It is therefore a mistaken dichotomy to wonder whether the unit of analysis of identity should be the community or the person. The focus must be on the process of their mutual constitution. (Wenger, 1998, p. 146)

**Literacy as (Inter) Action**

From the earliest moments of our lives we are engaged in interaction with our environment. We are not simply ‘born’ any more than we are simply ‘babies’. At birth we are both the cause and effect of interplay between mother and midwife, forceps, doctor, father, towelling, metal instruments, tables and nursing staff. We interact with people and things. How do we know what is food and what is not? What is cold and hot? What makes us cry, laugh, hurt? We can only reach a definition of ourselves by reference to other people and other things. However, our gaze over the last century or more has been more ‘on the baby’ than on the interaction between baby and her environment.

As babies grow into children, the interactions become more frequent and diverse. The contexts vary, people vary, places and things are more varied. Kids go home and they go to school. They play sport and they use the internet. They learn to read and write, go to church, make love and war. In all cases, they only achieve this as joint accomplishments with other human and physical elements of their environment. Their learning is a co-production drawing upon human and physical resources in the interaction.

This paper began from our belief that we tend to nominalise ‘literacy’ rather than ‘operationalise’ it as learning. From the time we first heard the term ‘multiliteracies’ (New London Group, 1997) we were uneasy about it without really knowing why. Perhaps it is because it makes an already too-complex matter even more complex, and then nominalises it into a big and powerful entity.

**Process and Product**

We can look at literacy as having two dimensions: process and product. The process is the interaction between the co-participants, be they human or physical (person, computer, textbook). The product resulting from the interaction is often described as a ‘text’, spoken, written or non-verbal, that is imbued with meaning through the values and purpose that bind the human participants.
Those following the study of literacy as ‘reading and writing skills’ focus particularly on the technical and purported cognitive aspects of literacy. These are aspects of the learner and are concerned with the human capital skills and knowledge related to the features of the print (letter formation, vowel and consonant configuration). These technologies are in fact an invaluable ‘tool kit’. Reading and writing are transferable, it just takes a while. This is usually because students have only been taught the reading and writing technologies, not the contextual and taken-for-granted information that makes for an adequately resourced ‘literacy event’. The ‘text-type’ and ‘genre’ folk have taken this one step further by including the format of the document and grammatical considerations in the explicit contextual data, but the interactive, cultural and interpersonal material is still missing, and these dimensions include the bulk of the resources required for knowledge and identity shifts.

Those involved in the study of critical or socio-cultural literacy view literacy as the activities associated with communication among people. These activities are considered to have particular meanings which are available only from mutual understanding of the values that bind meaning-sets together. These meanings (and therefore values) must be understood in order for the social participants to have a measure of confidence and control over their micro (one-to-one), their meso (group) and their macro (group of groups) social settings. We look mostly at ‘the text’ and not at the literacy events, apart from asserting that they be critical. But how would we know whether a literacy event is good, bad or indifferent? For the critical element to have teeth, we also need to have some conception of the common good and how it can be conceived without being generalised beyond meaning.

Socio-cultural (critical) literacy makes assumptions about resources. Effective critical literacy assumes that the agents, or learners, have at their disposal the resources on which they can draw in the production of spoken, written or non-verbal texts in all of life’s social and cultural situations. Furthermore, it assumes that they have some form of control over those texts and contexts, whatever that may mean. This presupposes that literacy education actually provides the necessary, purpose-related resources in terms of knowledge and skills necessary to resource the acquisition of critical or socio-cultural literacy. This reaffirms the importance of focusing more directly on the resources that are drawn on in learning interactions. Perhaps we should be talking about multi-sited literacy events where different socio-critical knowledge and identity resources are required to help generate critical, designer, designed or desired outcomes.

But what resources are necessary? And are we talking about resources for literacy events at and for school? Or are we talking about literacy for the multi sites for which school should be preparing children - the sites for life?

As a way of responding to these questions we find the metaphor of a literacy ecology useful. To talk of literacy ecologies rather than literacy skills, literacy events or even literacy activities provides a way of identifying the kinds of resources and interactions required for critical literacy, their availability and the capacities required to draw on them.

**Literacy Ecologies**
The literature on ecology and ecosystems (e.g., Colinvaux, 1986) describes an ecology as the study of interrelationships of living organisms and their environment. An environment comprises a living thing’s surroundings, such as other plants and animals, climate, rocks and soil. The community of organisms in a particular place, together with its nonliving surroundings, form a functioning system that biologists call an ecosystem. Ecosystems have flows of matter and energy and they have inputs and outputs. While the site of analysis is the ecosystem, the unit of analysis is the interrelationship. Building from a concept developed by Barton (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998), this paper shows the potential of the idea for an even greater explanatory role: the idea of literacy ecologies allows us to acknowledge more than the fact that text is embedded in context or that events occur in a milieu. It provides for a new focus on a new unit of analysis: the interrelationships between the various components of the ecosystem – the individual, the community, and the resources through a study of the interactions between these elements.

‘Literacy learning’ occurs in different situations and environments that have different ecologies of which particular institutional and organisational characteristics are only one aspect. Schools for example, provide one set of literacy ecologies; so do workplaces. Literacy ecologies are also operating in clubs, organisations and families. In each case, we can look at the interrelationships among the participants, resources, processes and products associated with literacy learning.

