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## CHAPTER 3

# LEARNING SPACES: FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

In this chapter we seek to connect the applied aspects of learning spaces and productive learning described in the last chapter with an internationally emerging body of research and theory related to literacy, learning, media, youth and identity. To demonstrate the links between what we have observed in Australia and what is being explored overseas, we have organised the chapter around a series of what we believe are significant questions.

If remote Indigenous communities are to overcome their economic disadvantage and political marginalisation they will require skilled individuals who can facilitate a strategic articulation with mainstream Australian society. Similarly, if young people in remote communities are to become competent, mature adults able to shape their own futures and the economic and social viability of their communities it is essential that they have access to learning experiences that will contribute to the formation of a positive sense of self, strong cultural identities, and independent learning and literacy skills.

In most public commentary and policy debate, schooling—and the attainment of English literacy—is promoted as the singular pathway to successful futures in remote Indigenous communities. Almost invariably, that success is defined in terms of employment and participation in the ‘real economy’ (Pearson 2000). Consequently, enormous political and financial investments are being channelled



into early childhood, school, and vocational education and training (VET) programs in remote areas, but to now most results have failed to meet expectations. Research on literacy in the Indigenous context tends to focus on schools with a particular emphasis on teaching methodology, curriculum and outcomes. What little is known about adult literacy in remote Indigenous communities indicates that literacy levels are low and the lack of literacy is affecting the ability of Indigenous people to participate fully in employment, to the degree employment is available in those communities (Kral and Falk 2004; Kral and Schwab 2003) Cross-sectional, synchronic assessments of English language and literacy in instructional settings are not only problematic in terms of what they are actually assessing among school children, but they also provide no insight into the maturation of skills across the lifespan. In fact, few studies ask what happens to language and literacy once acquired (Heath 1997). We argue that it is important to know what happens to young people after they leave institutional learning environments and what they take with them into their futures and across the life course:

- ▶ how they use literacy in everyday life;
- ▶ how they acquire new learning as systems and technologies alter;

- ▶ what experiences lead to leadership roles, further education and employment; and
- ▶ what factors lead to successful life outcomes and adult well-being.

As researchers we have looked to theory in anthropology, sociolinguistics and human development to help us answer these questions and to make sense of what is going on in the social context that we are examining. To do this we have focused our attention on what *is* happening, not what is not. What we have found is that what is happening—and our insights and conclusions—is often in conversation with international theoretical developments.

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LEARNING AND SCHOOLING?

Policies and programs too often equate 'learning' with 'schooling' but these are fundamentally different things. School is a limited institution, both temporally and socially, but learning is a fundamental feature of human life. As John Singleton once wrote,

...schools are complex social institutions, not general models of education and learning. If anything, they are extreme—and unlikely—models of enculturation. From the early acquisition of language to the later induction into occupation and social roles, we learn by observing and enacting social roles in everyday social contexts. Learning is situated in communities of practice, and schools are very limited as such communities. We

do learn to be students in school, but we learn to be adults in adult society. (Singleton 1999: 457)

As mentioned earlier, a basic tenet of anthropology is that cultural forms are transmitted from one generation to the next through enculturation or socialisation as well as direct and indirect teaching and learning. Socialisation can be broadly defined as 'the process through which a child or other novice acquires the knowledge, orientations, and practices that enable him or her to participate effectively and appropriately in the social life of a particular community' (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002: 339). Direct teaching using a Western model of 'schooling' or institutional learning was introduced into remote Indigenous society relatively recently—in some communities only within the last 50 years or less. Consequently, there has been a profound shift in socialisation and learning processes among remote groups within only a few generations. Learning previously relied solely on observation, imitation and guided participation through everyday social practice in the company of elders within a hunter-gatherer existence; colonisation introduced a sedentary Western-oriented lifestyle pivoting around learning from outside experts within institutional frameworks. The taken for granted role of schooling in remote contexts is rarely questioned. However, in our minds understanding the links between culture, learning and language and the sites in which learning is situated requires a view of learning that extends beyond the traditional frame of 'the school'.

