literacy

Access Routes to Written Culture for a Group of Women in Mexico

Judy Kalman
DISCOVERING LITERACY

Access Routes to Written Culture for a Group of Women in Mexico

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Winner of the 2002 International Award for Literacy Research
UNESCO Institute for Education
Hamburg, Germany
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Feldbrunnenstraße 58
20148 Hamburg
Germany


Printed by Alsterdruck GmbH, Hamburg
In loving memory of my parents,
Ted and Peewee Kalman
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First of all, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all the women in Mixquic whom I met through this project. Without them I could not have done this work and would never have learned so many important lessons about literacy in their community and adult education. Their enthusiasm for and commitment to learning, dialogue, and sharing made the time we spent together a true pleasure, and I consider it a privilege to have had the opportunity to get to know them. Special thanks to Isabel Martínez Guerrero, Delfina Martínez Monterrubio, Lidia Martínez Núñez, Gudelia Núñez San Miguel, Joaquina Peña Gutiérrez, Inés Peña Noria, Estela Pineda Galindo, Carmen San Miguel Pineda, Karina Santa Cruz Tenorio, and Elisa Suárez Flores—their warmth and friendship will always be cherished.

An important part of this project was funded by the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation postdoctoral fellowship program. Without their support, I never could have taken it on.

Projects like these always involve a number of people who contribute in a variety of ways. I would like to thank especially the different research associates that accompanied me during the various stages of this work. During the startup phase, Adriana Valdés helped me locate the group, and Claudia Flores worked diligently to prepare the data. Rocio Vargas worked side by side with me during 1998 and part of 1999, visiting Mixquic weekly, working directly with the participants, and preparing data. Guadalupe Noriega helped with the transcriptions and follow-up of the project, and Lupita Díaz worked on some of the final details. Miguel Angel Vargas played a decisive role in the preparation of the first version of this document, and Guadalupe Noriega worked on later revisions. Marisela Silva organized the file and helped
with the transcriptions, while Melba Sánchez took care of final details. Guadalupe Rodríguez, my secretary at the time, never lost patience and was key in keeping things organized. All of these people participated in this project with dedication and interest; not only were they essential in keeping track of notes, transcriptions, photographs, and documents, but they also encouraged me to think carefully about my analysis and conclusions. I only hope that they learned as much as I did. And finally, thank you, don Nico, for your continued support and company.

Transforming my manuscript into a book was the final phase of this project. During this stage, I was most fortunate to have the support and interest of Elisa Bonilla, General Director of Methods and Materials of the Secretary of Public Education in Mexico. Several of her colleagues from the editorial department worked diligently on the Spanish version of this text. My thanks go out to María Elena Ortíz, Magdalena González, and Alejandro Portilla from the Editorial Department. Jordi Farré, Fernando Shimizu, and Miguel Jerónimo Sánchez contributed to the photographic contents of the book. When preparing the English translation and manuscript, my daughter, Rebeca de Buen, was most helpful, as was Georgina Valentino. I am also indebted to the editorial team at the UNESCO Institute for Education for their contributions to the English version of this book.

My family is always patient with me when I am immersed in a research project. They accompany me through each stage, listen to my stories and concerns, and wait for me to finish with tolerance, a sense of humor, and love. Thank you again, Benjamin, Rebeca, and Odón.
Yesterday, my daughter-in-law came over to pick up my identification so that she could register me at the social security office. I used to have insurance coverage through my son, but he moved, and they assigned me to a different clinic. And then the first clinic removed me from their roster. So, once again, we have to go through the red tape.

Estela, 54
This is a story about Mixquic, a small township situated on the southeastern edge of Mexico City, but it is also an account of a group of women who live there. These women rarely go very far from their homes, and when they do, it is to travel to neighboring pueblos, to visit a government office, or to purchase goods for their household. Downtown Mexico City is about three hours away by public transportation and a trip there takes almost all day.

Mixquic is currently undergoing a transition from being a traditional rural, agricultural town to an urban area. Mexico City has grown continuously throughout the twentieth century to the point that it has swallowed up Mixquic and other areas like it. Recent national, social, and economic policies, the consequences of which are best observed in the deterioration in people’s standard of living, have also deeply affected the town. In Latin America and other parts of the developing world, there are hundreds of places like Mixquic where a considerable number of women with little or no schooling live and whose lives take place within the geographic boundaries of their neighborhood.

For the women about whom we will write in the following pages, Mixquic is the place where they were born, grew up, married, and raised their children; it is where they work day-in and day-out, where they plant and tend their crops, where they go to church and celebrate important holidays, such as the Santo Jubileos, Día de Muertos, Christmas, and Independence Day. It is also the place where they encounter acts of reading and writing everyday, sometimes participating in them directly, sometimes just observing them (Kalman 1999). In the town’s different social spaces—the church, the school, the home, the stores, the library, the post office—written language is used for a variety of purposes, and each one constitutes the local contexts for literacy.

In this book we understand ‘literacy’ to be the development of knowledge and use of written language in the social world and in culturally valid events, rather than the more restricted concept alfabetización, which is common in Latin America and is used to refer to learning the most rudimentary aspects of the writing system (letters
and sounds). Here we tell the story of a literacy project rooted in the local context of the women participants. In this endeavor, we tried to weave local culture, literacy, and human sharing; we searched for signs of local communicative and literacy practices as a basis for developing situations in which learning might occur, situations that would capitalize on the participants' existing knowledge and would build their commitment to their own education. This study is full of important lessons learned by the women who participated as well as by the researchers involved—which is precisely why it is upbeat and hopeful in its outlook. In the pages that follow, we locate some of the links between research and educational action and show the usefulness of developing innovative teaching options. We also point out the success that a self-directed study group can have when it is given tailor-made support.

This book is divided into four chapters. The first is a general introduction: it gives a brief history of the project, discusses its principal questions and objectives, theoretical underpinnings, and methodology. The purpose of the second chapter is to construct—by way of an analysis and integration of the data collected—a portrait of Mixquic as a context for reading and writing. We first explored Mixquic to find out how the presence of written culture has gradually increased and come to occupy the place it has now in the communicative life of the community. We then analyzed some of its social spaces in order to identify what opportunities for reading and writing exist for people living there; we examined the different access routes to literacy and modes of appropriation of written language practices present in the immediate environment. Chapter three focuses on the literacy project carried out with a group of women in Mixquic. Here we present in detail the theoretical premises that oriented our actions and the relations we tried to establish between the local culture and the organization of content and learning activities; we also describe some specific learning situations and ponder some of the results of our collaboration with the group members. In the fourth and final chapter, we present our conclusions and reflections on this research and the literacy project.

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1 Rocío Vargas, Guadalupe Noriega, Claudia Flores, Adriana Valdés, and Guadalupe Díaz Tepepa worked on this project at different stages of its development.
A brief history of the research project

This study began as a basic research project, the purpose of which was to investigate the literacy practices of a specific community and how the women who lived there appropriated and used them in their everyday lives. We decided to focus our attention on the use made of reading and writing by unschooled and underschooled women in light of the well-known education-related reality of females in the developing world: the majority of illiterate people are women and the majority of people with complete basic education are men (UNESCO 1999). Despite this situation, Nelly Stromquist (1997: 1) notes that there are few programs that promote education for women which provide “exposure to knowledge that would help them understand the macro- and microforces shaping their lives and to visualize alternative realities.” Our interest in the relationship of women and written culture is also due to our conviction that adult education in general, and education for women specifically, urgently requires new proposals and that educational research can and should make important contributions to their development. It was from this point of view that we tried to conceptualize the town as a context for reading and writing, on the one hand, and to understand how this context shapes opportunities for learning to read and write and how women navigate through them, on the other (Mangubhai 1998).

We first entered the community through an adult education group organized by the Instituto Nacional de Educación para los Adultos (INEA: National Institute for Adult Education), and from there we planned to explore different community spaces gradually. We regarded
this group as a way to meet some local women, hoping that through them we might learn about different aspects of community life.

Our research focused on the following questions:

- What are some of the identifiable literacy practices in different local spaces?
- What are some of the literacy practices that the women value and want to learn?
- How do the women relate their knowledge of the social world to the use of literacy in different communicative contexts?

In explanation of our presence in the group, we said that we were there in order to support the INEA volunteer instructor. In April 1998, about six weeks after we began to visit the study sessions, the instructor abruptly stopped attending the group meetings for personal reasons. When the participants were left without a teacher, the señoritas asked us to teach their class. This petition was problematic for a variety of reasons, not least of which was that a commitment of that type implied dedicating a considerable amount of time to traveling to and from Mixquic in addition to the time spent in class and would not allow us to carry out other responsibilities. However, we also felt that we could not in good conscience leave the women to their fate: it seemed unethical just to abandon the group after they had been so generous and kind to us. This situation confronted us with the well-known methodological and ethical question about researchers’ responsibility to those whom they study (Clifford 1984; Rosaldo 1989). We decided to continue to work with the group of women on a once-a-week basis and to help them hold study meetings two more times each week without the physical presence of an instructor. We thought that by collaboratively developing independent learning activities we could both tend to their needs and continue to pursue our research agenda.

The first challenge we encountered was the consolidation of the study group; several women left it when the instructor stopped attending. We assumed that we could keep the group together if, with the help of the women in the group, we figured out how to create a space for learning that complemented rather than interfered with their daily lives. This implied respecting their activities and commitments at home and in the community (specifically, by acknowledging their attendance patterns and schedules insofar as they accord with the priorities that the women themselves set, without complaining about their lack of punc-
tuality or irregular attendance.) It also meant that we would not give them homework assignments unless they requested them. We invited them to take part in deciding how the sessions were to be organized and run (such as when to prolong a session, when to cancel one, and what to do during the meeting time). Some of the women belonged to a sewing cooperative, and the classes were held in their shop; their double membership turned out to be significant regarding both the dynamics of their education and their participation in group activities.

In general we attended sessions with the señor as on Mondays, doing collective reading and writing activities and planning together what they would do on Wednesdays and Fridays, when they were to meet independently without an instructor. In the beginning, the sessions without us occurred only once in a while; the Friday meetings were especially sporadic. However, as time went on, especially in 1999, these became increasingly frequent and regular as a result of the time we shared together. To give a better overview of our experience, the time we spent together can be divided into three stages. The first lasted about five months, during which we got to know each other and we explored different types of materials and tried different types of activities (reading aloud together, answering questions in INEA workbooks, using reading and writing for a variety of purposes, and so on). During the second period (September–December 1998), most of our efforts were directed towards writing and designing a calendar that we decided to produce. Finally, during 1999 and the early months of 2000, the women continued to meet, spending their time reading, studying INEA materials, and preparing for the certification exams. We accompanied them on a regular basis throughout the first half of 1999; after that, our presence slowly tapered off.
In Chapter three we shall present a detailed description of the study group, its inner workings, and the guidelines that oriented our educational work. For the moment, we merely want to point out that assuming the responsibility of teaching in the context of our original research project became an interesting and unexpected opportunity to think about the data we were collecting about literacy practices, namely, to think about them from the perspective of the teaching challenges we faced with our learners. We added two new questions to our study:

- How can we facilitate access to literacy?
- How do the women use their knowledge about the social world and literacy to enrich their participation in their study group?

These questions forced us to question the notion of *access* to literacy, a concept often used in education literature and policy but rarely defined. We decided to make an effort to characterize it and identify those actions that promoted access. Once we had a working definition of ‘access’, it became a substantial part of our search for literacy practices in the community, as well as of our participation in the educational process of the women’s group.

It is important to point out that during the last four decades, Mixquic has undergone an intense process of urbanization, one that has gradually transformed the material conditions for reading and writing for the people in the town—transformations in the *availability* of literacy. At the same time, the social conditions for literacy use and opportunities for appropriating and using written culture have also changed: *access* to literacy has been transformed as well. We use these two terms—*access* and *availability*—to differentiate the dissemination of those material goods related to reading and writing from the social processes underlying the distribution and use of literacy. While *availability* refers to the physical presence of printed matter, the infrastructure necessary for its distribution (libraries, newsstands, post offices, etc.), *access* refers to the opportunities to participate in literacy events, those situations in which one is situated vis-à-vis other readers and writers; *access* also has to do with opportunities and modalities for learning to read and write or to extend existing practices (Kalman 1996). *Access* is an analytical category that allows us to identify how participants display their knowledge, reading and writing practices, understanding, and uses for literacy in the process of interaction. It covers two important aspects of literacy learning and use: the pathways to literacy (the relationship with other readers and writers, with texts and knowledge about written culture) and the
modalities of appropriation (the specific features of written language practices, their contents, forms, conventions, meaning-making processes and procedures).

Understanding the difference between *access* and *availability* is one of the ideas that emerged from the fieldwork and the preliminary analysis of our data. The mere existence of a collection of books in a library does not promote reading; it is necessary to understand why people go there, what goes on in the stacks and at the reading tables; only then can we think in terms of *access* to written culture. Similarly, a literacy program may be *available* to a community, on hand for anyone who wishes to sign up, but *access* to reading and writing takes place in the study sessions, during learning activities, in the interpretative options for understanding written texts. *Access* is a result of the modalities of appropriation and the social relations that develop around written language; these modalities are in fact an organic part of literacy (Andrade 2000; Chartier 1997a; Purcell-Gates 2000; Soifer 1999).

**Theoretical tools: Notions, concepts, and ideas**

In 1993 Brian Street used the phrase “new literacy studies” to talk about research that presents fine-grained portraits of the multiple uses of written language; these studies tend to relate literacy to oral language practices, to analyze their complex social meanings, and to examine their place in the communicative acts of individuals and their communities. From this perspective, researchers ask what is the social organization of reading and writing and how is it linked to power relationships (as well as different social, political, economic, and religious realities). This project also asks these questions, emphasizing the importance of the local context as the source of material goods and practices, as well as recognizing people's knowledge about oral and written language, their environment, their daily activities, and their social world.

In this study we adopt a theoretical perspective according to which literacy (*alfabetización* in Spanish) is something more than the rote learning of the most basic components of reading and writing. Furthermore, we assume that *being* literate refers to the ability to use written language to participate in the social world. It follows, then, that becoming literate involves learning how to manipulate written language—text genres, meanings, discourses, words, and letters—in a deliberate and intentional way in order to participate in culturally valued events and as a means of interacting with others (Dyson 1997; Heath 1983).
Ethnographic research has shown that differences in the uses of reading and writing exist; differences that are due to the variety of purposes users of written language have when reading and writing, what they hope to achieve through literacy use, their position with regard to other readers and writers, and the ideas and meanings that guide their participation. The concept of written language practice contemplates the social uses of reading and writing (the skills, technology, and knowledge necessary to read and write), as well as the views people have of their practices (Barton and Ivanic 1991; Besnier 1995; Canieso-Doronila 1996; Ferdman 1994; Kalman 1999; Moss 1994; Scribner and Cole 1981; Street 1993; Stromquist 1997; Wagner 1993). Ethnographic research has also shown that access to written culture is permeated by power relations that determine who reads and writes, what they read and write, who makes these decisions, who establishes the conventions that govern written language, and who exercises power through written language. For these reasons, Roger Chartier (1997a) proposes that the unequal distribution of written language is best understood when one studies the modalities of appropriation, the interpretative practices, and the relationship between literacy practices and types of representation.

Using the practices of reading and writing as a starting point in no way amounts to an instrumental view of literacy; the notion of use is different from the traditional concept of functional literacy (Barton 1994; Baynham 1995). In this book, practice refers to the opportunities for and types of participation in culturally valued activities rather than a strictly utilitarian use of written language in order to achieve concrete goals (fill out a form, write formal letters, follow instructions, write messages, and so on). Participating in the social world implies a wide range of possible communicative events, where reading and writing are crucial for intervening: reading literature (novels, stories, essays, poetry, and plays), for example, is a social activity in the sense that its interpretive practices are historically construed and its meaning is set in a universe of written texts. Furthermore, it is a vehicle for creating social relationships; by reading and interacting around literature readers connect with other readers, writers, texts, and contexts. From this perspective, all written language practices are functional to the extent that they imply participating in specific situations, regardless of what their purpose is. Reciting isolated syllables (ma me mi mo mu) or sacred texts is also a way of participating in specific reading events or
religious ceremonies; however, these types of practices do not necessarily give way to participating in contexts other than those mentioned.