Here we wish to discuss that particular set of interrelationships, often referred to as a resource, called social capital, which includes its meanings, production, uses, dimensions, misuses, measurement, and its possible effects on the common good. The social units or ‘ecosystems’ we are using are communities. In one sense, these are similar to communities of practice (e.g., Wenger, 1998). In our major studies we have used geographical communities of 2000 to 5000 people each comprising a rural township and its surrounding area.

**Social Capital**

Social capital is the taken-for-granted (and therefore often neglected) ‘third capital’ after physical and human. Bourdieu introduced the term to the sociological world in his paper called ‘Economic capital, cultural capital, social capital’ in 1983, though it has been in use for much longer than that. To our knowledge the earliest use is by an economist called Silverman in 1935. While established authorities define social capital in their own ways (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993), broadly speaking, social capital (Woolcock 1998, p.155) ‘encompass(es) the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit’. Networks, norms and trust involve formal and informal associations - from the formal and informal clubs and associations, to the implicit networks captured by ‘old school tie’, the Hospital Auxiliary, the email chat groups, to the neighbours over the fence and the lot we meet in the park. We are also talking about every other group, formal and informal, to which we all belong. It’s not whether some of us belong to more or fewer networks that counts; it’s the nature of those networks that seems to be important.
Portes (1998, p. 7) observes that, ‘Whereas economic capital is in people’s bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships’. One interesting reading of the literacy/ecology analogy is that social capital is the ‘energy’. We cannot label energy to trace its passage through an ecosystem. All we can do is measure indicators such as biomass and respiration. In real ecosystems, energy is not constrained to flow along set routes, but travels through complex loops and pathways created by situation and circumstance. In the literacy ecology application, we cannot see social capital but we can look for its pathways, those complex loops of interactions, of which language and literacy are indicators.

The ‘concept of limiting factors’, a major theme in the ecological literature, provides a further analogy. It is defined by Colinvaux (1986, p. 34) as follows:

> The presence and success of an organism or group of organisms depends upon a complex of conditions. Any condition that approaches or exceeds the limits of tolerance is said to be a limiting condition or a limiting factor.

So if some resource is either not present in enough quantity, or in excess, for example heat or a particular chemical, the system becomes sick. In applying the concept of limiting factors to a literacy ecology, there may be plentiful human capital and physical capital, but if there is not sufficient social capital (and of the right kind) then it becomes a limiting factor affecting the sustainability and viability of that literacy ecology or community. Similarly, the limiting factor might be lack of opportunities for interaction, or knowledge or identity resources of the required kinds. In fact, it would be interesting to analyse the literacy practices surrounding academic writing about ‘critical literacy’ in this way.

So while we all know the importance of physical (economic, infrastructural, technological, and environmental) capital, and recognise the importance of human capital as knowledge and skills, we seem to have missed the significance of the social capital required for effective social interaction. After all, adequate stocks of physical and human capital can only be put into circulation and used (drawn on) through social processes.

A research program into aspects of social capital and its mechanisms - networks, norms (shared values) and their associated oil of trust started in 1997 ([http://www.clr.edu.au/](http://www.clr.edu.au/); [http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au](http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au)). One strand of the research concerning the effects of social capital on the interactions in real life communities that is relevant here is the analysis of the nature of the interactive productivity between the individuals and the local networks in a community. We argued that for social capital to be a useful idea, we needed to understand what its components might be, how it was produced, where it came from, whether it could be accumulated and how it was used. We reasoned that to find answers to questions of this kind we needed to look at interactions or communication between people, for that is surely where social capital must lie - inhering in the structure of those relations, as Portes (1998) puts it. Interaction is also the site for literacy production, as noted earlier, and this coincidence was also of great interest to us. By looking at the sites of social capital and literacy production, we should be able to identify and
analyse their features or qualities. This examination should also tell us something about the relationship between literacy, learning and social capital.

Three Communities Study
The findings reported here are based on data from a study of the interactive interpersonal dynamics in three whole communities with the purpose of finding out what social factors made vibrant and active communities work together. All three focus on rural townships of around 2,500 people, all suffer typical rural Australian problems of unemployment, loss of youth to cities, remoteness, and shrinking commercial and government services among others. Purposefully different profile criteria were used in other respects. One community is regarded as vibrant, active, go-ahead, empowered, attracting small business and government assistance. Another community is virtually a single-industry town, while the third relies on small business catering to an annual influx of tourists.

The data were collected from a range of community texts gathered from participants, from various public offices including the local government authority, and from attendance at community meetings. A sample of 30 (on average) community members in each of the three communities was also interviewed. These community members were identified using a purposeful sampling technique: when people were cross-mentioned by three other informants as being regarded by the community as sources of knowledge or advice, they qualified for selection as a participant. As well as being the subject of interviews (semi-structured but flexibly applied and open-ended consistent with the grounded theory approach) these key informants were invited to contribute self-taped audio recordings and self-kept reflective journals for a week of activity. Once this group was established, a socio-economic matrix was used to ensure no significant group was omitted, such as ‘youth’, ‘hippies’ or ‘migrants’, and (the very few) categorical omissions were rectified by returning to key informants for advice on sectoral representation. The interviews and other recorded material were transcribed in full.