## WHAT ROLE DOES LANGUAGE PLAY IN LEARNING?

Most importantly, the process of socialisation is realised to a great extent through the use of language, as language is 'the primary symbolic medium through which cultural knowledge is communicated and instantiated, negotiated and contested, reproduced and transformed' (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002: 339). This process, referred to as 'language socialisation', is the lifelong process whereby social and cultural practices and understandings shape the way that people acquire and use language within the local culture or speech community or 'community of practice' (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986).

Researchers in language socialisation have drawn on theory from anthropology and sociolinguistics to examine how learners acquire the knowledge, practices and dispositions required to function as competent members of social groups and cultural communities. Language socialisation researchers have addressed the fact that for many people and communities today language socialisation involves not only the co-existence of more than one language or dialect. It is also commonly mediated by new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and may involve the development of related oral, written and multimodal, as well as cultural, practices intertwined with new intercultural or 'hybrid' identities (Duff 2008).

Until relatively recently, for many Aboriginal people in the remote regions of Australia, the production and reproduction of linguistic forms was linked to a nomadic lifestyle where language skills, strategies and attitudes were tied to a predictable framework of practice. Now in the remote Indigenous context, socialisation processes have often been deeply affected by changing access to stable family lives and the changing structural features of local communities. Social relations and the practices of cultural production and reproduction have altered. Aboriginal adolescents are now more distanced from traditional language immersion contexts than ever before. Indigenous Australian languages are in a state of language shift, with some endangered (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies with the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages 2005). Former language socialisation processes are fragmenting and traditional oral practices are diminishing (Simpson and Wigglesworth 2008); adult vernacular communicative competence is seen as less relevant for contemporary conditions and circumstances. Simultaneously, with the predominance of English in the domains of education, employment and the media, many young people have internalised the message that only English, rather than their mother tongue, has value. Yet many Indigenous children and adolescents are failing to acquire good communicative competence in Standard Australian English (SAE), leaving them 'without a coherent encircling structure of language socialisation' (Heath 2008: xii).

This highlights a significant question underpinning our research: how will Indigenous youth develop the communicative competence and discourse practices required to undertake the important transition from adolescence to adulthood in the globalised digital world?

### HOW IS LANGUAGE RELATED TO THE ACQUISITION OF ADULT ROLES?

International research indicates that learning and language socialisation continue well into the adolescent years (Heath 2008; Hoyle and Adger 1998) and adulthood as verbal and written registers and styles are acquired according to emerging roles, identities and practices (Heath and McLaughlin 1993). In fact, only during older childhood and adolescence do speakers begin to encounter to a substantial degree the styles, registers, and genres of discourse that advance negotiation, exchange, knowledge acquisition, and skill build-up. These syntactic and discourse structures, as well as their supporting symbol structuring, provide young speakers with the linguistic and conceptual tools to move toward adult roles as workers, parents and community leaders. School is an important site for the acquisition of these structures; however even in mainstream monolingual contexts schooling alone cannot provide the highly complex and intertextual structures of discourse required for later language and literacy development for adult

communication needs.<sup>1</sup> This dilemma is amplified in remote Indigenous communities where teaching is in English as a second language, and school attendance and retention rates are low. Accordingly, significant language development opportunities for older children and adolescents must come from their time beyond classrooms.

International research indicates the importance of collaborative projects with adults for adolescent language development where young people are given responsibility for adult roles and in the performance of such roles practice a broad range of lexical and syntactic structures, registers and genres (Heath 1998; Heath and Smyth 1999; Tannock 1998). Heath has noted the importance of youth engagement in collaborative tasks with adults in youth-based organisations. It is in cross-age tasks that require planning, practice and production work that young people 'receive authentic practice of linguistic structures that reflect planning ahead, linking current actions to future outcomes and self-assessing and self-correcting their own behaviors and attitudes' (Heath 1998: 217). Moreover, Heath continues, if adolescents have few opportunities to engage in joint work tasks with adults, their language use and development will be affected.