From this perspective, the concept of context is also central to understanding what printed matter is available in Mixquic and how people have accessed them: this requires analyzing the spaces where written language events occur. Work published by sociolinguists such as John Gumperz (1984; 1986), Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin (1992), and Muriel Saville-Troike (1982) provide many insights that help to understand how reading and writing are accomplished in the context of social interaction. They define context in terms of the situation of use, the interactive dynamics that occur among participants within a given communicative event. Gumperz (1984; 1986) carefully points out that communicative events do not take place in spaces void of social and cultural meaning: each speaker or reader/writer brings with them their worldview, language practices, history, and experience with other participants to a given communicative event. He posits that context is the intersection of specific situated interaction dynamics with relevant social, historical, cultural, and economic processes. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), R. P. McDermott and Henry Tyblor (1995), Anne Dyson (1997), Shirley Brice Heath (1983), and Brian Street (1993) have all contributed to the notion of context by linking it to the concept of participation and the different ways of intervening in a given situation, particularly one in which learning takes place. These two theoretical constructs—context and participation—are suggestive conceptual tools for understanding access to literacy: how it is used in context, its access routes, the modalities of appropriation, and the criteria for interpreting or producing written text.

There are also historical studies that are concerned with the notion of context. They assume that wherever reading and writing take place and wherever literacy is disseminated, it has to do with social, economic, and political scenarios. They show what practices in religious, political, or commercial spaces have contributed to the dissemination and diversification of literacy practices. For example, during the Reformation, in some countries religious requirements increased the practice of reading Biblical texts, which served as a bridge to reading other kinds of administrative, commercial, political, and even literary texts (Gilmore 1989; Graff 1991; Vicent 1989; Zboray 1993). In parts of Europe and New England, religious instruction was given within the family structure, turning the household into what Ronald Zboray (1993) calls a “lit-
eracy generating space,” a context in which people learn to read and write. After the Reformation, the Protestant church wielded a great deal of political power and it compelled its followers to master the reading of sacred texts, interweaving religious belief with the individual ability to read the Bible. The outcome of this policy was that reading became essential in some cases if one was to participate socially in religious contexts.

The relevance of historical dimensions for understanding literacy in Mixquic and other places like it should not be underestimated: the history of these places reveals the processes and conditions that allow, promote, or hinder the distribution of written culture and the adoption of given practices. Several researchers have identified important sites in which these processes occur (within families, schools, churches, at work, in commerce, and so on), and they suggest where we should also begin to look.

In the present study we have used the idea of a literacy-generating space in order to contemplate some of the situations in which reading and writing are achieved, but we have also broadened the idea in order to differentiate ways of participating in a given literacy event. This allows us to account for those situations in which learning and development are encouraged and literacy is required in order to participate. In both cases, mediation—the collaboration of two or more readers or writers—is a common and recurring form of interaction.

A key concept for us, then, is literacy, which we define as a mosaic of socially constructed written language practices that vary according to use. Reading and writing always occur in specific contexts, in complex situations with interactive, historical, political, and ideological dimensions. Our intention here is to give a description in which various positions and historical processes flow together. Researchers have already demonstrated the explicative power of examining dissemination and adoption processes for understanding literacy issues (see, e.g., Barton and Ivanic 2000; Brandt 1999; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996; Gilmore 1989; and Zboray 1993). They center their analyses on: 1) the dynamic relationship between individual and collective literacy practices, 2) the relationship between literacy practices and socio-historical and economic change, and 3) individual trajectories in specific local environments.

Finally, it is necessary to explain why we focused our research on some of the women in Mixquic. Currently, illiteracy and incomplete basic schooling has a feminine face: on a worldwide scale women usually have
less formal education than men. In higher education, professional and specialized training, there are also fewer women than men. Historically speaking, women have had fewer opportunities for formal education than their masculine counterparts, and for this very reason women are considered a special group in international and national education policies (Schmelkes and Kalman 1996: 79–80).

Recent research has shown that, although women with little or no schooling recognize the importance of educating themselves and they express the desire to do so, they generally do not enter educational programs, even if the programs are designed specifically for them. And when women do sign up, they often leave the courses and educational projects shortly after beginning for a variety of reasons, which range from local beliefs to asymmetric gender relations, economic responsibilities, or family duties that simply take too much of their time and energy (Lind and Johnson 1990; Stromquist 1997; Westen 1994). Studies pursuing this line of inquiry have focused their attention on, and explained to a certain point, why women stray from such programs. By contrast, while working with the learning group, we had the opportunity both to accompany the señor as (who made a sustained effort to participate in a program over an extended period of time) and, in the process, to understand what this meant to them.

In this sense this study also considers gender to the extent that we attempt to learn about those processes that promote or hinder women’s access to education (King 1994; Medel-Añonuevo 1997; Rockhill 1993; Stromquist 1997; Westen 1994; Zuñiga 1994). We were led to this topic by our interest in understanding how women in Mixquic appropriate literacy practices, how a community determines their opportunities to learn to read and write, and how this situation has changed in recent years.

Methodology: Literacy practices up close

The concept of literacy as a mosaic of social practices has had an impact on research on written culture in the social world. Qualitative studies develop “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973) of reading and writing practices in order to present these practices as they occur in different socio-cultural situations. Instead of seeking to arrive at an abstract thesis or decontextualized judgment about literacy, recent studies have sought to elaborate theoretical principles and knowledge about the specificity of written language practices, to distinguish the different ways in which reading and writing are achieved, and to contribute
knowledge and concepts that help to increase our understanding of written culture (Barton and Ivanic 1991; Besnier 1995; Canieso-Doronila 1996, Ferdman 1994; Kalman 1999; Moss 1994; Scribner and Cole 1991; Street 1993; Stromquist 1997; Wagner 1993). The aim of the present project was to find clues, by way of an analysis of acts of reading and writing in specific contexts, that also enable us to consider what we learn in such acts from an education perspective.

To answer our research questions, we had to look at literacy in process and capture it in action, particularly those situations in which the study group members participated, in and out of our sessions. The conceptual basis of our methodological stance was the view that practice implies action by social agents at a specific time and in a specific space. Reading and writing employ technologies—page or screen, keyboard or pencil—and are accomplished in different ways: on page margins, blackboards, or scrolls. This is the basis for Silvia Scribner and Michael Cole's definition of practice as the conjugation of knowledge, skill, and technology, and Brian Street's observation that people's beliefs about what they are doing is also a part of practice (Scribner and Cole 1981: 236; Street 1993: 4).

To discover and understand reading and writing practices in Mixquic, we began by paying attention to the ways in which the señoras participated in the study group. By observing learning activities, audi-taping, and collecting writing sample, documents, photographs and inter-viws, we compiled a variety of evidence concerning the subject of our study.

We prepared our data for analysis by transcribing the audio tapes and inserting codes using procedures taken from the ethnography of communication (Coates 1995; Gumperz and Hymes 1986; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Saville-Troike 1982). Analytical categories were constructed from the data and the participants' concepts, creating a "vocabulary" for organizing and explaining what we learned. We explored the

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2 In transcribing conversational turns, we highlighted certain interactive phenomena: latches (=) (when one speaker finishes another speaker's turn), interruptions (lined up phrases marked with (/)), extended syllables (:), changes in volume and speed (≠Ø), underlining for emphasis, brackets for short explanations concerning tone and/or meaning. We also tried to respect features of speech. However, we have simplified the presentation of coding in the conversations inserted in this paper for the sole purpose of facilitating their reading, leaving only those marks that we consider necessary in order not to distort meanings.
texts, looking for patterns of conduct and thought in relation to the use of reading and writing (Bogdan 1982; Dyson 1989).

Drawing our portrait of Mixquic required visiting different places in the community and looking for examples of written language (the parish, the cementary, stores, markets, the library, the school) and interviewing some local figures, including the priest, the manager of the local post office, the librarian, the local government authority, the person in charge of the local newsstand. For each site, we organized the data in terms of recurring events: the situations in which literacy took place, the materials used for reading and writing, and people’s expectations about them.

We also used information from the community and the participating group members to develop a small-scale survey in order to detect the presence and use of written language within local homes. Two women from our study group conducted the survey, which enhanced the surveyors’ acceptance in the community, though it also caused some difficulties. Even though the final sample includes 179 interviews (75% women), many surveys had to be eliminated, especially the initial ones, because the data was incomplete. We considered the experiences of informants between the ages of 6 and 97 and grouped the information into four categories: great grandmothers (averaging 68.8 years of age); grandmothers (averaging 50.8 years); mothers (averaging 29.6 years), and daughters (averaging 8.6 years).

The presentation of the pedagogical component of our project includes the description and analysis of the social and material conditions for literacy (access and availability), emphasizing four points of view: the literacy practices found in the community, the participants’ previous knowledge, the approach to teaching, and the different modes of participation and learning.

**Mixquic: A rural town in transition**

Not only are Mexico City and the surrounding metropolitan area—referred to as the Distrito Federal (DF) and Zona Metropolitana—the most densely populated part of Mexico, with 18.3% of the total national population (17.8 out of a total 97.5 million Mexicans live there) (INEGI 2000a); it is also the political, administrative, and economic center of the country. On the southeastern edge of this urban conglomerate lies San Andrés Mixquic, a small town that is in transition from rural to urban life. As recently as 1970, 61.4% of its geographical area was reserved for agricultural purposes (Hernández 1999).
Mixquic also belongs to the Delegación de Tlahuac, one of the 16 administrative districts that make up Mexico City; currently 55.68% of its territory is used for agriculture, making it the second most rural area of the capital city (INEGI 2000b). As these numbers indicate, Mixquic is the most rural area in one of the most rural districts in the DF. Its resistance to urbanization is reflected by comparing its demographic growth over the past 40 years with the rest of the district. While the population in Tlahuac has increased 9.08 times, growing from 29,880 to 271,600 inhabitants, Mixquic has barely tripled its population, growing only 2.66 times from 4285 to 11,400 inhabitants.

This locale has a strong and enduring agricultural tradition. However, during the latter half of the twentieth century it has undergone an accelerated process of urbanization. During this period, Mexico City’s urban sprawl extended in all directions, swallowing up small towns like Mixquic and incorporating them into the larger, and often disorderly, urban center.

The transformation experienced in Mixquic is part of a broader economic and social transformation that began in practically all of Mexico. Throughout the twentieth century, the state has pursued economic policies that have taken the country from a predominantly agricultural to becoming an industrial and service-sector economy. Following the Second World War, economically strong nations formed development policies for poor nations on the assumption that industrialization was the natural goal and at the top of the social evolutionary scale (Sachs 1995: 2). According to Arturo Escobar (1995: 132-45), experts in industrialized countries considered certain aspects of social life in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to pose serious problems, especially when these were perceived to be features of poverty and backwardness. Industrialized countries thus established a series of policies aimed at developing these countries (where ‘development’ was understood as industrialization), policies that were based on systematic economic intervention and dependent on technology transfer from the North to the South and that promoted the reorganization of work processes despite the implications for community life, urbanization, and industrialization. Alicia Ziccardi (1990: 54) points out that “the process of industrialization was directed at the production of intermediate goods, of capital and long term consumption, leaving all other economic sectors, particularly agriculture, to their own dynamics.”

The statistics on the activities of the Población Economicamente
Activd (PEA: Economically Active Population), show the transformations experienced in Mexico, including small towns like Mixquic. For example, in 1940, 65% of the national PEA worked in the primary sector (agriculture, livestock, fishing), whereas 55 years later, in 1995, the percentage fell to only 22.6%.

As far as Mixquic is concerned, in 1920 the overwhelming majority of people worked in agriculture (71.4%); currently these activities have fallen to 25.9%. From Table 1.1, which charts the evolution of these economic activities from 1920 to 2000, it is evident that between 1960 and 1970 there was a severe reduction in agricultural activity, dropping from 54.2 to 39.2%.

Table 1.1. PEA distribution in Mixquic by economic sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Carlos Tello (1980: 6), Secretary of Planning and Budget at the end of the 1970s, policies were chosen that tended to make changes in the economic structure and diversify productive activities in terms of jobs, manufacture, and exportations. For some, this meant simply changing activities and going into the oil industry, mining, utilities, or factory work. For others, however, it meant that they had to overcome increasing difficulties in order to continue on their farms because:

The self-sufficiency in food production that had been preserved at the beginning of the '60s became unsustainable by 1980 due to the continuous decapitalization of the countryside, the slow expansion of irrigation, and the exclusion of subsistence farmers, as well as the lack of organization of farm workers. (Tello 1980: 13)

It has been pointed out that the model of development adopted by Mexico, and other developing counties, imitates the economic organization of industrialized nations without taking into consideration the

---

3 Source: INEGI 1990. In the row labeled "Others," activities are not specified, but they could refer to unemployment or informal economic activity. For 1920–1960, data from Mexico City was used, adjusting it according to Mixquic's local growth. Data for 1970 was taken from the Gaceta de la Delegación de Tlahuac and Malváez Zavala 1985.
realities specific to those countries. Disconnected from local culture, development could not be maintained without the continuous transfusion of capital and technology. The development of an industrial base was supposed to be the main goal, sometimes in combination with a modern and mechanized agro-industry oriented towards export. The countries in the North had built their industries on a solid agricultural foundation, but these policies overlooked this fact and promoted industrialization at the cost of food security. The architects of these policies despised small-scale farming, the very source of income and way of life for many living in affected countries (George 1988: 15).

This observation is also relevant for Mexico. According to Victor Toledo (1990), in 1981, 77.2% of the units for agricultural production had less than 10 hectares. This means that, despite the established policies, small-scale planting and property continued to be the dominant mode of production nationwide.

Despite the guiding principles and processes of urbanization, Mixquic continues to be a rural area with some characteristics indicative of urban marginality. In comparison with the rest of Tlahuac, Mixquic shows stark signs of poverty: high dropout rates in the primary years, a lack of running water and sanitary infrastructure, and precarious housing. Table 1.2 presents a series of the poverty indicators most widespread in the area. In the next chapter we will discuss in detail figures related to education. But, for the time being, perhaps the most relevant figures when comparing the general population, Tlahuac, and Mixquic are those for running water, drainage, and income. A third of the working population of Mixquic receives less than twice the minimum daily wage (approximately US$ 7.00).

Table 1.2. Poverty indicators in Tlahuac, Mixquic, and Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Tlahuac</th>
<th>Mixquic</th>
<th>National Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of inhabitants without running water</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>11.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of inhabitants without drainage or toilets</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>9.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of inhabitants without electricity</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of inhabitants with dirt floors</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>14.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of inhabitants with income less than twice the minimum wages</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>50.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study group

An important number of the women participating in the study group belonged to a sewing cooperative called the Asociación Agroindustrial Fuerza Campesina founded in 1993. With loans and technical support, a federal government program helped the members to establish a workshop where garments are manufactured and mended. Moreover, they partially assemble garments for larger companies. Gudelia, one of the study group members, is the association's representative. The workshop has its own space, work tables, and ten sewing machines of different kinds.

This situation contributed to establishing the study group: many of the women knew each other, they already met on a regular basis, they lived in the vicinity of the shop, and they had a place where they could meet to study. As a result, the workshop, besides being a place for sewing, became a place where the women could read and write. This generated the possibility for them to take two hours on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to meet for reading and writing together. In the sewing shop, various uses of written language were part of their productive activities: using a measuring tape and writing down measurements, along with the customer's name, date of delivery, the style of their clothing, type of fabric, and so on; but only two association members were able to make these notes. The opportunity to learn to do these and other activities provided important motivation also to others to participate in the literacy circle.