The data were analysed using a variety of micro and macro techniques. Using grounded theory in the first instance, the multitude of interactions was categorised. A variety of analyses across the broad data set showed themes and common threads. Comparisons across the communities highlighted the levels and types of interactions between individuals and associations in each of the three communities. Ways in which the communities could be said to learn during these interactions were identified. Using the concept of social capital (with its components of norms, networks and trust) as a basis, the effects and influences of the levels of interaction on the common good in the community were examined. We also used the principles of conversation analysis based on ethnomethodology (EM), on individual segments of interactions. The EM principles and procedures (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967) and those relating to conversation analysis (Heritage, 1984) included techniques such as the Standardised Relational Pair (SRP) (Eglin & Hester, 1992) to identify and document the conceptual cluster surrounding the participants’ reportings of their experiences. This conceptual cluster analysis around the two SRP terms is called a Category
Analysis (Freebody, 1998), and yields useful results about the broader social consequences of local interactive processes. In addition, other techniques, such as manual thematic techniques (Babbie, 1998) and the NUD*IST software package were employed.

The scope of the data gathered across the three communities, is summarised below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tape recorded interviews</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>60 - 90 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal individu tapes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10 - 45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal diaries</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10 - 30 pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tape recorded meetings</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10 - 30 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

Our findings about the categories of resources that people draw on in their interactions as they make sense of their worlds include no real surprises. The two main groups are encompassed by the headings ‘knowledge’ and ‘identity’ resources. The knowledge is about people, places and things under sub-headings of knowledge-who, knowledge-what, knowledge-how, knowledge-when and knowledge-why. The identity resources encompass identity of self, others, groups, community, region, country and so on.

They are the personal and social resources that participants draw on as they may act in new roles, change their behaviour, be self-confident and willing to act for the common good of their communities. This research (Falk & Harrison, 1998; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000) shows that knowledge and identity resources are crucial for the development of social capital.

The kinds of resources drawn on and their adequacy were determined by the *purpose* of the interactions. In fact the concept of purpose was central both to our discoveries of the nature of social capital and its very definition. The purpose of the social project in hand defined the knowledge and identity resources which were drawn on and hence then valued as important. While Gee’s (1996) ‘Discourse’ is held together by ‘values’, we found that these values are only given meaning by the purpose of a project. That is, the values upon which the Discourse is premised are only called values because they are shared by the participants in the ecology and clustered around a purpose. In the Discourse of, say, ‘basketball’, the shared values are associated with the purpose of ‘doing’ basketball.

We also found that many of the interactions had all the features of what we define as learning. Learning, in fact, permeated the most mundane activities. People set about their activities in associational and civic life to achieve something (a purpose), to solve a problem or find something out. We have called the interactions which are intended for the common good and purpose, to be learning, and that it is these interactions which produce social capital. The community groups observed often displayed characteristics of what may be called a ‘learning community’, which resonates with ‘learning organisation’ and has similar features. It also resonates with ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998), and we have taken this generalisation further to call the groups in which this activity occurs ‘communities of common-purpose’, since it is the purpose which defines the knowledge/values of the group for purpose-related activity. Gee’s term for this seems to be ‘projects’.
Therefore, we can argue that the resources required for a community to build social capital are associated with knowledge and identity, and that they require opportunities of different kinds to allow the interactions to create the social capital (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Simultaneous building and using of social capital in interactions between individuals](image-url)

The model shows that social capital is built as it is used. The model applies to both geographic communities and other communities of common purpose such as email chat groups and so on. Kilpatrick and Falk (2000) note that both informal and deliberately arranged learning interactions help people get to know one another and develop networks. The interactions also build a commitment to the community, and increase people’s confidence to act for the benefit of the community. Our research also tells us that the need to plan and provide for opportunities to interact, opportunities in which the appropriate (common purpose-related) knowledge and identity resources can be used, is often ignored or assumed. That is, without the interactions afforded by community events, activities, meetings and small and large interactions of all kinds; social capital simply cannot develop or be used.

However, while the actual quantities of opportunities for interaction are vital, the qualities of those interactions are equally as important. For successful community learning to occur, not only do the resources need to come together in interactions (opportunities, events, activities), but the interactions need to have particular qualities, and these are the key ones:
**Historicity**

Often unconscious, but crucial for decision-making and learning (Falk & Harrison, 1998), the use of historical memories of places, people (their skills and personality characteristics), and common resources are drawn on in people’s private and business interactions. These histories are vital in making decisions about future courses of action. Historical knowledge enables new knowledge to be contextualized and applied. Without drawing on adequate short and long-term historicity, decisions and judgements are impaired.

**Externality**

The importance of external interactions has been an important piece of sociological knowledge from Stack’s (1974) and Granovetter’s (1973) work showing the effect of strong and weak ties on gaining employment. Taking account of external information (including networks) and acting on it works for the common good. External networking also helps communities (actual and virtual) relate and adjust to broader social changes. Without the dimension of externality, closed communities have a greater likelihood of perpetuating local prejudices and other anti-social values. In fact the dimension of ‘externality’ delineates social capital from a view of it as simply another term for ‘social cohesion’ or ‘social solidarity’.

**Trust**

Trust in peers, business colleagues, family and community members underlies successful personal and business interactions and transactions. Trust is an indicator of the presence of social capital, develops as a by-product of the reciprocity and values, and in turn oils the production and use of social capital. Trust permeates all levels of our social world, and without it our society cannot achieve the social cohesion that many believe modern communities have lost (e.g., Kramer et al., 1996).

