Health Literacy Events and Health Literacy Practices

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“Health literacy” has multiple meanings, as we search for richer understandings of the concept to inform research and practice. This paper makes innovative use of tools and frameworks used for decades in literacy research, by applying them to health care. Applying these tools and frameworks illuminates new aspects of health literacy, and offers a conceptually grounded approach to health literacy research—one called for, but not yet realized, in empirical studies. This study holds that literacy, including health literacy, is a dynamic social process that occurs between healthcare providers and patients in specific contexts. The concept of literacy as a social process is associated with the New Literacy Studies (NLS). This NLS concept has been widely used in literacy research, but has yet to be taken into healthcare interactions.

This study is unique in using an NLS lens to examine healthcare interactions. Specifically, this study makes use of two NLS constructs, literacy events and literacy practices. These closely-related constructs are used to frame and investigate interactions in which language plays a part. We can enrich our understandings of provider/patient interactions by utilizing these constructs in health literacy research, calling them health literacy events and health literacy practices.

Building on NLS definitions, we propose that health literacy events include observable interactions in specific contexts between people, or between a person and a text, around issues of health, where language plays a part. Examples could include a patient and pharmacist discussing a prescription at a pharmacy; a patient interacting with her web-based EMR at home; or a care coordinator discussing a client's treatment with a care team in a hallway. Health literacy practices are not directly observable, but refer to various social models that shape and are shaped by people’s use of language and text around issues of health, in specific contexts. Examples could include a patient’s desire to be a protective parent, using evasive language in conversation with his adult children after a bad prognosis. Another could include a care provider who believes ‘honesty is the best policy,’ delivering straightforward information to patients on the telephone, including bad news.

Using health literacy events and health literacy practices, this study investigates the patient/provider interactions of an anesthesiology group, frustrated by low patient satisfaction. Through interviews, surveys, and audio/video recordings, this research is documenting health literacy events and practices of patients and providers, before, during, and after patient/provider interactions, in order to evaluate language use. Findings from this study are informing the creation of health literacy training and materials for both caregivers and patients.

This study expands our view of health literacy, and the available tools for empirical research into health literacy. Health literacy events and health literacy practices can improve physicians' understanding of their patients' needs and how to meet them. Applying these long-standing literacy tools and orientations to the health care environment illuminates previously unseen aspects of language use by patients and providers – and the social processes around these health literacy activities.

¹Street, BV. Social Literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography, and education. New York: Routledge; 2014.