

Professor David Barton, 1949 – 2024



Professor David Barton, Lifetime President of the Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University, died on 18th October 2024. This piece brings together the voices of many friends and colleagues reflecting on his extraordinary life and contributions.

Isle of Wright, Brighton and Essex

David grew up and went to school on the Isle of Wight. He was drawn to the sciences selecting physics and double maths for his A-levels, but also chose what would be best for his timetable, leaving time for him to sit in the library and read about things that interested him. He went on to study social psychology at Sussex University, obtaining his BA in 1970. By then his interest in language had grown enough to make him settle on an MA in Theoretical Linguistics for his postgraduate studies, which he obtained from Essex University in 1973. He first met Mary Hamilton, who later became his partner and long-term research collaborator, during his undergraduate studies.

London and California

Research in Child Language Development

David completed a Ph.D. in Linguistics at University College London in 1976, with a focus on Child Language Development. His thesis was entitled *The role of perception in the acquisition of phonology*. In 1975, he presented a paper based on his doctoral research at an

International Child Language Symposium in London. Charles Ferguson (Department of Linguistics, Stanford University, USA) heard this presentation and invited David to join his Child Phonology Project at Stanford. David moved to Stanford in 1976 and worked there as a Postdoctoral Research Associate until 1981.

Early interest in research related to literacy

David and Mary had worked as volunteer teachers of adult literacy during their postgraduate years in the UK. For both, this was the start of a lifelong commitment to adult literacy research and practice. Both UCL and Stanford were major world centres of linguistic research, and David was at the beginning of a very promising career in a core topic, the acquisition of phonology. Nevertheless, during his last year or so at Stanford, David's interests were already turning towards the development of research related to adult literacy. By now, Mary had joined him in California and had taken up voluntary work in adult literacy again. Mary and David met Shirley Brice Heath, whose work on literacy inspired them. Their final contribution to research at Stanford was a joint project on metalinguistic awareness and on the effects of literacy on adults' definitions of the concept of 'word', later published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* in 1983. This was the beginning of a fruitful and highly influential research, writing and publishing partnership that spanned their careers.

Mary and David also developed an interest in what was then called 'literacy and development'. During a visit to Central and South America early in 1981, they met up with individuals who had participated in the Nicaraguan literacy campaign, and they collected literacy campaign artefacts.

Return to the UK and the move to Lancaster University

Developing research and practice in literacies

In the autumn of 1981, David and Mary returned to the UK and began working at Lancaster University. David was appointed to teach psycholinguistics, phonetics and research methods in the (then) Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language, and Mary joined the Department of Educational Research. In 1982, Mary and David set up the Literacy Research Group, an informal research group with a focus on literacy. This became an inclusive sharing space, characterised by a dedicated slot at the beginning of each meeting where each person introduced themselves and said something about their background or their work. For many postgraduate students in particular, this was the first time they had experienced 'having a voice' in an academic community. As the routine continued week after week, they learned about the names and research interests of others. As their confidence grew, David would invite them to present about their own developing research to this small and supportive group.

In 1984, David and Mary ran the first ever conference bringing together researchers and practitioners in adult literacy, including Brian Street, Roz Ivanič, Wendy Moss, Sue Shrapnel Gardener and Jane Mace. This conference formed the basis for the development of RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacies), a network of researchers and practitioners in the

UK and which is just coming up to its 40th anniversary. David and Mary were leading figures in putting on annual RaPAL conferences and in establishing *The RAPAL Bulletin* (later *RaPAL Journal*), first published in 1985.

During this period, David was at the forefront of a group of scholars including Brian Street, Shirley Brice Heath, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, developing the socially situated view of literacies for which he is internationally well-known. His research approached reading, writing and the uses of texts as social practices, rather than 'skills'. In 1994, David published a single-authored volume outlining this theoretical approach: *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language* (Blackwell). The second edition of this landmark volume appeared in 2007. What he said then still resonates: concerns about the limits of thinking of literacy as decontextualised skills are as important and valid today as they were then.

When David began teaching courses in Literacy Studies, he started to really enjoy his undergraduate teaching. Students of the time remember him as an energetic lecturer, jumping up on desks while speaking without missing a beat. He encouraged students to discuss freely in seminars, and to go out and research the literacy practices associated with an aspect of social life they were familiar with. Students presented to each other, and the enormous differences between their examples were a powerful illustration of the social, situated nature of literacy. Students often went on to turn these mini research projects into dissertations, showing the complex and extensive texts and literacy practices associated with even such an apparently non-textual activity as playing for the University women's rugby team.