**Social Application of Literacy and Social Capital**

The networks, norms and trust of social interaction are given meaning and communicated through the literacy webs spun within a community. The complexity of such webs is determined by the sort of literacy interactions occurring at the myriad intersections produced when community members meet. These intersections range from major events or projects to the one-to-one interaction between neighbours, people in a queue, customers in a shop or more deliberately, when one seeks out information or advice from another. Examples from both ends of the scale might help illustrate how social capital and literacy capacities of individuals and communities are interrelated.

We have drawn the data from one of the three communities referred to above which we called Together Town. It is a predominantly white, middle class, conservative and Anglo-Saxon rural township. The township, as the focus of the surrounding community, is set in a picturesque river valley, and could be described as an historical village. The township itself is attractive. It is clear that the town is cared for in the physical sense. There are many community activities and events, some of which attract national attention and patronage, and the local clubs and associations meet frequently and actively. The community is vibrant - art and craft has become a significant cluster of activity in the community having an annual focus in the craft
fair. The town is also the recent winner of a prestigious national community award and various tourism and numerous Tidy Town awards.

The community project we discuss later was a community arts project aptly called ‘Yarns’. It involved over 300 people, mainly women, and continues to attract national interest.

We now discuss interview data from two people living in Together Town whom we’ll call Merle and Darren. They have very different formal education backgrounds, work histories and life experiences generally and they occupy different ‘niches’ in the community. But they hold similar positions of respect and power (influence? authority?). Both Merle and Darren were subjects in the research project because they had been nominated by at least three other community members as someone others would consider approachable and to whom they would go for information. In this sense they are valued community resources as knowledgeable and effective communicators.

Merle is a 50 year old business woman who has been living in the town for 25 years. For the last 20 years she has owned and worked in a health care business that is unrelated to her tertiary art history qualifications attained as a young woman. Since then she has completed other studies both for professional and personal enjoyment reasons. During her time in Together Town she has been an elected government representative, has been involved and continues to be involved in many community groups and organisations at the local and state level in civic and professional capacities. She facilitated the formation of a local group, ‘a community of common-purpose’, concerned with organic gardening and farming that has now become a state organisation with branches in many communities.

Merle talks about Together Town as follows:

I like doing business here because I know my customers by name, and they trust me as I trust them. So they know if I say I will do this for you, I will do it, and the same with them, if they have something that I am interested in they will bring it in for me to read or they want to show me something, I know that I can trust they will do it, so that’s good.

Darren is a 37 year old man who works as a mechanic. He is one of a hundred or so Australian Indigenous people in the community. His father is white and his mother is Indigenous. In Together Town Darren is sought out by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for information, advice and opinion. His formal education ended before completing Year 9 and he explains that consequently he has had ‘to take on learning ways of being able to live in this society’. Darren was born in this community as was his father. Both parents were community-minded people and Darren believes that his good standing in the community has its foundations in the community spirited history of his parents.
Words like ‘learning’ and ‘learn’ pepper his conversation and he is involved in schools as an educator in Aboriginal history and culture:

I’m also...very involved with the Aboriginal Speakers Program which is actually going into schools, and that’s a program that the Education Department has initiated over the last couple of years. And I was one of the people that they approached, and it’s something that we feel that...by putting true blue...black fellas into the schools again we are still...we are very heavily governed by our Elders as to what we can teach and can’t teach in the schools, and I’ve had extensive meetings with Elders as to what we are allowed to do, but...I think it can be a really good one. Children at a young age do not have a prejudice set in their mind, and that’s really great.

Darren goes on to talk about his strengths. It is interesting that the knowledge of language resources drawn on is so different from Merle’s, yet their roles as social brokers, and their capacity to have an influence over their literacy ecologies, is so similar:

What do I say was my strength? I definitely wasn’t....a very educated man. I guess my strength had to come from within, from within my own personal self. And I guess the ability to learn quickly and adapt were always going to be handy when a guy was sort of low on the education part. If you can learn to adapt and learn new trades quickly I guess that helps. And I think just staying pretty practical and commonsense in my thinking.

We asked Darren and Merle what they thought their knowledge and skills were and how they went about sharing what they knew with others. In effect, these questions were asking Merle and Darren about their literacy practices and especially how their practices drew upon and generated social capital. Parts of their responses are reproduced below which are interwoven with a discussion in terms of the social capital model (Figure 1) presented in this paper.

Social broker or knowledge broker? ‘I’m a purveyor of knowledge’
Merle is a good example of the social brokers that we found in these communities - those who brokered knowledge through their own knowledge- and identity-resource-base:

1. Yeah you get pinned down as being the person that’s always there and ‘She might know’. And in fact I probably do and I am a resourceful person. I have been trained to be resourceful because of the research work that I did in the past and still do. I have never lost that ability, and I like to pride myself on being a resource. This is the thing I am giving this community. If I went out of business selling what I do today, I would still be the resource person. In fact I’d almost have to
sit on that chair somewhere along the footpath and they’d say, ‘She’s still there, you can go and ask her if you want to’. But I don’t mean to say that I’m a lynchpin it’s just that because I’ve done a lot of things, read a lot of things and am interested in so much, that it’s there for people, and it’s not mine to keep. That to me is the entire reward for being in the community like this. And heaven knows I go to someone else when I need a resource or need an answer and I have my people I go to, in my network to help me out as well.