## WHERE AND HOW DOES LEARNING ACTUALLY TAKE PLACE?

Linguists and anthropologists have opened up new understandings of the interrelationship between culture, language and literacy with the application of ethnographic methods to the study of communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Heath 1983). A range of theories have also shaped understandings of learning and literacy. Vygotsky's 'activity theory' is for many teachers and researchers the foundation of current thinking about learning and human development with its emphasis on socially mediated learning (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1985). More recently many theorists have drawn on anthropology and sociolinguistics in forging a situated and social perspective on participatory learning that broadens notions of learning beyond formal instruction and advances the notion that learning and literacy are purposeful, context-specific and socially organised practices. As a result, a divide has grown between those who see school as the primary site for learning and others who have developed a social theory of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff et al. 2003) encompassing a view of learning through social practice. Such writers emphasise that literacy is not only an instructional process, but also a cultural process and that 'everyday practice' is a more powerful source of socialisation than intentional pedagogy (Lave 1988: 14). In other words, in addition to instruction in school, it is ongoing out-of-school social practice across the lifespan that determines competence:



Humans need to practice what they are learning a good deal before they master it. Furthermore, they tend to lose a good deal of their learning—including school learning—when they cease to practice the skills associated with this learning in their daily lives. This is why it is easy to discover many adults who are no longer very good at school-based science, math, or literacy if they do not, in their work or home lives, practice these on a regular basis. (Gee 2003: 68)

Our work starts with the observation that learning is enhanced where the links between content and context are acknowledged and supported. From this point of view, learning is situated and experience is the foundation of learning. Our research has been deeply informed by the notion of situated learning and its emphasis on engagement in learning at all stages of life. When learning is viewed as 'situated activity' and the focus is shifted from individual skills acquisition to focus on competence and expertise, one can clearly observe that learning is derived from 'participation in the social world' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 43).

Lave and Wenger (1991) have provided specific examples of the situated nature of learning in their descriptions of the process of apprenticeship in various cross-cultural contexts. What emerged from those studies was insight into the process whereby in each setting knowledge and competence was actively gained and expressed initially—through observation and later through participation—in some valued enterprise or activity. Their work involved a significant extension of the notion of situated learning as not merely learning situated in practice, but as ‘an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world’ (Lave and Wenger 1991: 35). Their major insight was the development of an analytical viewpoint on learning, employing the concept of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, essentially a rich and insightful description of the process of various forms of apprenticeship through which individuals become members of communities of practice. The process of legitimate peripheral participation involves learners who are recognised as having a legitimate right or responsibility to initially observe and over time engage in activities, construct and employ artefacts and acquire knowledge and skills. In this process learners are on a practical social learning trajectory among a community of practitioners—first as observers, then as competent members, and ultimately as creators and transformers of knowledge and relationships in communities, society and culture. Other scholars have affirmed the benefits of learning through observation and participation in collaborative activities (Paradise and Rogoff 2009; Rogoff et al. 2003).

This focus on the socially situated nature of learning draws attention to the learner as a member of a socio-cultural community, a member of a ‘community of practice’ (Engeström 1987; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). This theoretical perspective draws learning out of the conventional confines of formal teaching, prescribed curricula and attainment of individual outcomes and qualifications and embraces a notion of meaningful learning that is connected with, and of value and relevance to, the social community to which learners belong. Importantly, it denies the binary of ‘informal’ versus ‘formal’ learning and with it the assumption that if a person is ‘educated’ or ‘learned’ they have gone to school. Rather it asserts that learning is not in the transfer of abstract or even traditional knowledge but in the socially situated production of knowledge. Accordingly, and in our research, we have found it is far more instructive to engage in an exploration of the ‘doing’ of learning... than focusing on (didactic) teaching as the cause and condition of possibility for learning’ (Lave 2011: 144–145). In our experience, ‘learning’ is ‘context-embedded’; it is found in the situated *doing* of life. In this way, and most importantly, it is inseparable from the learning space and the practically situated processes of production, observable in our project in the various creations of film, music, dance, theatre and enterprise by the Indigenous young people who shared with us their practice.