In 1990, David and Mary, together with their colleague Roz Ivanič, organised a conference called *Worlds of Literacy*. Participants at the conference were drawn from the growing literacy research community at Lancaster University, and a wide variety of invited adult literacy students, practitioners and researchers. The case studies presented at this conference formed the basis of a 1994 edited volume with the same name.

David's interest in international literacy led to a number of activities over the years especially with the then UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) in Hamburg, which included a report David and Mary wrote on *Researching literacy in industrialised countries: trends and prospects* (1990).

Everyday Literacies

David and Mary developed an ethnographic approach to research on literacy, along with inclusive ways of writing that valued the perspectives of participants. From February 1988 to March 1989, they received support from the Lancaster University Research Fund for a pilot project entitled *Literacy in the community*. Then, in April 1989, they received substantial research funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to develop this project. This research, investigating the literacy practices of a group of residents of one neighbourhood in the city of Lancaster, working with the researcher Sarah Padmore, formed the basis of a widely cited volume called *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*, published by Routledge in 1998. This landmark work in literacy studies conveys

an acute sense of place, serving not only as a vivid exemplification of the theory of literacy as social practice, but also providing a rich guide to Lancaster itself, and especially the local neighbourhood in which the research took place. It combines David and Mary's eyes for detail with empathy, a fascination with people's everyday lives, and a patience for slowly developing an argument rigorously grounded in data through powerful illustration. Local Literacies is a book we all keep returning to, recommending it to students and colleagues, reminding ourselves of some of its examples (e.g. literacies involved in cooking) or seeking inspiration for our own writing. It was reissued as a Routledge Linguistics Classic in 2012.

The Centre for Language in Social Life and research on multilingualism and literacy

From 1986-2000 David was Director of the *Centre for Language in Social Life* based in the (then) Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language. The centre promoted social approaches to language and literacy, including the New Literacy Studies, critical discourse analysis and critical approaches to multilingualism. Members of the Centre included Norman Fairclough, Roz Ivanič, Romy Clark, Marilyn Martin-Jones, Greg Myers and Mark Sebba. A Working Paper series was established in 1994. The centre hosted Sociolinguistics Symposium 10, with the theme of *Discourse: Practices and Identities*. Shirley Brice Heath gave a keynote address on her research on literacy in the USA.



Between 1989 and 1995, David collaborated with Marilyn Martin-Jones on two research projects on multilingualism, literacy and education. The project *Bilingual resources in primary classroom interaction*, with Marilyn, Roz and researcher Mukul Saxena, focused on the role of bilingual classroom assistants in South East Lancashire who worked alongside teachers in nursery and reception classes, exploring how their bilingual resources were drawn on in class activities. The *Multilingual literacy practices: home, community and school project*, located in Leicester, with Marilyn, Mukul, and researcher Arvind Bhatt, explored the language and literacy practices of members of 12 Gujarati-speaking households with different migration histories and religious backgrounds (Hindu, Muslim and Christian).

Building connections locally and internationally

Throughout this time and beyond, David and Mary organised many informal social events for members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Group, both staff and students, often at their home in Freehold in Lancaster. Food was enjoyed; chats started up in corners; no-one was left out. In this way, David and Mary built the *Lancaster Literacies* community which has since spread throughout the world; there are literacy specialists in the Australian outback, in Mongolia, in Stockholm, in Horwich, who started their careers at the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre.

Brazil was a particularly important connection. Between 1992 and 1998, research links, funded by the British Council, were established between the Centre for Language in Social Life at Lancaster and two university departments in Brazilian universities: at UNICAMP (State University of Campinas) and the University of Brasilia (UnB). This was a time when there were similar theoretical shifts in Brazil towards a social practice view of literacy. David visited both universities in 1995 and gave keynote address at a conference on literacy at the University of Brasilia.

Expanding literacy studies

During the 1997/8 academic year, the Literacy Research Group chose a guiding theme: *Expanding the New Literacy Studies*. By this time, new directions in the study of literacy were being explored by both staff and doctoral researchers in the Literacy Research Group, including Kathryn Jones' work on multilingual literacies on Welsh farms, Anita Wilson's research on the 'in-between' literacies of prisoners and staff in prisons, Kathy Pitt's work on the discourses and practices of family literacy classes, Clara Keating's study of the roots and routes of the literacies of Portuguese women living in London, and Karin Tusting's research on literacy practices and identity in a Catholic parish community. The *Situated Literacies* conference and subsequent collection of the same name (Routledge 2000), edited by David, Mary and Roz, brought together much of this work.