2. I don’t know everything but what I do have I will share with people, I have quite a large lending library here in the shop for various things people want to take home and learn about...and secondly you’ve got to listen, and you have to listen to what people want to know...by listening to them carefully you can usually find out [what people want or need] and usually say, ‘Hey, isn’t this what you mean?’ – ‘Yes, that’s what I mean; you’ve got it’. And so you’re just a wonderful person because you came up with a solution, but what you did is just turned their thoughts around and showed them what they knew, what they wanted in the end - they just didn’t quite know how to say it, so I think that is what I do....I’m a purveyor of knowledge.

In the above segment there is the explicit reference to the networks of social capital, which are cited as ‘a resource’ for information, the indications of reciprocity and commitment in the reference to sharing, and of course, the reliance on trust – ‘they trust me as I trust them’ in the paragraph cited earlier. It is through these social brokers that the information required for particular valued purposes becomes focused as knowledge. But let us look more closely at what ‘knowledges’ are really being brokered. The particular skill of being able to turn ‘their thoughts around and showed them what they knew’ indicates the interactive development of identity by putting what they knew into the words that they ‘didn’t quite know how to say’. Note, however, that this skill is not one of ‘knowledge of what’, but rather ‘knowledge of who and how’: Merle’s brokering is in fact not the kind of ‘knowledge broker’ touted as being the worker of the future by, for example, Reich (2000), whose use of the term implies a buying and selling of ‘knowledge of what’. Rather, Merle is acting as a connector for two sets of literacy ecologies by the brokering of knowledge and identity resources that allow people to see themselves in a different role, as ‘doers’ of something new, of being prepared to take on a new task - that is, to take risks.

Such micro examples help show that the over-simplistic notion of ‘knowledge broker’ needs to be re-examined. They also help show how it is that the very acts of interaction, drawing on the knowledge and identity resources for the particular purpose in hand, are so woven into the ‘literacy texts’ of the occasion as to make their separation somewhat meaningless. For example, we find it difficult to see how one could analyse the real meanings and functions of literacy in the text of the above transcript to show the social brokering role that Merle occupies other than through the resources drawn on and their functions.
There is an argument that can be put that Merle is well-educated, which she is in a formal sense. She has an apparently excellent factual knowledge-base, functions effectively within and across a number of community literacy ecologies in such a way as to be able to show people how to transform their identities by crossing their margins - and is generally, therefore, an exemplar of what a fine education and therefore (?) high levels of literacy can do for one. In one sense this is quite true. However, if one looks only at the literacy outcomes, and not also at the interactive resources, one could be deceived about the relationship between ‘literacy-as-skills’ and ‘critical/sociocultural literacy’. Darren, it will be remembered, withdrew from school before the end of Year 9. Here is part of his story.

School education vs community learning: ‘Blessed with the gift of the gab’
Darren talks about learning and school in the following extract. The discussion that follows it focuses on the ways in which formal learning and informal - or community - learning relate:

1.  ...my Dad used to often say I was blessed with the gift of the gab, you know, and my Mum...used to say it was the black fella in me, but...I share my skills in many ways.

2.  I never classed myself as a guy with a whole lot of bloody skills, really, to share, I suppose...I’ve always thought my knowledge was quite limited due to my schooling education, but when I was probably 20 I would have said that I was low educated person, but at 37 I can sit back and have a look and say, well, I mightn’t have achieved that academic status of passing Grade 10 and whatever, at that school, but I’m sure as hell I got through the 37 years old just as easy as what the next guy did, you know?

3.  So ‘pass on skills’ is hard; I’d never classed myself as a guy that I’ve had to pass on a lot of skills. The only thing with my Aboriginal traditional culture - I do pass those on a lot. I’ve learnt a lot from my Elders, which was traditional, both traditional and contemporary...; we tend to find that some of our traditional practices just are not possible any more because of the total difference....I learned a lot of those skills from my Elders and I do pass them down to our younger children and that’s just done by Cultural Council, or being on the land, and they’re shown those skills, taught them...and... passed through, in that manner.

4.  I guess if you want to class football as a skills...I pass that on, I pass that on through the Together Town football club and in many years of involvement within the local community in football and cricket. We actually had a young fella who is now playing with the Brisbane Bears.... He actually comes from my family as well, but not on the black fellas’ side.
5. Pass those skills and knowledge down and I guess we do that in many ways, don’t we? We can talk to them, and people can take the skills from that - with our tradition... you pass down those skills a lot by talking - but also by hands-on, showing the children and the young ones....

The difference between the white and black discursive worlds is a theme developed during this segment of text. The examples of perception of ‘difference’ shown here are evidenced in use of pronouns (Paragraph 5, for example the use of ‘we’ and ‘our’). A person used to living in two cultures and therefore two sets of discourses and to drawing on different identity and knowledge resources in each will, it is presumed, have the capacity to reflect on the significance of the differences. This case demonstrates some of that reflection.

In Paragraphs 2 and 3, the talk focuses on the differences between formal (‘schooling education’) and informal or community learning (‘learning a lot from my Elders’). In Conversation Analysis terms, the standardised relational pair (SRP) ‘formal/informal’ learning could be in evidence. There is explicit commentary on formal education: ‘I mightn’t have achieved that academic status of passing Grade 10 and whatever, at that school’. This is counterpoised immediately with a reference to his learning since school - his informal or community learning: ‘but I’m sure as hell I got through the 37 years old just as easy as what the next guy did’. The phrase ‘at that school’ holds some tone of mild accusation in the use of ‘that’. The counterpoising acts as a contrasting device, positioning formal and informal education as two opposites or binaries. In Conversational Analysis, binaries can be standardised relational pairs, which form the beginnings of category formation, which, when linked, may then lead to membership categorisation devices (MCD). These are the groups of meaning-resources that conversationalist participants draw on as they jointly construct meaning in their interactions.