At the beginning of our project in March 1998, there were twelve women in the group who met three times each week with a volunteer instructor from the INEA to work on INEA literacy and basic education programs. We were there to support the instructor, but she
abruptly stopped attending the sessions, and seven women left immediately after that, leaving only five in the group. With these five, we organized the self-directed group. The stable members of the group throughout the project were Gudelia Núñez San Miguel, Carmen San Miguel Pineda, Delfina Martínez Monterrubio, Isabel Martínez Guerrero, and Estela Pineda Galindo. They attended the study sessions regularly from beginning to end.

The rest of the women joined and left the project at different times, participating as their busy lives permitted. A few weeks later, some of the women came back to the group, curious to see what their neighbors were doing. In January 1999, the group began to grow, reaching a size of eleven members, whose attendance and participation varied. The following table details the name, age, and years of schooling for each of the group members:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Approximate age (at start of project)</th>
<th>Last grade attended in school</th>
<th>Participation in the project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Delfina</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1st grade</td>
<td>Attended on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Elisa (Licha)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1st grade</td>
<td>Attended at beginning and then sporadically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lidia</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Sporadically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Carmen</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Attended on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Isabel (Chabe)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3rd grade</td>
<td>Attended on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Estela</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>Attended on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Joaquina</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3rd grade</td>
<td>Entered in 1999; attended on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Juanita</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>Attended at beginning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Gudelia</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>Attended on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Inés</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>Entered in 1999; attended sporadically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Erica</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>Entered towards the end; attended on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Paulina</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>Attended at beginning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Xochi</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2nd grade</td>
<td>Attended at beginning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Karina</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>Sporadically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a sense this group of women represents all of the women who participate in a variety of similar activities in their community. Mix-

---

5 The column 'Participation in the project' seeks to describe in a general way the women's attendance. Some women consented to having their names in the text; for those who did not, we have used fictious names in the text.
quic has a total population of 5791 women, 53.7% of whom fall within the age group considered to be economically active. The main activities of the majority of these women include domestic work, child rearing, work in the fields, and other jobs related to traditional agriculture. Domestic work involves some quantifiable tasks, such as housework, laundry, shopping, and meal preparation, but other activities are more qualitative in nature, such as caring for the psychological and affective well-being of the family (Beneria 1987).

Unlike their male counterparts, women rarely leave their pueblo, and when they do venture beyond its limits, they usually go no farther than neighboring towns (San Juan Ixtayopan, San Nicolas Tetelco, or San Pedro Tláhuac) to do official business, make a special purchase, or see a doctor. During special religious festivities, they may participate in pilgrimages or processions. Only on a few occasions and under extraordinary circumstances do they travel to downtown Mexico City. Financial resources are scarce; families have to live on micro-economies and must sustain themselves with extremely low incomes.

Due to the amount of work and the continuous demands of domestic life, most women have little free time available, and therefore have few opportunities to postpone or put off their household responsibilities. Even though women theoretically have the right to go to school or find a job, very few of them have gainful employment outside their homes or continue to go to school much beyond a basic education. This in turn limits their job opportunities, reducing their options to poorly paid jobs or jobs in the informal sector (domestic work, selling merchandise on street corners, etc.). For the same reasons, the specific kinds of knowledge that one learns on the job or in more advanced educational settings are often off limits to them as well. Their restriction to domestic activities and their confinement to their community contribute to their isolation and marginalization. This accounts for why their immediate surroundings and their households are the primary contexts where their lives take place and their main sources for written culture. As Margarita Valdés (1995: 427) notes: “Although primary ‘goods’ and resources are open to women, the majority of them do not participate in those spheres and therefore cannot attain all those functionings that could only come about through education and employment.”

The participants’ experiences with and beliefs about written language revealed not only their particular ideas about literacy but also
how those ideas have changed over time. Over the last few decades, Mixquic has been gradually transformed into a place for reading and writing. As will be discussed, the presence of literacy has grown along with the increase in the circulation of printed matter. Similarly, insofar as formal education services have broadened, opportunities for little girls to attend school have also increased; the social conditions for using reading and writing have changed, and, generally speaking, women have more presence in public life in Mexico.6

### Table 1.4. Distribution of the population of Mixquic by age and sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>0-14</th>
<th>15-65</th>
<th>&gt; 65</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2027</td>
<td>3110</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>5791 (50.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>3012</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>5609 (49.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3990</td>
<td>6122</td>
<td>1288</td>
<td>11400 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the women participating in the study talked about literacy, reading and writing were portrayed as far off and distant activities. In making sense of them, they articulated different discourses and views about schooling, family needs, and their particular positions in relation to family and school. One common comment was that they did not have the mental capacity or sufficient interest to learn (“I was too burrita [dumb] to go to school”; “I didn’t pay attention”; “I preferred to play”). Carmen, a 64 year-old grandmother and great grandmother, explained why she had not gone to school in these words: “Before we practically didn’t go to school, they frightened us by saying ‘you are going to go to school, boys and girls together, and the boys take advantage, they want to kiss and hug the girls’ . . . nobody encouraged us, nobody called us, nobody said, ‘Go to school, you’re going to need it.’” When we asked them about what books, other printed matter, pencils, and paper were available in their childhood homes, Isabel answered, “In our homes there was a lot of necessity, a lot of hunger, a large family, a lot of brothers and sisters,” implying that acquiring books and other objects related to reading and writing was a luxury that families could not afford. Other women agreed with her: in their homes there were no books, magazines, or newspapers. The few books that they

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6 Currently, women are more visible in local and national public life. E.g., 46% of university students are female; there are women in high public positions, in the arts and sports; women with careers in higher education, research, health, commerce, and the media.
had were school related; Isabel reminisced that “other than school books, no. My father and mother don’t know how to read and write. In any case, school was for the boys.” Licha’s experience was similar: when she was seven years old, she stopped going to the classes that a local teacher gave in his home. “I was afraid to go to school, so they told me ‘what do you prefer, making tortillas or going to school? I preferred the tortillas. I was very happy to grind corn, and I wasn’t afraid.”

Carmen, Isabel, and Licha did not learn to read and write through formal schooling even though there was a small local school that they could have attended; when they were little girls the social conditions did not exist for them to go to school. There were no opportunities for them to learn to write in other spaces; for the most part, the other people in their households did not read and write, and so the family was not a literacy-generating space. Written language was not a part of their immediate existence, nor was it available or accessible through their daily lives. Gude, a 44-year-old grandmother (and Carmen’s daughter) had a different experience. She went to primary school, started junior high, but dropped out when she was fifteen. She tells of how her father helped her to learn to read and write by buying her comic books and reading them with her, with the promise that if she read them on her own, he would buy her another one. In her home there was a Bible, written documents, stories, and schoolbooks belonging to other family members. Her father told her stories, some of them from The Thousand and One Arabian Nights, and he bought her comic books. “I learned to read with the Supermachos. I went to school, but I think that I was very burra (dumb) because the teacher paid a lot of attention to me. My father sat with me. He said, ‘This says this, these are the letters.’ I started to like it, I started to read, and I always had his help.” Gudelia’s experience was different from Carmen’s, Isabel’s, and Licha’s. The social and material conditions made it possible for her to learn to read and appropriate written culture. There were books and other printed matter at her disposal, and reading was part of an important relationship with her father. Even though Gudelia and Isabel are the same age, neighbors, and natives of the same town, their stories are very different.

One of the most important printed matter in Mixquic is property titles. Having them is essential to members of the Mixquic communi-

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7 Supermachos was a political comic book drawn and written by Rius in the 1960s. Its characters parody the political structure of Mexico, placing them in a small town.
ty, given the history of land fraud that the peasants suffered due to the imprecision in land ownership. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, ownership policies favored businessmen and large property owners. Rocío Hernández Elia (1999: 94), for example, cites the case of the Ley de Desamortización de Bienes de Manos Muertas, which was decreed on June 25, 1856 and was used to expropriate communal holdings and steal individual properties. The author points out that the law generated a series of problems in land ownership in the area because “before assigning lands to anyone, it had to be determined whether lots were fallow, ownerless, or public; and in many cases the definition was not clear. Furthermore, and despite the fact that many plots were previously allotted by communal titles or belonged to indigenous people who held deeds to them, they were given to people who were outsiders to the communities.”

The women in our study were familiar with such incidents of confiscation and theft of land. Among their many stories, they told of how certain local characters used written documents as legal arms for taking advantage of the local farmers’ ignorance. Because few people in the town knew how to read and write, and because of a lack of public notaries (the public authority who could legally draw up deeds), private individuals took it upon themselves to elaborate property titles. According to the señoritas, the large landowners took over the properties of others by committing the owners of small properties to put their land up as collateral for loans. According to the women’s stories, the powerful men of Mixquic “lent money to the peasants, they wrote down the day and time that the loan had to be repaid, and if the money was not returned then, they would keep the land. Poor people! The heartless men were not to be found, and they kept everything! Nobody could stop them. We were all poor, and they became congressmen. Because of our ignorance we could not defend ourselves.” Ignorance meant, among other things, not knowing how to read and write.

For these women the idea of reading and writing is a complex notion that simultaneously conjures up many meanings at once. It includes important but unattainable knowledge; it is a privilege, a desirable activity that can be both pleasurable and difficult, a weapon for taking advantage of others and at the same time for defending oneself, something you learn to do in school and use outside of it. Social and material conditions mediated how close the participants came to literacy during their childhood; in some cases reading and writing was neither available nor
accessible. The lack of printed matter in their immediate surroundings and the absence of readers in their daily lives subordinated learning to read and write to satisfying other needs. Literacy was viewed as a luxury rather than a need. Only Gudelia, whose experience was different, had access to written language at home, with her father, with a variety of printed matter available and at her disposal. It is now, as mature women, that Isabel, Carmen, Delfina, and the others decided to create the conditions for reading and writing.
In our homes there was need, there was hunger, there were lots of brothers and sisters but books . . . no.

Isabel, 50
Only recently have researchers begun to analyze the relationship between community contexts and literacy processes of marginalized people (Brandt 1998). This chapter examines the availability of printed matter and the opportunities that the townspeople of Mixquic have for participating in reading and writing activities. Urs Fuhrer (1996: 179) has pointed out that both using social practices and learning to use them occur in specific contexts, and what we learn responds to the requirements of specific participation, shaping each practice to fit the social contexts in which we employ them. He regards contexts as including the physical spaces and the social conduct we expect within them. He notes, for example, that our ability to recognize a church as a place of prayer and to distinguish it from a stadium as a place where sporting events take place is part of our knowledge of socially constructed spaces. Seth Chainklin and Jean Lave (1996: 5) posit that "our theories about everyday practices insist in that people's actions and the social world of activity are simultaneous." From this perspective, to read, write, and speak about reading and writing constitute essential activities of literacy and are simultaneously the activities that are part of the social world that creates written culture.

Several social and institutional factors and forces influence and transform written language practices: formal education, the demands and norms of social interactions, the social value given to reading and writing, the relationship between literacy and work, the accessibility and availability of printed matter, and the distribution of technologies. Change in any one of these impacts written language practices and their use in the social world. Economic, social, and cultural processes have a bearing on the generation of new literacy practices, transforming some and discontinuing others (Brandt 1999; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Chartier 2001; Wittmann 2001; Lyons 2001).

Our position is that the availability of printed matter influences how opportunities to access reading and writing practices surface, and vice versa. However, we also assume that the physical presence of written materials by itself is not enough to disseminate written culture. Written
language practices spring up and evolve in response to specific communicative and cultural needs, transforming and modifying written materials at the same time. Although we recognize that school is a privileged site for learning to read and write, it is clear that it is not the only one; thus we actively look for and recognize other contexts for learning to read and write or for using reading and writing as a means of communication. Clearly, reading and writing are learned in school but they are also learned through everyday use. Reading and writing are practices linked to everyday life in most communities, and there are expectations about who reads and writes, as well as about how and when they will do so. It is possible to find written language uses that are deeply set within a community’s language life and still others that are more recent—harbingers of emerging uses of reading and writing. The analysis of these different aspects of written culture in Mixquic is necessary not only in order to describe the current panorama of reading and writing in town but also as a way of understanding the material and social conditions that contribute to people’s access to literacy, local uses of reading and writing, and especially as a way of appreciating how literacy use in Mixquic has changed over the past 50 years or so.

In light of the foregoing, our study simultaneously interweaves several analytical dimensions: a) a descriptive account of printed matter and texts found in Mixquic; b) a reconstruction of some of the historical processes related to how and when these materials first appeared in the town; c) an examination of several situations in which these materials are used; and d) a look at the beliefs, values, and experiences surrounding literacy as expressed by the women who participated in this study.

The development of spaces for reading and writing

Scholars studying the history of written culture, reading, writing, and the publishing industry have considered a series of indicators in order to depict the access and availability of written language at different times and places. In 1968, the English anthropologist Jack Goody called for the inquiry into written language use in daily life, proposing a research agenda centered on reading and writing practices in traditional societies. William Gilmore (1989) proposed studying family libraries, subscriptions to magazines and other publications, and religious texts as a way of documenting the different features that characterize the dissemination of literacy and the establishment of reading and writing practices. Harvey
Graff (1987) looked at the relationship between economic development of Western societies and the distribution of printed matter. Ronald Zboray (1993) noted the importance of exploring what he calls literacy-generating spaces, such as the family and the church, as a way of understanding the literacy processes at work in a community and its members' opportunities to learn and amplify their knowledge about reading and writing. He particularly emphasized the intersection of economic development, the rise of the publishing industry, and the growth of a reading public in the United States during the antebellum period. Roger Chartier (1997) studied the relationship between written materials, forms of representation, and reading and writing practices.

In this section we shall expand the notion of a literacy-generating space to include at least three types of situation, which we have termed 'literacy-demanding situations', 'literacy-scaffolding situations', and 'volunteer literacy situations'. The first one refers to situations that require knowledge and use of reading and writing in order to participate in them (for example, casting an individual secret vote in an election, following a road sign, or signing legal documents); the second type of situation presents opportunities for learning about reading and writing through collaboration with others (Bruner 1975; Lee and Smagorinsky 2000; Newman, Griffin, and Cole 1991); and the third type includes situations in which readers and writers choose to use literacy simply because they wish to do so.

In situations in which literacy is required, reading and writing may be an individual activity or it may include collaboration with others; for example, when filling out a credit application, two or people may discuss what information is being requested and how to respond (Kalman 1999). Scaffolding situations are always mediated by others because they imply that a reader or writer receives help from another reader or writer, even though the purpose of the interaction may not necessarily be to teach about reading and writing: two women may read information about daycare facilities together (Heath 1983); travel agents may explain the characteristics of an airline ticket to their customers (Barton 1994); or a public scribe may help a client with the wording of a document (Kalman 1999). The classroom is a mediation-intensive space in which students and teachers interact constantly with each other around written language. Volunteer literacy situations are also organized in a variety of ways: they can be individual reading and writing activities (recreational reading, doing a crossword puzzle) or they can also be collective
activities (playing Scrabble or writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper).

Each one of these reading and writing situations can occur separately in different places or coincide in one event: the notion of space refers to an interactive situation more than to a geographical or institutional entity. In the library, for example, there are scaffolding situations (for example, when the librarian explains to a visitor how to look for a book on the computer), literacy-demanding situations (when the visitor goes to the computer to look for the book without assistance), and volunteer situations (when the visitor takes a book from the shelf and sits at a table to look through it because it caught his or her eye). Each one of these situations is socially constituted; each is a response to a literacy demand, with help from others or in an individual act of reading and writing. The organization of each of these activities varies: when they occur, they can be individual or collective, with symmetric participation (among equals) or asymmetrical involvement (some participants direct the activity while others receive needed support).