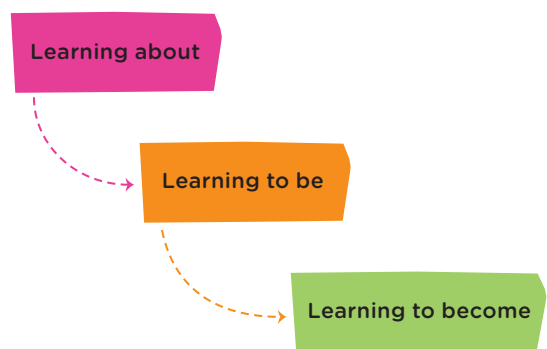


## OK. BUT LEARNING ‘WHAT’?

Theoretical models of learning have become more sophisticated over time, reflecting deeper understandings of the nature of learning, but also the ways in which learning has itself changed shape as the social and technological world has become more complex. Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown suggest that learning has had a different focus over time (Thomas and Seely Brown 2009). At the beginning of the twentieth century, learning was broadly conceived of as a process for the formal acquisition of knowledge. What needed to be learned was stable, as were the contexts within which that learning took place; learning was essentially ‘learning about’. This fitted the needs of rising industrial nations and framed the delivery of education in public schools. A major shift in understanding of learning came through the work of Lave and Wenger and others which, as noted above, demonstrated the situated nature of learning and its social construction. Critical to this reconceptualisation of learning was recognition of the process whereby individuals gain some practical and socially valued competence through observation and action. According to this view of learning, individuals are enculturated into skills and practices that enable not only participation but also ‘learning to learn’. This notion of learning included the various forms of apprenticeship that take place outside ‘school’ and which result in not just the acquisition of knowledge and skills but of a new role in practice.

Thomas and Brown refer to this as ‘learning to be’. Both of these conceptions of learning assume a relatively stable environment, with a sense of permanence and continuity over time. A new focus on learning, they argue, is required to accommodate the increasing instability and change of the twenty-first century. ‘Learning to become’ is what is required in a world where knowledge and skills are not static, where the content of what one has learned and the learning trajectories through which one learns that content are continually replaced and realigned as once constant contexts now continually shift. Learning today and into the future is a socially situated process and practice of becoming over and over again. This is no less true for Indigenous youth as they struggle to become the leaders of tomorrow and the guardians of cultural knowledge.

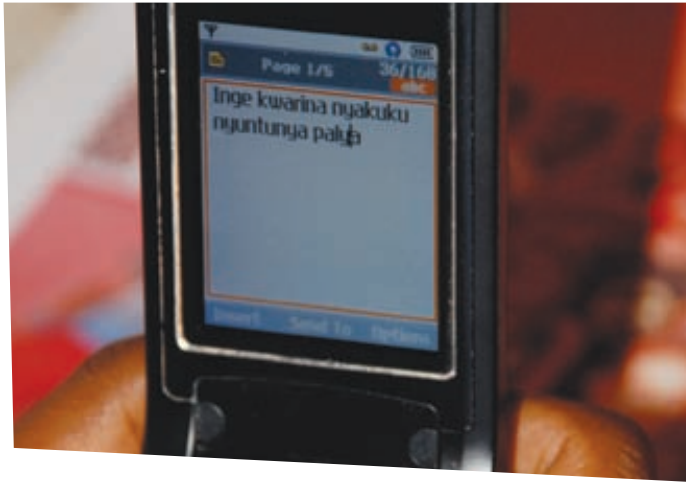
FIGURE 1.  
**THE EVOLUTION OF LEARNING**  
[THOMAS AND BROWN 2009]



## HOW IS LEARNING LINKED TO IDENTITY?

The phrase 'learning to become' expresses well the inextricable link between learning and identity. On one level a person's identity is defined in relation to others, but also identity is formed and performed in a fundamentally social process of 'self-making' in interaction with others (Bartlett 2007: 53). Identity is constantly shaped, negotiated and enacted. It is contingent and elastic, in a constant process of formation and change (Mallan et al. 2010: 268). We have observed among the young people participating in this project what Lave and Wenger (1991) have described as the clear link between learning and identity. We have watched individuals work together in various learning spaces. We have observed the acquisition of new technological skills and new literacies. We have watched as they gain confidence, solve problems, create knowledge and assume new responsibilities. As Bartlett and Holland show, to learn is to become a different person (Bartlett and Holland 2002). In other words, learning and the acquisition of various literacies is not just about acquiring new skills but also about changing identity and representations of self (Barton et al. 2007: 210). In this sense learning has a trajectory. While our research is not a study of Indigenous identity, the ways in which young people engage in learning and with multimodal literacies appears to be a process whereby they shape and reshape their senses of self, often in positive and socially affirming ways.