This book is a good illustration of David's commitment to supporting PhD students. As a postgraduate supervisor, David was always helpful and encouraging, while at the same time knowing how to allow students to tread their own path. He had a way of conveying faith in the students' capacity to successfully complete their research, without ever controlling it. He went out of his way to invite postgraduate researchers to contribute to the books and journals that he edited with their scholarship applications; while probably adding to his workload, this provided a huge confidence boost and an important step in supporting people's publications and their academic careers. At times his support for PhD students played out in unusual ways. A former PhD student remembers being extremely nervous when having to give a talk. Looking down to the table and then the floor, her attention was drawn to David's colourful socks, unusual for an academic of his standing. Musing on his sense of style, the undoubtedly deliberate mismatch between smart suit and rainbow striped socks, provided enough distraction to make her forget her nervousness and deliver her talk with more confidence than expected.

David's research interests continued to develop into new areas, extending the scope of literacy studies further. In the late 1990s, he became interested in letter writing. This led to a fruitful collaboration with Nigel Hall and the production of an edited volume, entitled: *Letter writing as a social practice* (John Benjamins, 2000). In 2000 David proposed organising a small workshop with the theme *Orthography as social practice*, providing Mark Sebba and Sally Johnson with the opportunity to share their work on orthography. Mark and Sally's work cemented orthography as an area of interest in literacy studies at Lancaster. In the early 2000s, a small seminar exploring the possibilities and limitations of the concept of communities of practice led to the edited collection *Beyond communities of practice* (CUP, 2005), showing how a literacy lens could extend the theoretical focus of social practice theories more broadly.

David's editorship of two Routledge series, *Literacies* (which he started in 1998) and *Routledge Research in Literacy* (2004+), opened up many possibilities for the publication of significant new work in literacy studies. These series are continuing as unique and successful book series based in Lancaster's Literacy Research Centre to this day.

Engaging with policy and practice

Skills for Life and the NRDC

From 2001 to 2011, a new governmental strategy on adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL called *Skills for Life* was developed and adopted, providing a huge financial boost to the sector. The multi-site National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) was established, and David became a member of its national Management Team. This made it possible to establish an externally funded Literacy Research Centre at Lancaster University, with David as its Director. The creation of a Centre facilitated the organisation of seminars and conferences and the planning of further research. It brought major funding and with it the creation of several new posts. Uta Papen was appointed to teach and research literacy in the Linguistics and English Language department. Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting joined as researchers working on the *Adult Learner's Lives* project, an innovative ethnographic project that worked with adult learners and practitioners of literacy, numeracy and ESOL in a range of settings across the North West to understand how people's learning was situated within the broader context of their lives and histories, later published as *Literacy, Lives and Learning* (Routledge, 2007). NRDC projects employed several other literacies researchers based at Lancaster including Anita Wilson, Sue Walters and Kathy Pitt.

Working with the NRDC represented a major change in David's work. Much more explicitly than previously, with the NRDC David and colleagues at Lancaster sought to bring the social practices view of literacy into policy and practice. This was a bold thing to try to do and David went about it with his usual enthusiasm, dedication and optimism. It was also a change in life, as David was constantly putting on a suit, getting on a train and going to London to a meeting or to present a report. David was willing to devote a significant portion of his life, more than five years, to trying to change the way people think, and he engaged

with national-level policy in ways which at the time did not gain him much credit within the university. Instead of publishing mainly scholarly papers in major journals, David and colleagues produced reports for the government, published in colourful professionally produced booklets. At this time formal assessments of research focussed far less on impact in the real world than they do today. David and his colleagues were ahead of their time in valuing engagement with policymakers and practitioners. Their reports and booklets may have received less interest from academic audiences, but they were valued by practitioners and those seeking to develop curricula and assessments. Influencing policy, trying to move it away from the dominant view of literacy as skill and individual responsibility was not an easy thing to do.