In Mixquic there are different literacy-generating spaces. The establishment of public services (such as schools, the post office, the local public library), the use of public spaces for publishing written texts (especially cinderblock and stone fences and lampposts), the emergence and expansion of a market for selling print materials and the rise of local publications have all changed the literacy surroundings and spaces in Mixquic. In recent years, the opportunities for reading and writing have gradually increased, as have the opportunities for constructing a literate identity and the potential to be recognized by others as a person who knows how to read and write.
Upon arriving in Mixquic, one is surprised by the large number of handwritten and printed signs in the town, considering that not long ago Mixquic was a rural area. Streets are adorned with the names of and advertisements from local stores, as well as community notices posted on electrical poles or outside storefronts. Many of these are large hand-painted signs, which are practically murals that cover the stone fences on the main streets of town. Such hand-painted signs are one of the most important means for informing community members about upcoming events, such as dances and religious pilgrimages, and for posting political messages, commercial advertisements, and information about public services. The fences are also a place used to express ideas and written forms that often lack social prestige: messages or complaints (*pintas*) and graffiti sprawled across walls often have political and ideological content.

Writing in the "public thoroughfare," as we can call it, is a favorite means of communication not only because of the strategic space it occupies (fences and telephone or electrical poles on public streets where passersby are potential readers) but also because it allows readers to come across information without intentionally looking for it. Its public and communal features gives it the possibility of finding a place not only in the written but also in the oral sphere of Mixquic's communicative life: the invitations to dances and religious festivities, the announcement of a vaccination campaign, and the political propaganda interweave local oral and written texts. We shall see in the next chapter, for example, how the women in the study group respond to an offer for financial aid for eyeglasses which was painted on a local cinderblock fence in the town.

However, in some spaces where one would expect to observe reading and writing events, they are not to be found. In the town's small restaurants (*merenderos*) the interaction between customers and waiters and waitresses is completely oral: there are neither menus nor blackboards announcing the day's dishes, orders are taken orally, and the bill is simply told to the customer rather than written down. In the main plaza, it is unusual to see people reading a newspaper or a magazine while they sit in the shade on the benches.

In the next section, we follow the expansion of reading and writing in Mixquic during the past four decades or so, tracking the development of some of its literacy spaces, the appearance of printed matter, the growth of opportunities for reading and writing, and the rise of some of the written language practices common there.
Generating literacy practices in social spaces

The organizing themes of this section are Mixquic’s public services and social institutions where reading and writing most often occur. We shall place particular emphasis on the opportunities women have had for participating in literacy events in different spheres of communicative interaction. The data to which we shall refer in each of the discussions that follow are a combination of the various sources of information gathered with several research instruments common to qualitative inquiry (including transcriptions of audio tapes recorded in class sessions and interviews, notes from informal conversations, photographs, printed and handwritten materials), as well as census statistics, the results of a small-scale survey we carried out in town, and documentary information.

The school.

In communities such as Mixquic, where the presence of basic schooling is relatively recent, educational institutions face special challenges and often satisfy contradictory needs. On the one hand, schools have multiple responsibilities: to teach new generations to read and write, offer a primary education to children, improve the quality of services offered, and reduce, in the short run, the number of young students who fall behind. However, because the schools do not always fulfill public expectations, their effectiveness is often questioned. On the other hand, schools are an active disseminating force of literacy in the communities in which they are located. This is not only true for the children who learn to read and write there, but also for others: those literacy practices necessary for formal education tend to spill over to other family members through the children and into the community. The literacy practices of schooling are appropriated by many, sometimes being partially transformed in the process.

Currently Mixquic has five public schools that cover preschool, primary, and junior high levels; three of them have double schedules,

1 It is often said that schools have been unable to get all children into their classrooms and keep them there, and that those that do register and stay do not fully develop the written language and mathematical knowledge they need for the world outside of school. The increase of years of schooling across the population has been slower than desired and early dropout rates in the 1–9 year cycle is still too high. As will be shown, some of these observations also hold for Mixquic, although they should be qualified in light of recent local history.
operating morning and afternoon shifts. The absence of high schools and vocational schools means that students must go to another location if they choose to continue their education after the ninth grade. During the 2000-2001 school year, there were 3077 registered students (see Table 2.1). This figure practically covers the current demand for education among school-aged children just as it has for the past 15 years: since 1985, for example, the registration figures have not varied except for the subtle difference that the increase in children attending preschool corresponds to the decrease in the number of children attending primary and technical agricultural secondary school (grades 7-9). Despite the fact that each child in Mixquic is guaranteed a seat in a classroom, there are still significant problems with keeping them in school. During the 1994-1995 school year, for example, 36% of the students did not go beyond the sixth grade.

_Table 2.1. Schools in Mixquic and registration data_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>No. registered students</th>
<th>No. of teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1985&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2000&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixquic Preschool</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie Klein Preschool</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. Tomás Fregoso Primary School</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristóbal Colón Primary School</td>
<td>1,584</td>
<td>1471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Agricultural Secondary</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(grades 7-9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3073</td>
<td>3077</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Getting students into and keeping them in school for the obligatory nine years of basic schooling continues to pose a serious challenge, one that reflects the history of educational trends in Mixquic, which have yet to be entirely remedied over the 60 years since the first public school was established in the town in 1942.

To give a better sense of the magnitude of the problem, Table 2.2 compares the years of schooling for those over 15 years of age in Mixquic, the Delegación Tláhuac (where Mixquic is located), and Mexico City (where Tláhuac is one of 16 administrative entities). At 6.5%,<sup>4</sup> the

<sup>2</sup> Source: Malváez Zavala 1985.
<sup>3</sup> Source: Subsecretaría de Servicios Educativos para el Distrito Federal. Departamento de Información Educativa.
<sup>4</sup> Since 1990 the national census has asked informants who have not finished primary school whether they are capable of reading and writing a simple message in order to establish whether they are literate.
illiteracy rate for Mixquic is almost double that of Tláhuac and Mexico City. If we add to this population those who have not completed primary school, more than one-third of the population of Mixquic has less than a sixth-grade education. The same indicator for Mexico City is almost half: 16.6% of the capital's population has not completed a primary education.

Table 2.2. Formal education averages for population aged 15 years or older

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Schooling</th>
<th>Mexico City</th>
<th>Delegación Tláhuac</th>
<th>Mixquic</th>
<th>National average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate or without schooling</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 6 years of school</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete primary education (6 years)</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-primary education</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>51.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the current schooling rates of Mixquic's population are just half of Mexico City's and Tláhuac's, illiteracy since the 1950s has steadily declined. Over the last 50 years illiteracy has dropped almost 30%, from 34.8 to 6.5% (see Table 2.3). Clearly, opening the local primary school and offering a full six year curriculum contributed to this process.

Table 2.3. Illiteracy rates in Mexico City, Tláhuac, and Mixquic over the last 50 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexico City</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tláhuac</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>10.54</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixquic</td>
<td>34.86</td>
<td>18.54</td>
<td>19.74</td>
<td>13.21</td>
<td>8.15</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Still, there is an unmistakable contrast between the three populations. Based on the figures in Table 2.3, the following graph shows that illiteracy tends to decline across all categories. However, the drop for Mexico City (Distrito Federal in the graph) begins to flatten around 1980, when the illiterate population reaches 6%. The same phenomenon can be observed for Mixquic in 1990, when the illiterate population reaches 8%. Apparently, in both cases this point represents some sort of obstacle for further decline. Between 1960 and 1970, in the Tláhuac district there was a slight increase in the illiterate population. This reversal coincides with two important demographic processes: first, an increase in the birthrate and, second, an intensification in the migration of rural populations to urban centers.
The drop in illiteracy rates by more than 30% and the increase of years of schooling among the local population during the last 60 years can be attributed, at least in part, to public education. The question of whether 60 years is a short or long time in which to accomplish this can best be answered by examining the broader context; furthermore, it requires that one look at the quality of education provided and evaluate the continuing effects that schooling has in Mixquic.

The testimonies from the women participating in this project indicate that they had few opportunities to go to school. The first primary school opened its doors in 1942; so for the older women (Delfina, Licha, and Carmen) there was no formal public school during their childhood. Previous to that date, there were two teachers who offered classes on a small lot where two very rustic rooms had been built to serve as classrooms. They called this space La Huerta (The Orchard) because there was in fact a small grove of trees growing there. These teachers offered classes through the third grade. If a family decided to send their children for further schooling, it would have had to take them to Xochimilco. For parents this had serious consequences, such as the time that had to be invested in taking a child to and from school and the transportation costs involved. Given the organization and family dynamics of the area, this became a daunting obstacle for children in general, and little girls in particular, to going to school. As a result, their opportunities for formal education were seriously diminished.

Several of our participants did not go to school or only went for a few years. In the local survey we conducted, the average was 5.2 years of schooling. However, a closer scrutiny of the average years of schooling by generation reveals a continuous rise in years of schooling. In the

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5 In the previous chapter we noted that the average age per generation is as follows: Great grandmothers (68.8 years), Grandmothers (50.8 years), Mothers (29.6 years), and Daughters (8.6 years). For this particular calculation we eliminated
data, the average years of schooling for the daughters' group is lower than that of the mothers' group due to the fact that many of the children are still school age.

Table 2.4. Average years of schooling by generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Average years of schooling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great Grandmothers</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmothers</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughters</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although school was not available to all the children in Mixquic and although not all of those who began attending school completed the cycle of basic education, its presence in the community has left a notable mark. School materials, ideas about literacy, and written language practices are disseminated through the community in a variety of ways. For example, the free school textbooks have a significant presence in Mixquic: 86% of those surveyed across all age groups said that they were familiar with them, and 31% said that they read or consulted them on a regular basis. With regard to school activities, 45% said that they do, or help others do, homework each day and considered this to be a substantial daily activity. Among the grandmothers, 34% answered that they regularly spent time helping their grandchildren fulfill their school responsibilities; 54% of the mothers stated the same.

Children's school attendance and the availability of educational materials within household interactions support other family members' appropriation of literacy practices. From this point of view, doing homework (such as reading assignments, writing compositions, solving problems, and looking up information) creates spaces that generate different reading and writing activities around a variety of printed matter. Those surveyed reported that the one use of writing in daily life that was more frequent than doing homework was writing down additions and subtractions for calculating family expenses (65%), a clear example of a social use of formal school knowledge. Furthermore, as students
move up in the school system, they require a larger repertoire of books; in one of the discussions to be examined below, we shall comment on the presence of literature and reference books in the family library which were purchased at the request of a teacher or because they were cited in the curriculum. It seems apparent that some literacy practices engender others, further opening the access to more and more aspects of written culture.
School generates and spreads other social practices in the community that require reading and writing in order to participate: parents must read notices that are posted on the school gates and at school entrances, as well as others that are sent home; report cards must be signed; students must be registered; certificates and other official documents are distributed; children’s work is displayed for special events or festivities (Day of the Dead, end of the school year celebrations, Mother’s Day); and students write invitations or greeting cards to their parents. Through these practices and events, literacy is present in family and community life.

What is more, through interactions in the home, family members of different generations have the opportunity to participate in reading and writing events and to learn school literacy practices. By doing homework, an after-hours activity devised for children, others participate in situations in which reading and writing take place, creating literacy-generating situations where school practices are displayed and appropriated by participants. In one of the first activities of the learning group, we lent the señoras children’s books to take home and read with their children, grandchildren, or nieces and nephews with the idea that they could comment on their experience in a future meeting. All of them took books home. Days later, when we began to talk about reading with younger family members, Carmen took a notebook out of her bag and showed us that she had hand-copied the entire storybook that she had borrowed.

The copy Carmen made reproduced a practice common in Mexican primary schools. First, in its form: between each word she had place a hyphen, employing a teaching strategy used to help young writers remember to leave a space between every word. And second, in its function: Carmen wanted to keep a copy of the story in order to go back to it on another occasion.

She remarked:

Quiero anotar todo para después dárselos a estudiar [leer] a mis nietos, a . . . mis hijos por que así no más [de memoria] a lo mejor lo pierdo, ya no, lo hago, platicarles y así teniéndolo y por lo menos tengo un recuerdo de esta plática. I want to write it all down so that I can give it to my grandchildren to study [read] later . . . to my children because without it [in writing] I might forget and then I couldn’t tell them the story, but at least I will have a memento of telling them.
Our purpose in lending the children’s books was to encourage independent reading and to give the women a chance to interact with young people around the books. As one of our first activities, we wanted to create spaces in which mediation was a necessary component, the idea being that this would enhance reading opportunities for the participants, give meaning to reading a book for children, and give access to a variety of reading practices (reading aloud, handling the materials, talking about the story, exploring and becoming familiar with the books themselves). Besides doing some of the above, Carmen, on her own initiative, voluntarily created another activity, producing a new text independent of the original, one that had meaning for her and that gave her the possibility of looking at it again if she so desired.

In school and beyond, through copying we accomplish a variety of purposes: it allows writers to reproduce materials when there are no other means available, to register information (particularly specific facts), and to use it at a later time. At the same time, it creates the opportunity to think about writing and written language. Carmen copied the text of the story so that she could read it (study it, in her words) with her grandchildren and have a keepsake of reading with them. For her, simply telling the story would not be the same as reading it, and she saw her copy as a way of rereading it whenever she liked. Copying the text is an example of what Chartier has called a “modality of appropriation” (1997: 1–2). This practice not only reproduces the text but also gives it meaning. Its significance has several dimensions: first, the ability to write it line by line; second, the possibility of reading aloud with others; and third, evoking the original printed version. In all three, the meaning of reading and writing permeates the idea of reproducing the text and pronouncing it out loud.

School in Mixquic is making its mark on the local written culture beyond its formal objectives and quantifiable outcomes. Its presence surpasses offering a seat in a classroom to every child in the community, increasing the average years of schooling of the town’s population, or reducing the illiteracy rate. School is making its mark on the local literacy practices through material goods (books, paper, writing devices, and texts) and the dissemination of communicative practices, which should be qualitatively analyzed so that they may be considered when designing other types of directed and intentional literacy efforts.

School is, by definition, a literacy-generating space: it is the social and cultural institution whose mission is to educate new readers and
writers. Its reach, however, goes beyond the schoolyard and into other places, particularly into children’s homes. In some families, literacy is collectively accomplished in a variety of ways: doing homework, reading together, sharing and commenting on print materials handed out or requested by school; each of these activities has gradually made their way into family life. From what we observe, families organize these interactions in different ways: older siblings help younger ones, parents and grandparents help the smaller children. This suggests that the interaction across generations is an important part of the process of establishing written culture and that it provokes diverse forms of participation in literacy events and contributes to the dissemination and circulation of written materials, increasing both the access to and the availability of written language.

The church

Approximately 90% of the population of Mixquic is Catholic, and their religious celebrations play a significant role in community life. The most important festivities are Santos Jubileos, Semana Santa, and Día de Muertos, as well as the Saints’ days for San Andres, Santa Cruz, San Bartolomé, San Agustín, El Señor de los Milagros, la Virgen de Guadalupe, and Christmas. Each these generates a series of activities that include, besides special masses, local trade shows, pilgrimages, street fairs, and

LA MAGNIFICA

Glorifica mi alma al Señor y mi espíritu se llena de gozo, al contemplar la bondad de Dios mi Salvador. Porque ha puesto la mirada en la humilde sierva suya y ved aquí el motivo porque me tendrá por dichosa y feliz todas las generaciones. Pues ha hecho en mi favor cosas grandes y maravillosas, el que es Todopoderoso y su nombre infinitamente santo.

Cuya misericordia se extiende de generación en generación, a todos cuantos le temen. Extendió el brazo de su poder, disipó el orgullo de los soberbios, transformando sus designios. Desposeyó a los poderosos y elevó a los humildes. A los necesitados los lleno de bienes y a los ricos los dejó sin cosa alguna.

Exaltó a Israel su siervo acordándose de él por su gran misericordia y bondad. Así como lo había prometido a nuestros padres Abraham y a toda su descendencia por los siglos de los siglos. Amén.
town dances (most of which are advertised in colorful invitations painted on slab fences). Many of these have been chronicled and documented in local publications, but the most famous of these is the *Día de Muertos* (Gutiérrez Martínez 1997; López Bosch 1994; Grupo Miquetlan 1997; Quintero Larios 1994).