Internationally, conventional understandings of identity are being challenged as new media provide a new fluid and flexible space for expressions of self where 'individual' and 'technologies' converge (Mallan et al. 2010: 264). In our research we have observed Indigenous young people enter the global space of *Facebook* and *YouTube* posting films and music they have created with digital technologies, identifying themselves as fathers, mothers, musicians, entrepreneurs, cultural custodians and much more. They are building social networks and portraying their lives, their cultures and their countries to each other, to other Indigenous people and to the world, in a way that would have been unforeseeable a generation ago. What is most impressive is the skill and confidence they present in these media. They portray not only their individual personalities and creativities, or their Aboriginal identities and cultures. They also display what Lave and Wenger have termed 'identities of mastery' (1991: 85), as we note with musicians learning the *GarageBand* software. They are skilled and clever participants in both the local and global world, enacting an expertise that is recognised both in their remote home communities and increasingly in the outside world.



## HOW IS LEARNING LINKED TO THE DIGITAL WORLD?

Among the most significant features in the contemporary world are digital networks and new media. By definition these technologies dismantle boundaries of time and space and have propelled change across the globe. From the perspective of our project, young people in the geographically remote communities with which we are working are active participants in this world and they have become, in less than a generation, participants in projects, productions and communications that would have been not only impossible but literally unimaginable twenty years ago. The implications of these changes for conceptions of learning are profound and illustrate the relevancy of Thomas and Brown's notion of 'learning to become':

Digital media and networks are increasingly prominent features of this constantly changing world. These developments are extremely significant for understanding the nature of learning today in that they have enabled new and pervasive forms of what Wenger, McDermott and Snyder refer to as 'knowledge-based social structures' (Wenger et al. 2002: 5). These digitally-based structures challenge existing notions of communities of practice in that they often involve extension of communication outside the local community (e.g., via film or music recordings) and/or the creation of multiple and varied virtual spaces where young people can interact (e.g., *Facebook*). As a result, as James Gee (2005) suggests, understanding

(and supporting) learning requires a focus on the 'space' where people interact rather than their membership in a local community situated in a physical or geographical location; he refers to such spaces as 'affinity spaces'. This idea fits well our experience and understanding of new media and the nature of learning among young people in remote Aboriginal communities, and we include them as a particular type of learning space.

Gee's analysis of learning within affinity spaces also aligns with our own observations of learning among young Indigenous people engaged with digital media. In these places and in these spaces, learning is fundamentally different from what takes place in schools. While school learning is increasingly focused on 'learning about' (as assessed by NAPLAN tests and the like) learning spaces are sites where young people are 'engaging with information and use it *in a broader social context* as a crucial part of... productive inquiry' (Thomas and Brown 2009: 3, emphasis in original). That productive inquiry is part of the process of 'learning to become', of assuming responsibility and shaping images and stories and interacting with the outside world.

The engagement of young people with digital media illustrates the nature of the process of 'learning to become'.

Young people today are confronted with and enter more and more affinity spaces. They see a different and arguably powerful vision of learning, affiliation and identity when they do so. Learning becomes both a personal and unique trajectory through a complex space of opportunities (i.e., a person's own unique movement through various affinity spaces over time) and a social journey as one shares aspects of that trajectory with others (who may be very different from oneself and inhabit otherwise quite different spaces) for a shorter or longer time before moving on. What these young people see in school may pale in comparison (Gee 2005: 231)