Together with colleagues in the NRDC, David, Mary and others at Lancaster were able to contribute to and shape the government's new national curricula for literacy, numeracy and ESOL developed and produced as part of *Skills for Life*. Social practices views of literacy fed into these new curricula. These, together with a series of practice guides, several of which David and colleagues contributed to, were the most tangible and visible illustration of how the Literacy Research Centre, directed by David and Mary, successfully engaged with government policy.

The Literacies for Learning in Further Education project

Between 2004 and 2009, David, along with Roz Ivanič, took the lead in the Lancaster-based team for the *Literacies for Learning in Further Education project*, undertaken jointly with the University of Stirling and the University of Aberystwyth. This was one of the projects undertaken under the umbrella of the ESRC-funded Teaching and Learning Research Project. The project team included learners, apprentices, tutors and lecturers in subjects across the curriculum such as Painting and Decorating, Childcare, Catering and Hospitality in further education colleges; the Lancaster-based researchers were Candice Satchwell and Zoe Fowler. The aim was to understand the everyday literacy practices of these students, and to draw on this understanding to design ways of helping future students with the literacy demands of their courses and their future employment. The project incorporated not only David's view of literacies as social practices, but also his trade-mark way of undertaking research in collaboration with participants. It led to the co-authored book *Improving learning at college: rethinking literacies across the curriculum* (Routledge, 2009)

Bowland Trust

At around this time, while David spent much time travelling between Lancaster and London, he had a serendipitous conversation on a train (trains were always important, also as a literacy theme) with a businessman, Tony Cann, who was seeking to make a useful philanthropic contribution to research. David was able to persuade him of the importance of literacy research in educational technology. He secured funding for a lectureship in digital literacies (filled by Julia Gillen) and a PhD scholarship exploring innovative uses of educational technology, awarded to Euline Cutrim Schmidt. Euline recalls the opportunity this gave her of pursuing her dream. Without the PhD scholarship, she would have had to

return to Brazil after the Master's. David's sense of opportunity (a chance meeting on the train) and his willingness to take a risk led to the creation of the Bowland Trust, which Lancaster University went on to benefit from in many ways. David made the most of this opportunity, strengthening the Literacy Research Centre by bringing in a new colleague and supporting a junior scholar.

Extending international links: France and Norway

Between 2006 and 2010, David, working with Uta Papen, developed what they called a 'Franco-Anglo dialogue on literacy practices'. Prior to this, work going on in France and other French-speaking countries had been little known in Lancaster. In 2007, David and Uta were invited by the French research group *Anthropology of Writing*, located at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (EHESS), to speak at a conference with the theme of *Ecriture et Literacy: the constitution of the research field in Great Britain and France*. Attending the conference, they learned about research in France that had striking similarities with the approach taken by the New Literacy Studies and by Lancaster's Literacy Research Centre. In May 2008, Uta and David organised a one-day meeting *Ethnographies of literacy: an Anglo-French dialogue* which was attended by five members of the Paris-based group. Papers given at that meeting provided the initial drafts for the book *The Anthropology of writing: Understanding texturally mediated worlds*, co-edited by David and Uta (Continuum, 2010). The book not only brought work from France to an English-speaking audience but also helped to make the Literacy Research Centre and David's work much more widely known in French-speaking research circles.

From January 2008 until December 2010 David was distinguished Visiting Professor at Stavanger University. This involved regular visits to Stavanger from which he always returned with new insights about literacy and language in Norway, as well as with stories of the food he had been eating and photographs of signs in Stavanger that he had taken. As with everything David did, he was fully committed, including making a weekly effort to attend a Norwegian class.

The connection with Stavanger University was maintained by the Literacy Research Centre for many years; most recently through an Erasmus+ project on *Critical Literacies and Awareness in Education* (2022-2024) that Julia and others from Lancaster took part in together with colleagues from Stavanger, France and Spain.

David's later work

Digital language and literacies

In the later stages of his academic career, David shifted his attention to the area of digital literacies. This transition was not a mere change in research focus; it represented a logical progression and expansion of his social practice approach to literacy studies. His primary endeavour revolved around understanding vernacular literacy practices among adults, both online and offline. He supervised PhD dissertations in this area too, including Carmen Lee's

study of Chinese and English multilingual digital literacies and had many connections and visits with universities in Southeast Asia, particularly Hong Kong.

David's initial engagement with digital literacies research stemmed from his enduring passion for photography. For him, literacy studies and photography were closely related. He often captured images of interesting signs and literacy artefacts found in public spaces. He enthusiastically shared these visual representations of literacy by creating beautiful and entertaining sets of postcards for the Literacy Research Centre and showcasing them on the centre's website.