During the conquest of Mexico, the San Andrés Mixquic parish church was built on the site of an already existing prehispanic indigenous structure. According to its priest, it was located there “because there were many centers important to the prehispanic culture and so the Spaniards took advantage of their locations as a way of getting rid of them and reusing their materials.” At the foundation of the church, one can see the remains of the original temple, a *chacmol*, and the hoops from the prehispanic ceremonial ball game known as *Juego de Pelota*. The first church in Mixquic was built in 1537 but was later destroyed and rebuilt in 1620. Currently, in one of the church’s patios, there is a permanent exhibition of prehispanic artifacts. Along one side of the cemetery where Day of the Dead is celebrated are the remains of what was once a convent adjacent to the church (Sierra 1985).

Despite the large number of published religious materials that are available, in the community’s participation in the church and religious training activities the privileged means of communication and information continues to be oral language (although there are some signs of an emerging use of written texts). For each Sunday Mass, small printed guides (missals) are handed out to worshippers if they wish to follow the sermon and rituals; however, the parish priest notes that most people do not use them: “they don’t pay much attention to them, they want to listen, they prefer to listen.” In the entrance to the church there is a small display where publications about Church doctrine and other religious literature are sold at a very low cost. Among them is a series of pamphlets (each measuring $15 \times 10$ cm and varying in length from 8 to 32 pages) that covers a range of topics, such as Protestantism, the expansion of religious sects, sexuality, and birth control. Even though the complete series is not for sale, from the volume numbers it appears that the collection runs into hundreds of titles. Another important publication available is the *estampita religiosa* (a small two-sided sheet about the size of a credit card; on one side is the portrait of a saint and on the other, a summary of his or her life and miracles). More than half of those interviewed in our survey (68%) said that they are familiar with these cards, and 54% of those questioned said that
they read them frequently. The majority also said that they knew what the Bible is and 43% demonstrated specific knowledge about it: they recognize it on sight, they know about its contents, they know about whom, when, and where it is read and for what purposes. They also said that they had read it personally or had listened to others read it; only 14% mentioned that they read it on a regular basis.

As far as religious training and religious study groups are concerned, oral interaction is the dominant mode of reflection and exchange. In the town there is a group of catechists whose mission is to prepare parents and godparents for baptizing newborns, children for their first communion, adolescents for their confirmation, and young couples for their marriage vows. As part of the catechists' own training, they read and work on published materials provided to them by the parish; but their work with others in the community is almost entirely oral. While their classes are based on verbal exchanges, oral repetition, questions and answers, there is a new tendency also to include written language activities.

Only recently has reading and writing become part of the training received by children who are preparing for their first communion. Several of those interviewed pointed out that when they as children studied for theirs, they orally repeated texts that their instructor recited or, in some instances, read to them. For example, one survey informant who took communion for the first time at 9 years of age commented that “in the church in Mixquic, the catechists read to us and we repeated what they said over and over until we learned it by heart.” Anita, 42, said that when she was 13 years old “some ladies came to teach us. They taught us with some drawings they made and they guided us with the catechism. We had to go over it until we memorized it.”

Table 2.5. Reading and writing activities in preparation of the first communion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>They read to us</th>
<th>We read</th>
<th>They wrote in front of us</th>
<th>We wrote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great grandmothers</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmothers</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughters</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% average</td>
<td>13.05%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>6.05%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using our survey data we constructed Table 2.5, which shows the percentages of people who said they had participated in literacy events
as part of their training in preparation for taking their first communion (in all four groups the average age was approximately 9 years). Only 13.05% across the generations noted that the catechists read to them and only 0.5% said that they were allowed to read the texts directly. With regard to writing, this situation varies slightly: 13.9% said that they were asked to write something during their religion classes.

Table 2.5 illustrates the dramatic differences in the use of literacy in religion classes for the great grandmothers, who had practically no exposure to reading and writing in their training, while in the other groups there is an increase in reading opportunities. Apparently, this can also be linked to the average years of schooling in each group (see Table 2.4).

At present a program is being run by the parish to train local missionaries so that they “can preach the essential message of the Gospel.” Each church worker meets with a group of about 15 people to discuss issues of faith. To prepare the discussion leaders, they read and comment on a manual put out by the Church entitled *Id y evangelizado a los Bautizados* (Go and spread the Word to the Baptized) and rehearse different types of group dynamics. The priest says that in these groups:

| Las personas mayores no están acostumbradas a leer; en cambio, los jóvenes sí leen bastante y leen con mucha atención de tal modo que los mayores están aprendiendo de los jóvenes, porque ellos no leen y los jóvenes sí leen, ponen atención y van comprendiendo lo que se tiene que hacer y eso les va sirviendo pues para que se predispongan a estudiar más, a leer un poquito, a que vean que . . . hace falta que la gente lea porque solamente leyendo podemos aprender cosas e instruirnos para poder servir mejor a la comunidad . . . Estamos formando un equipo de liturgia en donde tiene que haber personas que sepan no solamente leer para ellos y comprender para ellos sino leer para los demás y que los demás comprendan qué leyeron. | The older people are not used to reading; the younger people, on the other hand, are and they read carefully, in such a way that the older folks are learning to read with the younger ones because they don’t read and the youngsters do. They pay careful attention and understand what they have to do, and this helps them want to study more, read a little and they see that . . . it’s necessary for people to read because only by reading can we learn things and develop ourselves to serve our communities better . . . We are creating a liturgical group where everyone who attends has to know how to read and understand not just for themselves but to read for others and read so that others understand what they read. |

In these groups there are opportunities to read and comment on the shared text collectively and, at the same time, improve the partici-
pants’ reading. The contact among readers of different generations, among youth and older people, socializes certain ways of reading: paying attention, studying, understanding what to do in the community. The printed matter used for this has 115 pages divided into 11 chapters, each of which begins with an objective and ends with a section entitled “Group Reflection.” The latter includes comprehension questions, a section of school-like exercises (multiple choice questions, true-or-false questions), and phrases to be memorized. According to the priest, this activity requires that the missionaries read, listen to, and understand the text so that they can convey it to others.

Through these different activities the church offers the community opportunities to read and write. It makes written artifacts, such as notices, missals and other print materials, available and, to a lesser extent, creates situations where reading and writing are central activities for religious participation. The modality of appropriation of the Catholic doctrine continues to be mediated by oral language practices, particularly listening and repetition. Access to the doctrine through reading and writing is a relatively recent option and serves as an illustration of a subtle change in the social conditions for literacy: the catechists have begun to introduce talking, reading, and writing centered on sacred texts as a way of learning about them.

Based on this brief analysis, we can also state that, through these activities around religious writings, the church maintains the important tie to written culture it has had for centuries (Cavallo and Chartier 2001). In the various activities that the catechists organize, access to literacy is mediated by an authorized participant’s reading and interpretation. In this case, the objective is to disseminate certain meanings established by religious canon. In the training of local missionaries, there are situations of collective reading and oral and written commentary on texts which follow specific guidelines for reading comprehension. Still, within the religious study groups, orality continues to be the dominant pathway for accessing Catholic doctrine.

The post office

The post office in Mixquic was inaugurated on November 7, 1980. Prior to this date, Mixquic’s postal service depended on the regional headquarters in Xochimilco. To send a letter, people had to go to one of the neighboring towns that had a post office. Currently, some of the smaller villages near Mixquic depend on its post office. Anybody
with an official address is a potential customer of public mail services. The post office is responsible for delivering mail to individual homes, the bulk of which are commercial and administrative notices: the water bill, bank accounts, advertisements, and some periodical publications, which will be detailed below.

According to the head of the post office in Mixquic, few people write personal letters, because they prefer the telephone. However, this observation was not confirmed by the comments made by the participants in our study or by evidence from other studies in which letter writing and telephone calls coexist, each one fulfilling a different communicative need (Vargas 2000). In some situations it has been noted that the use of letters and written messages among members of the same community and families is a means of local daily communication (Barton and Hamilton 1998).

The observation that there are few personal letters, however, is confirmed by the results from our survey and the experiences reported by the señoras from the study group. Only 14% of them said that they had received personal letters and only 10% claimed that they had written one.

In their testimonies, the participants in the study group noted that they thought that people seldom use the mail services for personal matters for a variety of reasons. They pointed out that a) many people do not know how to read and write, b) the post office was far away for them, and c) it was not necessary because everybody in town knew each other and ran into each other often. Because most of their time was spent in town and they had very little contact with the outside, writing was not really necessary.

Some of them mentioned, however, that there was at some point correspondence with a forbidden boyfriend. They also told stories about the 1940s, when the men had to leave town to look for work in other parts of Mexico City because the town’s water source had dried up and made planting and harvesting virtually impossible. The following is an excerpt from Carmen and Delfina’s conversation about this:

| Delfina: Por el agua, pusieron presas para que no pasara el agua. | Delfina: For the water; they put dams there so the water wouldn’t flow. |
| Carmen: Sí, porque como se terminó el agua . . . ya no tenían en qué trabajar y se tuvieron que ir a trabajar fuera | Carmen: Right, the water dried up . . . they couldn’t work and they had to go elsewhere [. . .] and since they |
were spending so much time away, they had to send letters to let their families know how they were. For example, my brother-in-law went to Tacuba; others went to Clavería. Delfina: Tacubaya . . . and the Colonia Roma.

Apparently, the rerouting of water not only had an impact on the local economy but on the community’s communicative practices as well. The women also thought that many of the men who had left the town looking for work had to learn to read and write so that they could send news home; others hired public scribes to write for them.

Thus an indirect consequence of a public construction project was the creation of the specific communicative need to establish and maintain long-distance communication, an event that serves as empirical evidence of the theoretical proposition that literacy is a situated practice and that the dissemination of reading and writing is always located in social, cultural, and concrete historical contexts. The construction of the dam and its effects generated demands for written communication and created different modes of participation: some wrote letters as best as they could (literacy-demanding and voluntary literacy situations), others had to learn to read and write (literacy-scaffolding situations), and still others used public scribes to write letters home (through the mediation of others). It is possible that something similar occurred on the receiving end: families at home had to read and answer the letters they received one way or another.

Carmen received letters from her daughter, Gudelia, for several years when she was working in the United States. Gudelia was gone for four years without visiting home during that time. While she was away, she wrote many letters to her children and her mother as a way of keeping in touch and maintaining her emotional ties to them. In some letters Gudelia narrated her experiences, but in the majority she tried to participate in her family life and in raising her children through her writing. When Carmen received the letters, a family member read them aloud to her, often reading them over several times. Receiving these letters and listening to them being read were important events in Carmen’s life during this period; her access to the letters was through another reader. For Carmen, these letters have enormous sentimental value, and she still has them in their original envelopes.
The head of the post office gave us the following approximation of the number of publications that are distributed each month:

Table 2.6. Periodical publications received by mail in Mixquic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title / Approximate translation</th>
<th>Monthly deliveries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Bíblica de México / Mexican Bible Society</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi bebe y yo / My Baby and Me</td>
<td>8–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secciones del Reader Digest / Readers Digest</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerobics / Aerobics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepeneur / Entrepreneur</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deutschland / Germany</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundación Unam / UNAM Foundation</td>
<td>3–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ediciones Medicina y Cultura / Medicine and Culture</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Gaceta Unam / The Unam Gazette</td>
<td>3–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Training / Technology Training</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aguiluchos / Eagles</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct TV / Direct TV</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offshore / Offshore</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Mexicana de Pediatría / Mexican Pediatrics Society</td>
<td>4–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parque Acuático “El Rollo” / Acquatic Park “El Rollo”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciudad de los Niños / The City of the Children</td>
<td>4–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revista Veterinaria de México / Mexican Veterinarian Magazine</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fondo de Cultura de México / México Cultural Fund</td>
<td>6–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federación Mexicana de Tenis / Mexican Tennis Federation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures give an indication of the current subscriptions delivered in Mixquic and the number of people who receive them. The majority of these publications are magazines of general interest and commercial info-texts, and a few are professional or academic publica-
tions. The amount of publications delivered is relatively small, considering that the total population is 11,400 inhabitants.

The library

Prior to 1975, the year in which the Mixquic's library was opened, there had been a small community library with a collection of books donated by the district administrative offices in Tláhuac, but it was destroyed in a fire in 1968. For seven years, Mixquic went without a library, and the closest one was in San Antonio Tecomitl, about 20 minutes away on public transportation.

Due to a joint effort of the Mixquic community and the district office in Tláhuac, a new library was founded in 1975, and the Secretary of Public Education and the Tláhuac district office donated several thousand titles to it. Today the library has approximately 16,000 books, divided into five different collections, which are available to all in open stacks. Inside the library there are signs that explain how to use the card catalog, specifying lending procedures and rules, and listing overdue books, as well as community notices and several decorative posters commemorating an important date or festivity.

Besides a reference room and lending privileges (which requires acquiring a library card), the library offers other services. It organizes special reading activities (story time, reading circles), workshops (náhuatl language classes, handicrafts, theater, thematic learning groups concerning inventors, artists, scientists, etc.), movies, book displays, children's activities, and guided tours.

The librarians' record of services rendered gives a sense of the impact the library has had on the community. For example, Tables 2.7 and 2.8 reflect the records for 1999:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 18 years</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>3750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–18 years</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>1311</td>
<td>1341</td>
<td>737</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>7524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 12 years</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>742</td>
<td>1671</td>
<td>1217</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>9109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>1578</td>
<td>2095</td>
<td>1173</td>
<td>1590</td>
<td>1509</td>
<td>1119</td>
<td>1346</td>
<td>3471</td>
<td>2947</td>
<td>1803</td>
<td>1192</td>
<td>20,383</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The figures in both charts show that the library in Mixquic is a project directed, intentionally or otherwise, at young people (children and adolescents). More than 80% of the individuals receiving assistance are 18 years old or younger (Table 2.7). At the same time, the majority of organized reading activities carried out at the library (33 out of 34, Table 2.8) were directed to people in this age group. The high number of children 12 years or younger who attend the library suggests that it is a place to do homework, especially for students in primary school, which once again shows the impact the school has on the community. Through these activities the school and the library intertwine as literacy-generating spaces: in the national curriculum and the textbooks for primary education, special emphasis is placed on visiting the public library and using its resources (particularly because most public primary schools in Mexico do not have a library of their own); September and October are the months in which library attendance is highest, precisely the months during which the first lessons of the school year include visiting the library and looking up information.

Several women participating in our project had never been to the library, despite the fact that it was only a few blocks from their homes. Yet they did know something about it: they knew, for example, that they had to have a library card to check books out; they also knew that to get a library card they needed to turn in photographs, give their home address, and have a co-signer. They also knew the library’s schedule and some of the rules for using the collection. They even knew that the card catalog had to do with looking for books by title. Juanita remarked:

Table 2.8. Organized reading activities and number of attendants in 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (36)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 (142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (47)</td>
<td>3 (28)</td>
<td>7 (67)</td>
<td>6 (74)</td>
<td>8 (242)</td>
<td>1 (25)</td>
<td>1 (90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (47)</td>
<td>3 (28)</td>
<td>7 (67)</td>
<td>6 (74)</td>
<td>9 (278)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (42)</td>
<td>5 (215)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.9. Books consulted at the library in 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>1451</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>2504</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>2304</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>1601</td>
<td>6028</td>
<td>3701</td>
<td>2773</td>
<td>1063</td>
<td>28,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>1698</td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>8,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>2051</td>
<td>2535</td>
<td>3127</td>
<td>2284</td>
<td>2348</td>
<td>2934</td>
<td>1597</td>
<td>2289</td>
<td>7726</td>
<td>4717</td>
<td>3592</td>
<td>1556</td>
<td>36,756</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The use and circulation of the general collection suggests that in Mixquic adults also participate in some of the activities at the library, although probably to a lesser degree than young people.