The language in the third paragraph shows a reflective transformation from the answer expected of his white world (paragraphs 1 and 2), to the ‘other’ world of his traditional Indigenous community: ‘I’d never classed myself as a guy that I’ve had to pass on a lot of skills’ stems from the same discourse as the ‘I never classed myself as a guy with...skills.... I’ve always thought my knowledge was quite limited due to my schooling education’ in Paragraph 2. The white and black worlds share discursive proximity in this talk which allows a transfer of discourse items embedded in white discourse (the ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’ from formal education) to the Indigenous discourse: ‘The only thing with my Aboriginal traditional culture - I do pass those on a lot’. Once again, this case reaffirms the deep divisions between the two literacy ecologies, apparently created by the white culture’s version of formally acquired skills. Once the transfer from one discourse to the other is made, the discourse items (‘skills’, ‘knowledge’) are seen to rapidly recontextualise and be colonised by the white world’s language. For example, ‘I’ve learnt a lot from my Elders’ and ‘they’ve shown me those skills’.
The final paragraph, Paragraph 5, provides an explicit recognition of the role of oral tradition (talk) in the transmission of skills and knowledge, framed in the first few words by the now integrated ‘white’ discursive items ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’: ‘Pass those skills and knowledge down...’. The word ‘skills’ appears twice more in this sentence, as if to demonstrate that the speaker has recognised how the two discourses have come together and is practising the elements. The role of talking is once again emphasised, and then counterpoised with the ‘hands-on showing the children and the young ones’. The contrast between the ‘real life’ (informal, community) learning and formal education parallels the ‘hands-on’ informal discourse with the ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’ of formal education.

How can we compare Merle and Darren on the dimension of ‘critical literacy’? Darren also facilitates people to cross the boundaries of their literacy ecologies, as he does between white and black literacy ecologies. He is ‘uneducated’ yet apparently as adept at using knowledge and identity resources to his purpose for action. His use of historicity layers traditional Indigenous culture through the Elders with his white heritage. What, then, is critical literacy in reference to these two community members?

Leaving that perspective in the air for the moment, let’s consider the same question in reference to a community event – where literacy, community learning and social capital intersect in even more complex critical ways.

**The ‘Yarns’ Event**

In the discussion about social capital presented in the first part of this paper, it was noted how crucial ‘opportunities’ for interactions are to the production and use of social capital. The arguments around the way TV may have deprived American society of these opportunities continue (e.g., Putnam, 1995), and the nature and quality of interactive opportunities require more space than we have here. Let us focus for now on an opportunity or occasion in which social capital was created - that is, the specific, socially productive and purposeful interactive moments that were the catalysts for social capital production.

The social interaction and resulting social cohesion occurred during the Together Town ‘Yarns’ project, a community arts project. The Together Town community has a number of annual events such as the local agricultural Show and a large annual Craft Fair. The ‘Yarns’ project grew from the need to repair aspects of the community’s interrelationships, specifically related to the ongoing conflict resulting from the arrival two decades ago of the ‘hippies’ into the traditional farming community.

‘Yarns’ is an artwork in silk, depicting Together Town and surrounds in four large panels – one for each season. A historical perspective of the community was also stitched into the work. It is made of yarns – silk, cotton, wool; people told yarns as they constructed it; the panels themselves tell stories of the past and of the present; and it continues to produce stories in the community and for visitors. It involved more than 300 people, over 10,000 hours of work, 200 metres of hand dyed silk and many arts and crafts such as design, drawing, embroidery, appliqué, cross-stitch, weaving, patchwork and quilting.
A large proportion of the community, mainly women, participated in the project. They worked in formal groups and informal networks consisting of groups of loosely linked individuals who came together for a common purpose or interest. The project’s success required more than art and craft know how. It required planning and co-ordination; co-operation and division of labour; sponsorship and promotion; effective intra and inter group communication; and learning and teaching. Experts ran workshops in specialist areas such as silk printing so that other women could learn and contribute to the project; women invited groups into their homes to work together on discrete sections; others worked towards entering displays for the community event at which the project would be unveiled. Participants sought external expertise as well as looking for it in their own community. ‘Yarns’ was about sharing knowledges and networks, creating new ones, and being prepared to re-shape identities for a common purpose.

The project was and is a resounding success. The finished product is now a tourist draw card. The community is proud of its achievement, and it is another accomplishment that signals to business operators and the population at large alike, that this is a vibrant, ‘go-get-it’ community. And it displayed all the signs of community learning, of social capital being used and generated and flowing healthily and vigorously. The project resulted in high levels of interaction between individuals and groups in the community who had not necessarily interacted before. Communities of common-purpose clustered to contribute to the common goal of the project. There was a common purpose involved, with external information available through contacts in others place and states about technical aspects of tapestry, embroidery, stencilling and much more. Informal and nonformal learning occurred to suit the task. Common values related to the skills and knowledge involved in the project were identified and fostered so that friendships of various strengths and types were created and cemented.