Even before social media became prevalent, he was actively posting his photographs on the photo-sharing platform Flickr. His involvement with Flickr deepened his interest in how literacy practices unfold online, which eventually inspired his scholarly writings on the topic. In this work, David explored how Flickr users interacted with vernacular literacies and informal learning, examining how adults learned to deploy multilingual and multimodal resources in digital environments. This exploration resulted in David and Carmen publishing the book *Language online* (Routledge, 2013).

By employing innovative methods like technobiographies, which David developed through working with undergraduate students, he uncovered valuable insights into how digital literacy practices are woven into the fabric of everyday life, often drawing on research participants' self-reflections and insider perspectives. Drawing on this work he co-authored the book *Researching language and social media* (Routledge, 2014).

The changing literacy landscapes of universities

One of the last research projects David was involved with before his retirement, alongside Mary, Karin Tusting, Sharon McCulloch and Ibrar Bhatt, was the ESRC-funded project on writing in universities, leading to the book *Academics writing: The Dynamics of knowledge creation* (Routledge, 2019). This research used the ethnographically informed methods of literacy studies to explore the changing writing practices of academics. In this work we can see many of the themes from the research described above: a refusal to privilege the more 'prestigious' forms of writing in academia, the research article. Instead, the study focusses on research participants' everyday workplace experiences and the full range of writing practices academics encountered. It seeks to understand the challenges academics faced navigating the demands of managerialism and digital literacies in their professional contexts.

Worlds of Literacy 2.0

The Worlds of Literacy 2.0 conference (2014) was a 20th anniversary celebration of the original Worlds of Literacy book, an academic and personal valediction to David and Mary, and a visionary look towards the future of literacy studies. The event, held at the iconic Midland Hotel in Morecambe (and the venue of the first Worlds of Literacy conference), included a presentation of a specially created volume by their son Tom, with contributions from academics and friends from all over the world. Several PhD students at the Literacy Research Centre presented their current research, including Ami Sato (Nagoya University,

Japan), Margarita Calderón López, (Universidad de Chile), Iva Son Li, (Columbia University), Virginie Thériault, (Université du Québec à Montréal) and Winnie S Y Ho (universities in Hong Kong).

David officially retired from Lancaster University in 2019. In his final years he found time to pursue some of his less well-known interests, including a passion for dictionaries (which he loved to collect) and a long-standing interest in James Joyce. He continued to be passionate about photography and, together with Mary, cared for a piece of woodland in the Lune Valley that he and Mary had bought in 1997. 'The Woods', as he liked to call them, were not only a place for David to learn about the planting of trees and the conservation of woodlands but a place for many parties and gatherings, including to celebrate his and his friends' birthdays, while also holding a Christmas tree library, that many of us borrowed from.

David will be remembered in many different ways. He was an enthusiast, pursuing wide-ranging interests in the academic world and beyond, supported by his relentlessly positive and optimistic outlook, even in difficult times. He loved to share his interests with others and was a gifted and generous collaborator. He was great at bringing people together, initiating conversations and events, and building communities. He would have been the last person to talk about his own legacy, but it is very apparent in the breadth of connections which remain which he built around the world. He was genuinely interested in people's lives and practices, a thread which informed much of his work. All through his many projects, his writings, collaborations and initiatives, in Lancaster, London, Stavanger or elsewhere, we know that people experienced David and remember him as the enthusiastic, thoughtful, wise, caring and also funny (and at times silly) person that he was, enjoying research, enjoying writing, always reading (and widely) and always happy to talk.

Contributors

Margarita Calderón, Julia Gillen, Mary Hamilton, Roz Ivanič, Carmen Lee, Marilyn Martin-Jones, Tony McEnergy, Greg Myers, Uta Papen, Ami Sato, Euline Cutrim Schmid, Mark Sebba, Karin Tusting

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Catherine Kell, Emeritus Associate Professor at the University of Cape Town, remembers David Barton.

David was a hugely important figure in Literacy Studies, from way back in the early 1990s, and made a huge contribution to this field. While doing rigorous theoretical and empirical studies and always innovating, he remained committed to community engagement and practitioner work. He was also a wonderful, generous person, who had a huge influence in my academic life. Go well, David, gone too soon.