Considering that homework is one of the principle motives for going there, it is not surprising that the general collection is the most frequently visited section in the library; most general sources of information are in this section. However, considering that, according to the librarians, the children’s book section is almost entirely made up of literary texts, it is remarkable that 25% of the books consulted were from this collection. Together, the use of the general collection and the popularity of children’s literature indicate that children are reading different kinds of books, an affirmation that contradicts the widespread belief that children read little or nothing at all. This idea is misguided in more ways than one, since it is focused almost exclusively on the reading of literary texts and ignores other important reading practices (Heath 1983; Kalman 2001; Street 1993; Vargas 2000). In summary, it should be pointed out, first, that reading is not synonymous with reading literature and, second, that apparently some of the children in Mixquic do read literature.
Table 2.10. Books checked out in 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1999</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library cards issued</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of books lent</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>2799</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relatively low number of library goers that check books out and the concentration of lending in September and October (when school begins) and in February and March (after winter break) again points to the close ties between school and the library. Most library cards are also issued in the fall months. But in February a relatively large number is issued as well, which suggests that school children may perhaps have library or special research projects at that time. Given its potential as a literacy-generating space, the library in Mixquic (and public libraries in general) should be more thoroughly studied.

The sale and distribution of commercial publications

Mixquic has two newsstands, which sell several of the main newspapers and magazines available in Mexico City. One of them is located on the center square and the other is in front of the market, down the street from a major bus stop. According to the women in the study group, before these stands were set up a man from the neighboring town of Tu-
lyehualco peddled papers and magazines from his bicycle. The first newsstand was established at the beginning of the 1960s. In response to the growing number of readers, the second one opened in about 1996. These newsstands are places where several reading practices are generated in relation to the different publications on display; in some cases they involve reading instructions on the cover of a do-it-yourself magazine, in others they involve reading the newspaper or looking up information about a favorite television program. They are also places for reading *in situ*, some people stop to look at the covers of the publications regardless of whether they buy them. Readers passing by stop and take a look for a few minutes before they continue on their way.

Besides the two newsstands, in one of the markets there is a stand that has sold second-hand magazines for the past 15 years; each one costs two or three pesos. Trade-ins or short-term loans for a small fee are other options. Here all kinds of magazines are sold: comic books, fashion magazines, home decoration magazines, illustrated novels, *fotonovelas*, and handicraft magazines.

Table 2.11 reflects information from a salesperson at one of the newsstands about the average number of newspapers and magazines sold. It is worth noting that the distribution of newspapers is far greater than that of other publications; in one week more than 250 copies go from hand to hand among family and community members. Sports papers are the most popular of the newspapers sold. In our survey, we asked people what they knew about reading newspapers and how they read them. Their answers indicate that few read them constantly. Only 44% of those interviewed expressed clear ideas about the newspaper (its different sections, the type of content to expect, who reads them and why). Furthermore, we found that only 7% of the women interviewed read the newspaper regularly, most of them belonging to the generation of mothers (12%).

Considering that some studies on the presence of printed media in the Mexican population show that relatively few people read newspapers, we should not be surprised by the low number of women who read them. A market survey conducted in 2000 by the Buró de Investigación de Mercados showed that only 40% of those living in Mexico City and over the age of 13 read the newspaper with any frequency and that women read them significantly less than men. The survey also

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gives data indicating that the number of women from socially and economically impoverished groups read the newspaper less than women from more privileged classes. This situation reflects the complexity of the processes of literacy dissemination: the women who read newspapers have more economic resources, more schooling, and better living and working conditions than those who do not. The availability of printed matter on newsstands is only part of the distribution process; others are: who has the economic capacity to purchase them, who reads well enough to take a look at them, and who is interested in its contents. Knowing how to read the newspaper and having interest in its contents are achieved only once one has gained access to reading practices, which is accomplished by interacting with other readers and with written contents.

Table 2.11. Average publication sales at a newsstand in Mixquic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number Sold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td><em>La Prensa</em></td>
<td>General newspaper</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ovaciones</em></td>
<td>Sports paper</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Esto</em></td>
<td>Sports paper</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>La Jornada</em></td>
<td>General newspaper</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Universal</em></td>
<td>General newspaper</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td><em>Tele Guía</em></td>
<td>For the general public, TV news and programs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Mi Guía</em></td>
<td>For the general public, TV news and programs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Revista Sentimental</em></td>
<td>For teens and adults, romance</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-weekly</td>
<td><em>T.V. Novelas</em></td>
<td>For teens and adults, TV series</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>T.V. Notas</em></td>
<td>For teens and adults, TV series</td>
<td>6–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Eres</em></td>
<td>For teens, music</td>
<td>4–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td><em>National Geographic</em></td>
<td>For general public</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Play Station</em></td>
<td>For teens and adults, video games</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Manualidades (varias)</em></td>
<td>For adults, crafts</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Promociones (varias)</em></td>
<td>For adults, general</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Adultos (varias)</em></td>
<td>For adults, general</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Dibujos Animados</em></td>
<td>Children and teens, various topics</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Policias (varias)</em></td>
<td>For teens and adults</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discovering Literacy

Table 2.12. Newspaper readers by generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Newspaper readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great grandmothers</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmothers</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughters</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Publications related to television programs also sell widely. If we add up the number of sales for each of the magazines of this type (*Tele Guía, Mi Guía, TV Novelas*, and *TV Notas*), we discover that 128 are sold each week, which is almost equal to those whose circulation is monthly (139). Obviously watching television is closely linked to reading about television programs in magazines (programming, summaries of favorite series, and articles), as well as reading the texts that are flashed on the screen.

In addition to the commercial publications, there are a number of local publications put out by the local city offices in Tláhuac and by community organizations. The district publishes information pamphlets on public services, health campaigns, local customs, and festivities in the five areas that make up Tláhuac, including Mixquic. An important function of these publications, particularly those produced by community organizations, is to serve as a forum for community issues.
and as a link to local authorities. In some cases they have also coordinated efforts for petitioning the city government for needed services. These publications are distributed through government offices and local stores; they are also widely passed around and shared among family members, friends, and acquaintances. The most outstanding of these publications are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>In Circulation</th>
<th>Published by</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notitláhuac</td>
<td>1984–1986</td>
<td>District offices</td>
<td>Information on local public works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La voz de Tláhuac</td>
<td>1996–present</td>
<td>District offices</td>
<td>Information about local events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raíces</td>
<td>1986–present</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Began as report on crimes and political matters, but expanded coverage to general topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Informante / El Informativo</td>
<td>1994–1998</td>
<td>Community organization</td>
<td>El Informante began in 1994; in 1998 the name was changed to El Información. Covers community issues. Local readers contribute poetry and articles on the history of Tláhuac, customs, events, and important dates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Palabra</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Local culture, traditions, and festivities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuarto Poder</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Crime report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nosotros</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Local current events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of these are distributed without cost and are financed by public funds or commercial sponsors, which indicates a certain degree of cooperation from local businesspeople. The number of copies printed each time varies; sometimes it is as high as 3000, and they are distributed throughout Tláhuac.

The availability of these materials (commercial publications and free local newspapers) has a direct impact on different aspects of social participation, creating multiple opportunities to use written language. These newspapers circulate in different ways: some are purchased, others are borrowed; their availability in shared spaces, such as beauty salons, barber shops, waiting rooms, or on display at newsstands, creates situations
in which voluntary reading can take place, both by individual readers or through collaboration or sharing. The specific purpose of these reading events depends on the situation, but it is safe to assume that readers pick up these publications with a view to recreation and gaining information. They also open opportunities for social participation: the local publications publish letters to the editor, public invitations to local events, commercial advertisements, articles on local activities, and debates on current community issues. The interaction that takes place around the newspapers and magazines creates opportunities for literacy use that can range from a casual comment on a recent story to participating through writing in one of the local publications.

The family

In the commentary in the previous sections, we have discussed the impact that different literacy practices have within the family sphere, practices produced as part of activities in literacy-generating spaces: the school, the church, the library, the post office, and the sale and distribution of local and commercial publications.

Zboray (1993: 86) suggests that one of the ways to research the reading and writing practices in the family environment is to study the family library, meaning the printed matter that families choose to collect, read, and keep. We discovered such collections in Mixquic, at least in part, through the data we collected on subscriptions, lending from the public library, school-related materials, the presence of free publications, and the possession of estampitas religiosas and other religious texts.

Whereas those interviewed insisted that, due to a lack of economic resources, they acquired few books, magazines, newspapers, and other written materials, we nevertheless were able to obtain information on what publications and documents they do conserve in their homes. Table 2.14 shows the number of households that keep a family file with important official documents.

This paperwork (Kalman 2001) can be classified by its different functions: administrative/civic documents (voter registration, birth certificates, property titles, etc.); school documents (report cards, school diplomas); religious documents (baptismal certificates); and health documents (medical identification, vaccination records). All of these are related to different spheres of social activity in which literacy is widely used and which involves one or more family members. The different types of situation related to the documents sometimes privilege
women's participation, given the role they usually play within their families, particularly those practices related to health, education, and family matters. It should be observed that the one document that was reported to be present in almost every home is one related to religion.

Table 2.14. Types of documents saved by families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificate of Baptism</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report cards</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter registration</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaccination records</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth certificates</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School diplomas</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage certificates</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical identification (used for public health services)</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property titles</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death certificates</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military registration cards</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transference of property documents</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passport</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this study we have given literacy practices two fundamental dimensions: those activities that are observable (what people do) and the interpretative aspects of reading and writing (what people think about what they are doing). The latter includes attitudes, values, and social meanings that underlie different uses of literacy (Barton and Hamilton 1998). In the case of family files, it is worth looking at some of the reasons people give for keeping certain documents. Marriage certificates, for example, have a high social value for women. On repeated occasions they volunteered that they kept their marriage certificates to show that they were married or, to cite one of them literally, "para probar que no soy madre soltera" (to show that I am not a single mother). School-related documents, such as report cards and diplomas, were kept because they are needed in order to move from one level of education to the next and because they are proof of the completed years of formal schooling. The value of keeping these documents lies in the ability to provide written proof of academic achievements: having a primary certificate, or what the women vaguely referred to as tener los estudios.
(have schooling), is in their eyes essential for getting a job. They give the same value to military identification cards, and, even though these documents are exclusively for males, all of the women in the study group were familiar with them. Other documents, such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates, property transfers, and deeds, mark important events in family life and are therefore charged with social meaning and are necessary for related official paperwork and for identification purposes.

There are other reasons for saving documents. For example, in 1965 Isabel won a local beauty title, “la flor más bella del ejido” (the loveliest flower of the field). Among her personal papers she still has her photograph that she cut out of the newspaper. Furthermore, hanging in the living room of her small house is a framed copy of the story as it appeared in the newspaper El Universal, almost 40 years ago.

As for the presence of other printed matter in family libraries, the following table summarizes what some of these are and how many families have them:
Table 2.15. Percentage of households where diverse materials are kept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed matter</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Estampitas religiosas</em></td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books (in general)</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free textbooks</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other textbooks</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructions</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafts magazines</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipes</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fotonovelas</em></td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic books</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamphlets or flyers</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports magazines</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty magazines</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment magazines</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The foregoing table again shows the importance of a religious text, one closely linked to reading practices bred in the church: the *estampitas religiosas* are present in the 98% of the homes of those surveyed (48 out of 49 households), as are baptismal certificates.

Given the impact that the school as a literacy-generating space has had on the community, the presence of books (general topics and schoolbooks) is a predictable outcome. However, what was surprising was to find the number of households with books other than textbooks. We expected that there would be more textbooks (free or purchased) than general reading material. However, the majority of the titles that make up the family library are directly or indirectly school-related: most of them are literary texts that are required by the curriculum and some of them are school-related reference books. This fact should not be ignored.

It was also surprising to find that so many families keep written instructions, which are very practical texts for daily activities, although

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8 We distinguished between free textbooks and other textbooks as a way of exploring the presence of those schoolbooks that families must buy versus those that are distributed without charge by the state as a way of appreciating, on the one hand, the impact of the government textbook distribution program and, on the other, the presence of purchased schoolbooks. While the difference is minimal, it is important to bear in mind that the free textbooks are only for the primary level and that, to go to junior high school, students must purchase all of the books they need *per* subject, *per* year. Currently, junior high is a three-year cycle, and the curriculum is made up of approximately eight academic subjects per school year.
we suspect that their use is most likely sporadic. This is one type of text that literacy programs should keep in mind and exploit more often. More than half (57%) the families reported having newspapers, although in many cases they were back issues. However, it is important to point out that while the newspapers were in fact present, they were often old editions and were basically disposable in nature. The reasons for keeping them are many, some literacy-related and some not. They may contain an article or photograph somebody is particularly interested in or they may simply be used for a variety of house cleaning tasks.

Through our survey we also learned the different ways in which people obtained texts: sometimes they bought them, sometimes they gave or received them as gifts, sometimes they borrowed them, sometimes they traded them, and sometimes they even inherited them.

Even though many materials were available, what varied from household to household was family members' knowledge about them. To get a sense of the subjects' familiarity with written texts, we also asked the informants what they thought about them. This line of questioning was pursued in practically all households, regardless of whether that particular family possessed the materials of interest. The following table shows, in general terms, the types of material that were
Table 2.16. Reading frequency and knowledge of print materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed matter</th>
<th>Frequently read</th>
<th>Familiarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Estampitas religiosas</em></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free textbooks</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books in general</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafts magazines</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty magazines</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fotonovelas</em></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic books</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking magazines</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other textbooks</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment magazines</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructions</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several comments on this table are in order. First, a key observation, which confirms the complexity of literacy dissemination: the presence of materials in the home does not necessarily correspond to the knowledge people have about them, nor does it correspond to reading practices. This, along with some of the other discussions in this chapter, provides some empirical evidence for our theoretical premises: the availability of reading and writing materials is a necessary precondition, but in itself does not guarantee access to literacy—access is constructed through activity. There are different types of texts within each household that go unnoticed for some family members, as in the case of the *estampitas religiosas*. They are present in 98% of all households (see Table 2.15), but only 68% of those interviewed said that they were familiar with them and only 33% said that they read them on a regular basis. There is also a sharp contrast in other categories of printed matter, such as books, textbooks, instructions, and newspapers: there is a
clear gap between knowing about these types of publications and reading them frequently.

*Table 2.17. Reading frequency and familiarity with texts of women by generations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generations</th>
<th>Printed matter</th>
<th>Frequently read</th>
<th>Familiarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estampitas religiosas</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free textbooks</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great grandmothers</td>
<td>Other textbooks</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=19)</td>
<td>Estampitas religiosas</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free textbooks</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fotonovelas</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comic books</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crafts magazines</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other textbooks</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beauty magazines</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Books in general</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free textbooks</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Books</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comic Books</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooking magazines</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estampitas religiosas</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other textbooks</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fotonovelas</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beauty magazines</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crafts magazines</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entertainment magazines</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free textbooks</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comic books</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other textbooks</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crafts magazines</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Books</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estampitas religiosas</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructions</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These contrasts are softened somewhat when we display them by generations, where, for example, free textbooks are the best known and most widely read by mothers. Table 2.17 illustrates two important tendencies: first, from one generation to the next the number of materials informants were familiar with and the number they read increased. The most read materials are almost always the Bible, the *estampitas religiosas*,...
and textbooks: it appears that as opportunities for reading and handling new materials arise, the primacy of religious texts begins to wane. Second, the increase in the variety of texts coincides with other events in Mixquic that have to do with the availability of texts. Starting with the grandmothers’ generation, there is a steady rise in the number of the materials those surveyed were familiar with. (Recall that the average age of the daughters is 8.6 years.) Many of those in the grandmother group were young girls when the first newsstand arrived in the town and introduced new printed matter into the environment. For the mothers’ generation, familiarity with and frequency of reading books is among the highest, and there is also the new presence of recipes and cooking magazines in this generation’s repertoire, even though just a generation before this genre is not mentioned. This is particularly interesting because cookbooks and magazines contain mainly recipes, a text genre that traditionally has been circulated orally among women from generation to generation.