The process of creating the tapestry had all the ingredients of social capital - qualities of externality, historicity, common purpose, trust, and it was for the common good.

For the Common Good? ‘... trying to do the best thing at the time’

The debates on social capital and critical literacy have another element in common, and that is the use to which each can be put - deliberately or unintentionally - against other people. Darren for one did not derive the same benefits from the project as most of the community (the other community) appeared to do. At least, not at the point at which ‘Yarns’ first entered the public arena:

D The ‘Yarns’ project actually put a big wedge in the community here between the Aboriginal community and the white community. The
‘Yarns’ project was started off and it was supposed to be inclusive of everyone and when it got down to the stage where it was nearing completion instead of waiting for a nice Aboriginal artist to come along and do our nice bit of work on our panel somebody jumped in very, very wrongly and overstepped the mark and done it for them and then tried to stand up and say ‘Well we’ve done this in the best interest of the Aboriginal community’. So ‘Yarns’ I believe actually left a bit of rough ground there...I’ve been approached by many people just of late about trying to reconcile that problem from ‘Yarns’. We got shafted, it was a mistake made by a person who was trying to do the best thing at the time. They thought that they had taken all people’s concerns into heart and were working for the best of everyone. But we found out later on that you know that person was a little bit sort of, what do you say ignorant to the Aboriginal culture ... by not allowing that artist to take part and that be an actual Aboriginal person doing it, they thought they was doing the right thing and...I mean [the initiator of ‘Yarns’] - I’ve talked to him yesterday.

I Really? Just yesterday?

D Well he come and talked to me actually, yeah, because he’s actually trying to find another place to house ‘Yarns’. And he was down at a tourist meeting and he was saying how he was trying to you know get funding to house the ‘Yarns’ and stuff like that, and I know that [he’s] taken ‘Yarns’ on very strongly, he feels that it was a great community project, and I don’t think [he] fully understands how much it did upset the community - the Aboriginal community - by thinking that they was taken into account.

I Do they know now?

D They do now, yeah, we told them in [no] uncertain terms. And sometimes I guess you’ve got to, because if you don’t, I mean I’m not a radical person, but there is times where I - you know - our Elders were there as well, and they say to us there’s times when you need to stamp our authority, and say well hang on a little minute, you fellas did muck up here, you made a big mistake, be man enough to stand up and say okay we mucked up; we made that mistake, how do we go about righting it, and then we’ve got a future to go to, once you’ve at last accepted the fact that they’ve made a mistake. We know that that bit of recognition...will only help...not make the same mistake the second time, and I’m sure if I go along and have a talk to [them] we’re sure we can work something out. I know there is a future plan to actually continue that ‘Yarns’ project and make it...an established ‘Yarns’ thing and at this stage the Aboriginal community has been consulted very closely, so their input will be put in correctly next time round. So yeah, so I mean I don’t know why...they come to me.

So was the ‘Yarns’ project community learning? Whose community? Building social capital should be inclusive of diversity, and not be used as a white middle class gloss.
But the outcomes of what might be called ‘Round 1’ in the ongoing and overlapping sets of literacy ecologies that Darren facilitates across both communities augers well – communication is open, more learning is possible. One interpretation is that neither the need nor the opportunity would have been possible had it not been for the first event, and that the intervening time allowed for a whole series of sub-events that facilitated the most recent ‘reconciliation’.

Some Concluding Thoughts, as yet Forming, Forming, Forming...

Learning processes, enhanced by their production of social capital, produce change in work, community and public practices through changes to people’s skills, knowledge, identities and values. These changes, the outcomes of learning, are visible at several levels of society: Learning produces demonstrable changes in individuals’ knowledge, skills and values; learning produces changes to outcomes achievable by groups and teams; learning produces demonstrable changes at the work, community and regional levels, and subsequently at the societal level. Work by scholars such as Michael Young on ‘learning societies’ (e.g., Young, 1995) conceives of learning societies as resulting from the collected outcomes of individual and collective learning; learning societies are well-educated, responsive to change, reflective and healthy.

The differences between formal learning and community or informal learning described in some of the data presented call for a re-examination of just what ‘school learning’ is and does - more particularly what it should be and should do. The data show two examples of social brokers, each with radically extreme formal educations, yet both experts in critical literacy. The man who does not consider himself as having skills and knowledge (from his formal institutional learning discourse) does have such attributes. Formal schooling and further education is seen by Darren as being not the same as the informal or community learning in ‘real life’, ‘doing’ and ‘hands-on, showing’. The latter Darren perceives to be the core attributes of the nature of learning required in his contemporary life and workplaces.

In this regard, there is some evidence in the data to support a view of learning as the discursive assembly and subsequent re-assembly of cultural practice. Learning and transfer of learning ‘...can be theorised as a process of discursive colonisation’ (Falk 1997, p. 64) rather than as being ‘cognitively different’, and in some way related to notions of intelligence. Darren, in those moments of reflective transformation, provides an example of this colonisation. Merle, as she describes her turning others’ thoughts around and showing them what they know, provides another example.

The socio-economic need for the ‘one qualification for life’ expectation of the traditional education and training approach is passing. The effects of socio-economic change on the nature of work and (un)employment are so pervasive that re-learning and re-training are supposed to need to be on-going. It is suggested that the socio-economic goals of the ‘new work order’ (Gee et al., 1996) require the informal and on-going learning that the people who are the focus in this paper have utilised successfully. The power of the binary of institutionalised learning in schools versus
‘community/informal/real life learning’ may act as an influence against the kinds of lifelong learning currently found in policy documents.