**EARLY DESIGN FOR THE 'YOUTH LEARNING' POSTER**  
PHOTO: YOUTH LEARNING PROJECT



## HOW ARE THESE NEW MEDIA LINKED TO LITERACY?

The rapid development of ICTs, an increase in affordable, small mobile technologies and the penetration of the internet and mobile telephony over the last decade account for an explosion in new modes and channels for communication and multimedia production. Digital technology is altering styles of engagement and learning and catalysing computer mediated communication and multimedia cultural production outside institutional or instructional settings. Internationally, such developments have led to substantial ethnographic inquiry (Buckingham 2008b; Hull 2003; Ito et al. 2010) into youth and the emergence of changing social practice surrounding new media and have led to new understandings of language and literacy. Socio-cultural learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1990) looks to everyday social practice in out-of-school settings for models of learning and engagement (Hull and Schultz 2002) that differ from what is typically found in instructional locations such as schools or training. This approach aligns with a growing literature examining the relationship between online communication and changes to alphabetic reading and writing conventions (Crystal 2008) and language use in new media settings (Jones and Schieffelin 2009; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). International studies (Hull 2003; Soep 2006) suggest that fresh thinking about literacy has been ushered in by the arrival of digital technologies and the emergence of changing social practice surrounding digital technologies.

Writers comment that mobile phone messaging and online writing is strengthening and enhancing our language abilities (Baron 2008). Others note that youth uptake of informal forms of writing in online contexts is part of a broader set of social and cultural shifts in the status of printed and written communication (Ito et al. 2010). An affordance of computer mediated communication is its multimodal aspect (Kress 2010) evidenced in the increasing prevalence of 'multimodal literacies' that draw on a variety of communicative options including speech, writing, image, gesture and sound (Hull and Nelson 2005). Computer mediated communication requires a reframing of what is meant by literacy in a globalised world increasingly 'filled with digital artefacts and multiple modes and media available for communication across multiple symbolic systems' (Stornaiuolo et al. 2009: 384).

In remote Indigenous Australia a digital divide is evident in many locations (Daly 2005; Rennie et al. 2010), nevertheless altered individual and collective youth media practices have developed in accordance with broadband, satellite or Wi-Fi availability (Featherstone 2011). Communication using mobile phones, texting and online communication via social networking sites is becoming central to everyday practice for Indigenous youth. As we note, public access sites such as libraries, media organisations, youth centres and arts programs are providing important collective lifespan learning spaces in locations where there is minimal engagement in formal education and training. The developing ICT competence of young people is defining a

generational identity distinct from that of their elders, with digital media representing an arena where youth can exhibit technological expertise that exceeds that of the older generation.

In the digital environment, learning a new procedure, performing technologically complex tasks and participating in new modes of cultural production can be mediated in ways that do not necessarily privilege alphabetic written systems. While multimodal practice benefits from the intuitive meta-textual skills of alphabetic literacy, such practice also incorporates gesture, signing, gaze, eye contact and haptic or kinaesthetic aspects. The creative, icon-based approach embedded in the Mac *iLife* suite of applications lends itself to a rich layering of image, sound and text. Hence, young people who have familiarity, though not fluency, with standardised alphabetic symbols find it relatively easy to work out how to navigate their way through the icons and symbols to construct texts and engage with creative cultural production (e.g., producing music and editing films).

Digital media technologies have engendered an explosion in multimodal literacies among youth who have access to the new tools of production—computers and mobile phones—enabling the generation, dissemination and decoding of multimodal texts. The visual-spatial and symbolic conventions used in online and new software applications are enabling users to interpret, read and manipulate technology in personally and socially meaningful ways. Despite the assumed dominance of English in digital media and online



**SHANE WHITE AND  
MAXWELL TASMAN,  
CANBERRA 2011**

PHOTO: YOUTH LEARNING PROJECT

practices, the content of many multimedia activities is enabling some young people to extend their vernacular literacy skills in song-writing or transcribing and translating subtitles for films.

To sum up, Indigenous youth in remote communities are encountering a complex of competing and conflicting language socialisation influences and learning and identity formation pathways. These young people are finding they must balance traditional socio-cultural obligations with the increasing requirement to participate in the wider Australian community. New understandings of what it means to

participate in activities and relationships across social, geographic and historical time and space, and into imagined futures, must be developed and enacted through language and other meaning-making systems. We suggest that innovative ways of thinking are needed to address how Indigenous youth will develop the communicative competence and discourse practices they will require to undertake the important transition from adolescence to adulthood in the globalised digital world. Building on the theoretical models outlined in this chapter, we now move onto a range of practical suggestions or design principles for thinking about youth learning in out-of-school settings.

### Chapter 3 endnotes

1. Shirley Brice Heath, pers. comm., August 2008.