Work, commerce, and official agencies

The extent of participation in and the relevance of written language to work activities covers ranges widely: at one end of the spectrum, reading and writing a variety of texts constitutes a substantial part of a professional activity (lawyers, doctors, secretaries) while at the other end, it is only occasionally necessary to follow written instructions for using a tool or filling out a request form for supplies; in between lie the literacy practices employed in everyday commercial exchanges.
The Mixquic population in general has contact with businesses, stores, and public offices and uses literacy for reading and writing a variety of documents or filling out forms as a part of their interactions with these establishments. In government offices, the preferred means of communication is the oficio: formal letters written to petition, consult, claim, clarify, or record different matters that come up when fulfilling legal requirements and public codes. The administration of small local businesses and public organizations, as well as interaction with suppliers, banks, and maintenance services, create paperwork on both sides. Official agencies frequently inform the public by exhibiting various kinds of printed matter: posters, handwritten notices, and flyers and pamphlets displayed on the walls or at the entrance of the health center, the library, the post office, the school, and local administrative offices. Many of these materials, especially the flyers and pamphlets, are produced with the idea that they will be distributed to people visiting the different locales, but because of the severe lack of funds, this is next to impossible. Each neighborhood office receives just a few copies of these materials and, instead of handing them out, it posts them for all to see. The head of the health center told us that they organize informal talks on public health topics, such as different types of diseases, childcare, and care for the elderly. At these meetings they read the pamphlets aloud and afterwards display them for people to read.

In Mixquic there are many small stores, repair shops, and domestic services where people work (see Table 1.1, Chapter 1). An important part of local commerce takes place in corner stores, whether they be “mom-and-pop” grocery stores, small hardware stores, animal feed shops, pharmacies, stationery stores, or others. Waiting on customers frequently implies opportunities for reading and writing. Shopkeepers need to be familiar with suppliers’ stationery, receipts, and invoices; they file them for their own purposes. Waiting on the public also entails reading brand names and writing a receipt if a customer requests one. Although in the majority of the stores people ask for their merchandise orally, in some cases, clients bring in a written list of items to purchase: the pharmacy is one of the places where this occurs often. Some brought in medical prescriptions; yet when we visited one of the local pharmacies, we saw very little interaction around written texts between the person working in the store and the clientele. Customers generally handed over the prescription and the employee located their medications on a shelf. In a few cases, when shopkeepers had a doubt
about the prescription, they asked the customer a question; or shoppers might ask the pharmacy worker to read the instructions for taking the medicine if they had a doubt.

The majority of the women surveyed reported that their main activity was taking care of the household, even those who had a job outside their home. To a lesser extent, they considered the most important daily activity to be work in the fields. Among the mothers’ generation, some women had economic activities quite different from the traditional ones: taking care of a family business, working as dressmakers or as domestic help. Slightly more than half of them reported that they write at some point during the day, but the bulk of written language used is related to homework and family accounting. Only in a few very specific cases (a nurse, a policewoman, and a shopkeeper) did they note that they read and write in order to do their job.

In the sewing shop where some of the women from the study group work there are several important literacy practices. Gudelia registers the day’s activities and each associates’ work hours: she has a notebook she uses exclusively to record the money that comes in and the shop’s expenses, and if a supplier or a sewing machine repairman comes to the shop, she writes a detailed description of his visit (and had even required the visitor to write in his own handwriting what service was performed and how much he received for doing it). In the shop they keep fashion magazines so that their clients can look through them when they ask for an article of clothing; they also keep a file with patterns for dresses, pants, jackets, and blouses. Each customer’s order is written down in a journal; each entry includes the customer’s name, the date, the measurements, and the garment (which is sometimes drawn), the cost, and the amount of the deposit.

When a client comes into the shop, Gudelia measures them and writes down his or her measurements using a series of abbreviations: LT (largo talle: torso length), LE (largo espalda: back length), AE (ancho espalda: back width), LM (largo manga: sleeve length); she also asks the customer to explain any special feature he or she wishes the garment to have (fringe on the bottom, a low back, a special sleeve) and writes down notes about the order.

Besides work situations, people in Mixquic have to visit public offices to do personal business, pay property taxes, light bills, and water bills, use public services, and solicit and obtain transcripts and school diplomas. The women in the study group mentioned a variety of public
agencies that they visited frequently: schools, INEA offices, the Tláhuac administrative offices, public health clinics and hospitals, the land authority, city administrative offices, and the offices of the *Mujer Campesina* program. They shared the opinion that bureaucratic procedures, no matter what they were, tended to be long and complicated. Every time one of them talked about an experience they had soliciting a duplicate of some official document or following through on some procedure, their comments were “so many documents,” “there are too many requirements,” “red tape all over again.” They assumed that any paperwork of this sort meant long hours in line and in waiting rooms, having to turn in a variety of documents (certificates, photographs, previous documents, statements) and fill out the necessary form or write an oficio. They also believed that the eventual outcome of their petition would depend more on the bureaucrat’s mood and disposition than clear criteria and procedures.

In the case of public health services, the use of medical prescriptions has acquired a new meaning. Previously, when patients went to a doctor’s appointment, they were given the medicines they needed and a written prescription that explained the doses and frequency. Now physicians write prescriptions instead of distributing medications: due to a lack of funds for public health services, patients no longer receive all (or any) of their medicines; those that the doctors cannot hand out, they must purchase with the prescription they receive. Gudelia remarked:

| Hoy mi mama se puso enferma y se fue para el Seguro [la clínica], le dieron un receta por que ya no dan las recetas como antes, no más dan el papel y una parte de los medicamentos. | Today, my mother did not feel well and she went to the Seguro [the clinic]. They gave her a prescription because they don’t give the prescriptions anymore like they used to. Now they just give you a piece of paper and a part of the medication. |

During the first months of our research, the women in the study group were trying to arrange for a training course through the Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico (SEDECO: the Secretary of Economic Development), a public agency. It supported the course by hiring an instructor and accrediting the course. To obtain SEDECO’s help, Gudelia and Juanita had to go to the SEDECO offices several times and file an application and provide the documents required for each of the women that
would participate in the course (birth certificate, photographs, school transcripts if they had them). After two weeks and several interviews, they approached the planned starting date but still did not know if they would have the course or not. Juanita described the process:

**Hoy fuimos temprano a SEDECO, nada más a arreglar todo lo del curso. Mucho requisito y vuelta y vuelta . . . que entregue la maestra su currículum vitae, si este . . . sus datos personales, su dirección y todo eso. Sus datos y este: las van a entrevistar a doña Gudelia y a la maestra porque ya la citaron cuatro o cinco veces con ésta que no está la persona y no se le entrevista y este: ora la citaron otra vez para mañana. Y: la vez pasada este: la atendió el, el jefe de ahí, el encargado del de ese programa, el encargado muy ese, y le dijo que para hoy iba a encargarse de (inaudible) pero estuvimos nos esperamos y no llegó. (Tuvimos que llenar) dos formatos y firmarlos (inaudible). No más por eso nos dice mañana, a ver si llega la persona que va a hacer la entrevista. Tienen que darle rapidez a los papeles por que si no, no da tiempo a que empiece el 22 en lo que meten los papeles, la copia del acta de nacimiento y fotografías. Y aparte papeles del taller. Creo que ya se los entregó. Ya tienen todo, ¿eh?

Early this morning, we went to SEDECO to arrange for the course. So many requirements, and we have to go again and again . . . the instructor has to turn in her resume, her personal information, her address, and all that. Her information, etc.: they are going to interview doña Gudelia and the instructor because they have given them four or five appointments and the person isn’t there and they don’t do the interview and now they gave her another appointment for tomorrow. And last time, the head was there, the boss, and he said that today he would make sure [inaudible], but we were waiting, and he didn’t show up. We had to fill out two forms and sign them [inaudible]. That’s the reason they say that tomorrow maybe the person who does the interviews will come. They have to hurry up with our paperwork because if not, we won’t be able to start on the 22nd by the time they process our documents, the birth certificates, and the photographs. And also the documents from the sewing shop. I think we turned all of that in. They already have everything, don’t they?

It is common for citizens to find themselves at a disadvantage when dealing with government agencies. In situations such as these, the power relations are extremely asymmetric and applicants are dependent on the mood and good will of public servants, who often force them into a position of deference by insisting on the precise fulfillment of requirements and by demanding hours and hours of waiting for interviews that do not happen, multiple return-visits to the office, and a great deal of humility and patience.
Discovering Literacy

However, not all dealings with official agencies are like the one just described; people also develop their own solutions by exchanging information and helping each other. In November 1998, for example, a local government office offered a series of activities, such as sewing, jam making, felt figures, for women in town. Gudelia participated in this program, running participant registration, collecting and organizing their birth certificates and photographs, and, once the courses began, taking and monitoring attendance using a form on which the participants’ names were written in alphabetic order. At the beginning of December, we had the opportunity to accompany Gudelia on a visit to take roll in one of the groups where they were making Christmas decorations with felt. The group had fallen behind on their attendance sheet, and she asked everyone to sign in several times. On her way out, the instructor came up to Gudelia and walked out to the street with her. The instructor showed her a form that she was supposed to fill out so that she could get paid. The first few lines were simple: name, address, date of birth. The problem the instructor had was that the form had a line where she was supposed to fill in her tax identification number, the Registro Federal de Contribuyentes (RFC).

Strictly speaking, the RFC is an official number that is assigned to the taxpayer by the fiscal system; however, until relatively recently the series of numbers and letters used to compose it were common knowledge: the first four spaces were derived from the taxpayer’s paternal surname, maternal surname and maiden name, followed by the date of birth. For example, an RFC for José Gonzalez Sandoval, supposing that his date of birth was May 1, 1958, would be GOSJ580501.

Gudelia knew this. She went back to the first lines, looked at the instructor’s name and date of birth, and composed a number for her to use as an RFC. Then she checked it, saying out loud to the instructor her last name, her given name, and her date of birth. Gudelia told the instructor to write the number that she had just made up on the line that called for the tax identification number and that it would be a good idea for her to go to the Mexican tax authorities, when she had a chance, and have them officially assign her a number. But for the meantime, Gudelia considered that the made up number could meet the requirement for filling out the form and the instructor could get paid. Through their interaction, the instructor had access to at least two types of information: first, what a Registro Federal de Contribuyentes number is and how it is composed; and second, what office to go to in
Access and availability: Reading and writing in action

Throughout this chapter we have visited social spaces in Mixquic where literacy events often take place. At home, in the church, the school, the post office, the library, and other places, there are many written materials available and situations in which reading and writing occur. We have pointed out that opportunities to read and write can also be literacy-generating spaces and we have classified them into three types of situation: literacy-demanding situations, literacy-scaffolding situations, and voluntary literacy situations. From this perspective, when a repairman goes to the sewing shop to receive payment for fixing a sewing machine and Gudelia presents him with her open notebook and asks him to write and sign a receipt for payment in his own handwriting, the situation demands literacy use. When one sibling helps another do homework, it is a literacy-scaffolding situation. When a person walking by a newsstand stops to read the covers of the publications on display for sale, it is a voluntary literacy situation.

The different situations arise from the types of social relationships that occur in these spaces, the display of knowledge, and specific actions used for accomplishing literacy, the relationship between the participants in the literacy event, and their relationship with the texts and written culture. This set of relationships, knowledge, and actions constitute the access routes and modalities of appropriation for learning and using reading and writing. In the sessions organized by the church, there are activities for which a religious authority decides what the topics of interest are, how to approach them, and how to read and interpret the related texts. Gudelia read with her father, who shared the pleasure of reading with her. Carmen received letters from her daughter when she went to work in the United States and, thanks to the presence and willingness of others, she was able to listen to the letters being read aloud to her, over and over again. Access to literacy is constructed through relationships with other readers and writers, with texts and through multiple opportunities to interact around written language.

We were also able to identify a series of literacy practices in Mixquic. Each of these represents a possible encounter with written language: they are local ways of using literacy, ways with which the towns-
people could potentially be familiar. The following list summarizes the reading and writing practices we found in Mixquic and gives a short contextualized example taken from the discussions above:

- **Examining written text orally.** In classes organized by the church, participants learn about religious texts through oral interaction. Generally, the catechist reads aloud or simply explains the texts, and the participants then comment on them.

- **Public reading and writing.** In the streets of Mixquic, invitations to important community events, political propaganda, advertisements, and graffiti are displayed on community fences and walls. An important part of both the messages' content is common knowledge among the townspeople (celebrations follow a pre-established calendar, political parties have local activists and use emblems and logos that are widely recognized, and most of the advertisements are for local stores) and their ongoing conversations.
• **Sharing joint practices.** Many of the social demands for literacy are resolved through collective practices. There are formal scribes as well as informal ones (neighbors, other family members) who read and write for others or help others to read and write for themselves.

• **Doing everyday literacy activities.** Writing is used to do everyday chores like writing shopping lists or writing down expenses and family accounting.

• **Following up on official business.** Writing is also used to do family business, at work, and for official paperwork at government offices. Two common uses are sending and receiving formal letters, as well as filling out forms. Many times the forms and the formal letters have to be turned in with complementary documents, such as birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, school transcripts, receipts, previous documentation, and photographs.

• **Schooling.** The presence and influence of school has grown in Mixquic over the last few decades. School work is done at home; siblings, cousins, and other relatives share books, and parents increasingly participate in homework. For the younger and older generations alike, there are opportunities to interact with other family members around written language; reading together in the household is becoming more common.

• **Circulating literacy materials.** Reading materials circulate among experienced and novice readers and among readers with different tastes and practices. Commercial texts are sold, resold, borrowed, given away, traded, and inherited. But there are also some publications that are distributed free of charge: local newspapers, library books, free textbooks on the primary level and other schoolbooks. Another public service that contributes to the circulation of texts is the post office: the mailman carries commercial documents, bills, advertisements, notices, subscriptions, and, on occasion, personal letters. The circulation of texts increases the opportunities to read and new opportunities potentially generate still other possibilities.

• **Keeping family files.** Families maintain files in which they keep those documents considered important.

In each of these situations, the close and implicit relationship between orality and literacy stands out. According to Heath (1983), written language lives in a world of talk; written culture is nurtured by oral
language, and oral language is one of its most important vehicles for dissemination. By participating in oral language events around written texts, access to literacy is opened up; and along with reading and writing texts, privileged situations for appropriating literacy practices, interpretations, forms of expression, and conventions emerge. For example, by sitting with their grandchildren while they do their homework (and, in some cases, helping them), grandmothers learned some of the different aspects of written language, its contents and ways of reading and writing that are taught at school. When preparing to be community missionaries, the catechists learn to read and interpret religious contents so that they can tell them to others; at the same time, those who attend religious study groups learn to give certain specific meanings to the texts. Access to the basic concepts of Catholicism is achieved when the catechist and the participants interact around certain texts and participate in ways that are previously defined by their manual.

Perhaps it is the area of gender that best illustrates how social relationships shape access to literacy. For generations, girls were not allowed to go to school; they were socially subordinated to their parents' will and to a very narrow idea about what women should and should not do, could or could not be. They were not allowed to work outside the family circle, and if they did get a job, the range of possible jobs considered appropriate for them was limited. As a result, the knowledge and know-how useful for employment were also out of their reach. Currently, some of these circumstances have changed, and with them so has the access to literacy. As the environment for reading and writing is transformed, the opportunities for interacting with written language and the ideas that the members of a community who use that written language have changed as well.

The literacy-generating spaces are active spaces for several reasons: historically, they are sensitive to social changes and evolve with them. Also, in specific situations they may shift; any given event can start out being, for example, a literacy-demanding situation and end up being a literacy-scaffolding situation (in the shop, Gudelia told the repairman to write her a receipt, but she ended up helping him with the date and the amount). They are also dynamic because, as readers and writers participate in literacy events, their concept of what they are doing, of reading and writing and written culture, can also be transformed. For those of us who are professionally dedicated to creating and carrying
out pedagogical actions that will contribute to improving the quality of adult education, particularly in relationship to reading and writing, it is essential that one not to lose sight of shifting dynamics that occur in literacy-generating spaces.