‘Learning’ may well have the potential to produce or enhance socio-economic wellbeing. However, if our society relies on the fallacious assumption that formally-acquired institutional learning is the same as the critical learning required to facilitate socio-economic change (and the hoped-for socio-economic outcomes that are presumed to flow from such change), then a truly civil society will likely be a long time in coming. This paper has provided two examples of the processes required for critical learning, by showing both Darren and Merle brokering literacy ecologies for the common community good.

We will now address the question that was left hanging earlier: What, then, is critical literacy in reference to the two community members, Merle and Darren? How have we as literacy experts ensured that there is an analytic body of work which shows that the knowledge, identity and skills resources for the kind of critical learning shown in the earlier examples are components of ‘critical literacy’? In other words, we talk about critical literacy as implicating resources-to-action in our social domain, but where is it that we describe and prescribe these resources (apart from the reading and writing technologies)? The relationship between critical and socio-cultural/critical literacy and the ‘subject areas’ of science, maths, English (and so on) remains problematic, yet it is in these subjects that students develop the resources to become critical. Literacy experts are, from our observations, still seen by many policy-makers and practitioners as experts on ‘literacy-as-reading’, while the subject specialists have ‘the knowledge’ (which is therefore nothing to do with literacy experts). In Australia at least, school knowledge, except for a very few, remains knowledge for one of life’s narrow pathways - schooling-college-university-career. What of our parallel civic, political and community literacies?

Socio-cultural literacy is, by definition, literacy for living. School is part of life; life is not a subset of school. Where is it that socio-cultural literacy suggests the agenda for literacy outside (but parallel to) and beyond schooled literacy? Where do we locate learning about the ways people learn and manage their literacy ecologies in their everyday lives, rather like Merle and Darren do? Socio-cultural literacy should provide a coherent practical account of macro social issues such as power, institutional life and production, as well as meso theory related to, for example, families, communities, groups and organisations, and micro theory of action and interaction. More importantly, a socio-cultural theory should account for how links occur between these institutions and groups, horizontally and vertically. This is the real articulation of ‘lifelong learning’.

It is important that socio-cultural theory accounts for forces such as power and how it is exercised, and the interactional and communication activity that oils these interactions is obviously also integral. Such a view would allow us to conceive of socio-cultural learning and literacy as being a literacy event, or literacy ecology, occurring in particular contexts, each of which has its particular resources. But the resources aren’t just ‘there’, they are what the interaction draws on. To resource socio-cultural or critical literacy would involve making judgements about the resources appropriate for the context of use of the literacy acquired in, for example, school contexts. Some textual features are not drawn on at all in interaction, others
are. However, for a successful critical literacy event to occur, there has to be an ecology involving the adequacy of available resources (knowledge that is there/available as a capacity) and the appropriate interactions of resources from that capacity pool. This helps to think about how learning interactions can be seen as drawing on identifiable relevant knowledge and identity characteristics, and that institutional features are one necessary component of these.

A definition of critical literacy that fits with the discussion in this paper is:

Critical literacy is the resources or human and physical capital required for mutually beneficial and purposeful collective action.

while critical learning would be:

Critical learning is the utilisation of those resources using social capital.

The two reasons we have chosen this definition are first, that from much of the writing on critical literacy (we haven’t substantiated this in this paper) it is associated with individuals and their possession, demonstration, acquisition, or lack of ‘it’. This seems to involve the individual’s power and control over his or her social circumstances. That is, critical literacy is the use made of a commodity, a thing that individuals draw on to a greater or lesser extent. So the first factor favouring the above definition is the focus on the resources to action, rather than on the individual.

Second, there is the question about reciprocity. We have not as yet found any discussion in the critical literacy literature about the mutuality of critical literacy. Where is the talk about the individual’s responsibility to society, not just that about society’s responsibility to the individual? [There is a big issue in Australia about government policies on ‘mutual obligation’ - an interesting side of the reciprocity question]. Mutual benefit between people and their society is the second missing feature of critical literacy that the above definition allows for. The two-way street of mutual benefit has that element of interdependence that is a feature of ecologies. Literacy is the technology that facilitates mutual dependence in such an ecology. Literacy is about things - texts, skills. Literacy-in-learning refocuses on the interaction between people, texts and the physical aspects of the environment. The literacies are only given meaning in the context of the human and physical resources, and are themselves a resource, but no more important to the process than the other elements. It is this literacy ecology - the way human and physical capital is brought into life by social capital - which we hope this paper has raised for discussion.

Finally, we believe the idea of social capital helps bind literacy, learning and learning for life into a whole-society framework, and we believe it has a certain clarity of explanatory power and some political teeth at this time in history. This might well be because of the word ‘capital’ in the term, but in policy terms both ends of the political spectrum, as well as researchers and many branches of practitioners, accept it and are excited by it. Social capital is the product of an ecology of interactions between resources in the human and physical environment. Literacy ecologies inhere
in the structure of purposeful and productive human relationships as the manifestation of social capital. The call arising from this paper, then, is to raise the need to re-focus on literacy-as-learning rather than on just ‘literacy’.

References

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Social Capital, Literacy Ecologies and Lifelong Learning:

The Importance of ‘Process’ in Repositioning Literacy debates

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