Guinean village, in B.V. Street (ed) *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lea, M. and Street, B.V. (1998) Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach, *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157-173.

Lienhardt, R.H. (1964) *Social Anthropology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McDonough, G. (2021) Persuading Pre-Professionals to be Participant Observers: Reflections on Teaching Anthropology and Education to Professional Teacher Candidates, *Teaching Anthropology*, 10(3), 70-82.

Mitchell, C. (1984) Typicality and the case study, in R.F. Ellen (ed) *Ethnographic research: a guide to general conduct* (pp 238-241), New York: Academic Press.

Moss, G. (2013) Reflective piece in *Mentor, colleague and friend: Celebrating Brian Street, Memories and appreciations from his doctoral students*, June 22nd 2013.

Nabi, R., Rogers, A. and B.V. Street (2009) *Hidden Literacies: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy practices in Pakistan,* Bury St Edmonds: Uppingham Press, available at: http://www.balid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/HiddenLiteracies_all_02.pdf

Nirantar (1997) *Exploring the Everyday,* Delhi: Nirantar, available here: http://www.nirantar.net/uploads/files/part2.pdf; http://www.nirantar.net/uploads/files/part3.pdf; http://www.nirantar.net/uploads/files/Part1.pdf

Ong, W. (1982) *Orality and Literacy: the technologizing of the word,* London: Routledge.

Openjuru, G., Baker, D., Rogers, A. and B. Street (2016) *Exploring adult literacy and numeracy practices: ethnographic case studies from Uganda,* Bury St. Edmonds: Uppingham Press, available at: http://www.uppinghamseminars.co.uk/Exploring%20Adult%20Literacy.pdf

Peacock, J.L. (1997) The Future of Anthropology, *American Anthropologist,* 99(1), 9-29.

Roberts, C., Byram, M., Barro, A., Jordan, S. and B.V. Street (2001) *Language learners as ethnographers,* Cleveland: Multilingual Matters

Robinson-Pant and Street, B.V. (2012) Students' and tutors' understanding of 'new' academic literacy practices, in Castello, M. and C. Donahue (eds) *University Writing: selves and texts in academic societies,* Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Street, B.V. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Street, B.V. (1993a) Review Article in *Journal of Research in Reading,* 16(2), 165-174. (Review of Hammersley, M. (1992) *What's wrong with ethnography?;* Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (1993) *Inside/outside: teacher research and knowledge*; and Cameron, D., Frazer, E., Harvey, P., Rampton, M. and K. Richardson (1992) *Researching language: issues of power and method).*

Street, B.V. (1993b) *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Street, B.V. (1993c) Culture is a Verb: anthropological aspects of language and cultural process, in Graddol, D., Thompson, L. and M. Byram (eds) L*anguage and Culture*, Clevedon: BAAL and Multilingual Matters, pp 23 – 43

Street, B.V. (1995) *Social Literacies: critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*, Harlow: Longman

Street, B.V. (1999) Academic Literacies. In Jones, C. and B.V. Street (eds.) *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and epistemological issues* (pp. 193–227). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Street, B.V. (2001a) Foreword, to Robinson-Pant, A. (2001) *Why eat green cucumber at the time of dying? Exploring the link between women's literacy and development: a Nepal perspective,* Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education

Street, B. V. (2001b) *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives*, London: Routledge

Street, B.V. (2004) Thoughts on anthropology and education, Guest Editorial, *Anthropology Today,* Special Issue on Anthropology and Education, 20(6), 1-2.

Street, B.V., Rogers, A. and D. Baker (2006) Adult teachers as researchers: ethnographic approaches to numeracy and literacy as social practices in South Asia, *Convergence,* XXXIX(1), 31-44.

Street, B.V. (2009) 'Hidden' Features of Academic Paper Writing, *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics*, University of Pennsylvania, Spring 2009, available at: UPenn https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=wpel

Street, J. and B.V. Street (1995) The schooling of literacy, in Murphy, P., Salinger, M., Bourne, J. and M. Briggs (eds) *Subject learning in the primary curriculum: issues in English, science and mathematics,* London: Routledge

UNESCO (2003) Literacies – New meanings of literacy position paper, Paris, France: UNESCO/ Ed/BA.LIT