The ways we learn about written language are shaped by the situations in which reading and writing are used; we appropriate them as we participate in literacy events and use reading and writing. To become literate in a broad sense—to learn to manipulate and use language deliberately to participate in socially-valued events—requires that one take part in literacy-generating situations in which these practices are displayed and employed. The women in our study group participated with varying degrees of fluency and skill in local literacy events; many of them still thought of themselves as illiterate, unable to read and write, and wanted to enrich their knowledge and their know-how about reading and writing. The idea of creating literacy-generating spaces and increasing participants' opportunities for reading and writing is very promising with regard to teaching others. This is the central theme of the next chapter.
Why didn’t you try to read? Why didn’t you ask somebody to teach you? You really messed up, honestly... You could have gone to someone, a friend, a workmate who [could say] look, here’s how you do it.

Gudelia, 42
The current trends in policies aimed at fostering basic education and literacy for adults and young people emphasize at least three essential principles: 1) education actions must consider the context in which learners live and carry out their daily activities; 2) the starting point for educational interventions should be learners' existing knowledge and know-how; and 3) educational projects must recognize and respond to learners' heterogeneity (Garcia-Huidobro 1994; Hautecouer 1997; Messina 1993; Osorio 1996; Rivera 1997; Schmelkes 1996).

These principles represent important challenges for literacy programs designed for and directed at marginalized youth and adults. Many projects often distinguish the urban from the rural, the native from the non-native, and artisans from farmers; however, policy guidelines are useful directives for educational actions in defined situations only after a careful analysis of the potential participants' circumstances. Paul Bélanger (1994: 88) has pointed out that for literacy programs to be effective, they "must be built through and on the learners' prior practices in their communities. But this is only possible if we acknowledge the plurality of literacies." For basic education and literacy efforts to become relevant educational programs, it is imperative to situate the teaching, understand written culture within the local context, and portray the immediate community as a place for reading and writing. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand local communicative options and language practices as part of the intellectual and cultural background of learners and consider them exploitable resources for teaching and learning.

In Mixquic we identified not only several written language practices but also different experiences with them. Carmen and Gudelia, mother and daughter, illustrate some of the changes in language practices from one generation to the next that can be attributed, at least in part, to transformations in the community. In one of the study sessions, Carmen compared her experience with that of the protagonist in the book Benita, an autobiography the group was reading. In the text, the main character reminisced that one of her boyfriends left her because he found out she could not read or write. Carmen used this incident in the
narrative to comment that she lost a job for the same reason. She told us that when she was young she got a job in a medical clinic as a nurse’s assistant. After she had been on the job only a few days, she was asked to weigh a child, but she did not know how to read the scale: she was so discouraged that she never went back to work. A comparison of Carmen’s and Gudelia’s attitudes towards this incident is revealing:

| Carmen: Porque, por ejemplo, en el libro de Benita . . . ella perdió el novio, estaba tan enamorada ¿no?, por no saber leer. Yo perdí el trabajo por [lo mismo] (risas del grupo). Y dije: si hubiera sabido leer me hubiera superado; que hubiera seguido trabajando. Y otra cosa hubiera sido, pero en lugar de subir, tuve que haber bajado. No conocía ni el reloj, no conocía, yo, la báscula . . . Y créeme que si me quedé muy triste, me dio mucha tristeza perder ese trabajo. | Carmen: Because, for example, in Benita . . . she lost her boyfriend; she was so in love, wasn’t she? Because she couldn’t read. I lost my job for the same reason. (Laughter from the group.) I said: if I had known how to read, I could have gotten ahead, I could have kept on working. Things would have been different, but instead of moving up, I moved down. I couldn’t even read a watch, I couldn’t read the scale. And, believe me; this made me sad, really sad to lose that job. |
| Gudelia: Pues sí; y que le pasaban a pesar al niño y que por la pena que ya no regresó a su trabajo. ¿Por qué no se puso a leer? ¿Por qué no le pidió a alguien que le enseñara? ¿Qué torpkea cometió usted, de veras. | Gudelia: Right, they gave her a child to weigh, and she was so embarrassed, she never went back to work. Why didn’t you try to read? Why didn’t you ask somebody to teach you? You really messed up, honestly. |
| Carmen: Pero es que antes no íbamos casi a la escuela. | Carmen: But before we hardly went to school. |
| Gudelia: No, pero ya estaba trabajando. Que ella se hubiera acercado a alguien, hubiera tenido una amiga, una compañera de trabajo, mira, esto se hace así. | Gudelia: No, but you were already working. She could have gone up to someone, a friend, a workmate, who [could say] look, here’s how you do it. |

For Carmen, asking another person for help was not an option; she didn’t know how to do what she was assigned to do and she attributed this to her lack of schooling, a personal failure that she could never overcome. Her daughter, Gudelia, reproached her for not asking for help; unlike her mother, she thought that requesting assistance from somebody else in order to learn something was a legitimate solution. During her childhood, Carmen spent most of her time helping with the house-
work, growing up in a world of orality where written language had little presence; she emphasized that she did not even know how to read a clock and that “before we hardly went to school.” Gudelia did go to school, however; she participated with other members of her family in literacy events, writing with others, reading with her father, and she learned how to ask others to help her with different ways of reading and writing. Despite the fact that they grew up in the same town, the changes in the local communicative landscape and in the access routes to literacy (for example, the presence of school, the availability of written materials, the opportunities for reading and writing) paved the way for different experiences (Chartier 1997a and b).
The purpose of this chapter is to examine the learning activities in which the women in the study group took part, activities that involved the use of their community language practices. The language practices (particular uses of oral and written language), the diversity of their sociolinguistic variants, the expressive options, forms, and meanings are an important part of social interaction and, at the same time, constitute part of the participants’ prior knowledge (Duranti 1992; Gumperz 1986; Saville-Troike 1982). In this case, our attention is focused on the variety of reading and writing activities, on the assumption that reading and writing are not monolithic activities but form a mosaic of possible written language practices for understanding and producing written texts (Boyarin 1992; Ferdman 1994; Gallego 2000; Goody 1968; Moss 1994; Scribner 1991; Street 1993). From this perspective, there are different ways to read and write, depending on the context, the communicative purposes, the text genres, and the position a reader or writer assumes vis-à-vis literacy.

James Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear (1996) suggest that the heterogeneity of a group of learners is constituted by the range of their experiences, the modalities of appropriation and use, the time in learners’ lives when learning takes place, and their individual relationships with literacy. In our study group, as in any study group, there were similarities and differences in the participants’ experiences: in their schooling, their knowledge and know-how of reading and writing, their reading and writing habits, their stance towards literacy and other readers and writers. There were also similarities and differences in their experiences as mothers, wives, and daughters growing up and raising families in poverty, living in the same town practically their whole lives. These experiences provided important elements that shaped their participation in the construction of meaning, their interest in certain topics, and their priorities for learning.

The foregoing considerations provided general guidelines for working with the women in the study group. These can be summarized in three pedagogical approaches:

- Knowledge of the local context and its characterization as a place for reading and writing would be the basis for identifying, at least partially, the learner’s background knowledge.
- Local communicative practices (oral and written) constitute an important starting point for planning and developing situations for learning to take place.
Each learner’s literacy knowledge is the result of her personal experience, her trajectory through different social spaces in which reading and writing take place: for this reason, any group of learners is heterogeneous, a fact that must be considered in order to promote learning.

In the previous chapter we looked at some of the different ways in which literacy is accomplished in Mixquic. Each of these represents a possible encounter with reading and writing; given that they are local practices, learners are likely to be knowledgeable of them. From the local literacy practices, we identified ways of approaching texts through orality, reading texts posted in public spaces, and individual, shared, and commented reading. As far as writing was concerned, many of the social demands for writing were solved collectively; many of these practices were related to daily tasks, such as writing lists and family accounting. The presence and influence of schooling has grown over the past few decades, as has the circulation and availability of written materials.

From an educational point of view, these practices constitute important resources for designing situations for learning, promoting interactions, selecting texts and text genres, creating opportunities for contact with other readers and writers, and promoting the appropriation of literacy practices and new knowledge and know-how of written language. Given that the only way that reading and writing can be developed is through their use in situations in which they are important resources (Duboi 1995), our teaching efforts began with two main activities: a) identify those situations and topics that would involve the participants, that would really get them hooked, and b) construct ways of participation with the learners that would get them committed them to their own learning processes.

Educational actions

In the introduction we detailed how we began to work with the group of women in Mixquic. As was noted, a few weeks into our study the volunteer instructor stopped attending the study sessions; at that point, the women asked us to take over teaching the group. To do this without abandoning our research project altogether, we searched for a way to organize a learning situation in which the señor as could count on our support in a study session once a week and work together without us on other days. We hoped to strengthen their commitment to each other and generate opportunities for interacting, studying, reflecting, learning, teaching, and planning their education together in accordance with
their own expectations and criteria. We looked for ways to create a situation in which solidarity in learning was not appropriated only from materials, books, or the facilitator, but also from each other as learners. Salvador García Angulo (1979: 8) wrote that

All of us have valuable ideas and different experiences to contribute to our classmates. So besides studying books or attending classes, we should try to share our ideas and help each other, and that way a group of learners can make up for a lack of teachers.

Once we agreed to coach the study group, we concentrated our efforts on offering an educational program that allowed learners to participate in multiple and diverse interactions with each other (and with us) by addressing reading and writing practices, raising topics of their interest, and invoking their experiences with local uses of literacy. Our agenda included capitalizing on the participants' specific resources and shared knowledge, helping them to take ownership of their educational process by participating in the organization and selection of contents and activities. This proposal meant understanding that our study sessions were a literacy-generating space and that, as a result, our purpose was to transform the members' relationship with other readers and writers, with written texts, and with specific literacy practices by putting them in contact with a variety of printed matter and constructing with them their access to reading and writing. We believed that learning activities should provide a variety of opportunities for interaction: we wanted to design situations that demanded literacy, situations that encouraged collaboration, and situations in which reading and writing were voluntary actions, an option for participating in communicative events. Our teaching objectives were literacy practices rather than just written language (Lerner 2001). The point was to create access routes to literacy and modalities of appropriation of written language practices that extended the participants' existing knowledge about reading and writing, their socio-cultural background, their participation in literacy events, and their know-how for using certain reading and writing conventions.

We gradually discovered that within the group there was a wealth of knowledge and resources that we could use as a starting point for organizing learning activities. The participant with the most schooling had finished primary school and had important life experiences working as a union activist and as a result of having emigrated to the United States to seek employment as a domestic worker. Several of the other women, especially the older ones, were very knowledgeable about local plants
and herbal remedies. They also had experience selling vegetables and other merchandise in the market, working in small stores, and participating in religious groups affiliated with the local parish. They all participated in organizing community festivities, local activities, and short courses offered by the local administration. The group was heterogeneous in terms of their schooling, their knowledge and use of reading and writing, their everyday practices, their knowledge, and their experiences.

The women had some knowledge about reading and writing, formed over the years as a result of facing different communicative demands for literacy. They used written language in a variety of everyday scenarios; they knew the importance of obtaining and holding on to important documents (what they referred to generically as *los papeles*): birth certificates, marriage certificates, receipts, notices, formal letters, report cards, diplomas, health cards, vaccination records, military identification cards, invoices, and so on. They also recognized and classified texts and signs painted on local slab fences and usually could anticipate at least some part of their content. Even though the substance and the style of these signs varied, they easily distinguished between the colorful displays that announced an upcoming community dance, the propaganda of the political parties, and commercial advertisements. Besides these kinds of public community texts, they sometimes received flyers at their homes that echoed the content painted on the walls. They also classified and anticipated the meaning of many written formats.

At different times the women demonstrated familiarity with different uses of writing: they could tell different text carriers apart (newspapers, magazines, letters, books, advertisements, commercial wrappings, etc.) and recognized some of their different purposes (political propaganda, school notices, property titles, vaccination records). They also created their own literacy practices: signing a report card, writing lists, developing filing systems, and keeping sales records, to name just a few. Sometimes they received correspondence (especially junk mail, bills, and property taxes), and they considered it important to be able to read and write so that they could get around on public transportation. While they all shared the goal of obtaining one of the various certificates that the INEA offered, they also shared other learning goals, such as helping their children or grandchildren with their homework, making their jobs easier, understanding better what they read, being able to add and subtract in writing.
Learning activities

During the two years of collaboration with these women in Mixquic, we carried out a series of activities that were designed to help them extend their knowledge about reading and writing practices and to help them learn about other such practices. As we learned about literacy practices in the community, their interests, and their backgrounds, we used these as starting points for working together and we introduced new ways of reading and writing when it was relevant to do so. The principal activities fall under the following general headings:

- Reading aloud together and commenting on texts, reading their own writing, and individual reading.
- Writing for different purposes: for authentic reasons and uses, for thinking, and for cultural production.
- Preparing for INEA examinations by working on INEA workbooks.¹

Within each of these broad categories, our strategy was to create situations in which the uses of reading and writing were not merely simulations of literacy practices but authentic uses of written communication. Exercises for practicing written language use cannot reproduce the socio-cultural demands of using reading and writing outside the classroom (Fingeret and Drennon 1997). We also looked for ways of interacting that allowed the participants to take ownership of their educational process, recognize what they knew, and turn to their classmates for assistance and guidance in learning about new content, forms of representation, and practices. At the beginning, the women insisted that they did not know how to read or write at all; they doubted their own intellectual capacity; they devalued their experiences and knowledge; and they were very unsure of themselves. When faced with the prospect of improving their command of written language or learning new subject matter, such as when we tried to involve them in the different learning activities that we invented, they used self-demeaning expressions, such as "I am the farthest behind" (soy la más atrasada) and "I am very dumb" (Soy muy burrita). But, most of all, at the beginning they avoided participating directly in group situations.

¹ Besides these, there were other activities that were both sporadic and spontaneous, such as planning upcoming sessions together, individual reading, discussing topics related to the main activities, community life, their personal lives, local history, and celebrations, and filling out forms.
The pedagogical challenge was to create a literacy-generating space with the learners that contained multiple opportunities for interacting, diverse situations for participating, and differentiated demands for reading and writing (reading and writing voluntarily, through collaboration, and to satisfy specific requirements). We tried to promote modalities of appropriation that would help the learners to redefine their stance towards literacy and to those contents and practices they associated with schooling; our goal was to also help them to redefine what they knew as useful and valuable knowledge so that it could be tapped for future learning. To accomplish each of these objectives, we offered multiple ways of participating, and validated all of them. For example, when reading aloud together, some of the women read a full paragraph, whereas others only a few lines; when revising their writing, some were concerned about finishing incomplete sentences, while others focused on fine-tuning conventional uses of spelling, syntax, and format. The redefinitions also implied recognizing the learners' efforts before pointing out their errors, acknowledging new ways of participating, encouraging them to try a new kind of reading or writing, inviting them to read something they had never read before, even if they found it difficult. At the same time, we tried to create a friendly environment, giving the learners a significant amount of responsibility for the activities and reducing, to the best of our ability, the social distance between "those who know" and "those who do not know." To do this, we also had to redefine our place as the instructors by refusing to exercise the authority given to the person who held the position of teacher. We insisted that they direct their questions to the group and not just to us, that they help each other to go over their workbooks, that they revise their writing together, and that they come to us only when they had exhausted other possibilities.

In the following pages we shall review the three principal activities just listed. Due to limited space, the selection of examples will necessarily be brief. We propose to illustrate our conceptualization of access to literacy by analyzing some of the modalities for appropriating texts (ways for understanding and approaching written discourse) and by examining different access routes to reading and writing practices (the social relationships that underlie the construction of meaning in literacy events).
Reading aloud together and commenting on texts, reading their own writing, and individual reading

Warwick Elley (1996) has noted the importance of having an abundance of books and printed matter, reading aloud, and commenting on texts as a way of fostering reading in developing countries. Shared reading and oral commentary were among the most continuous activities in our study group: besides reading a variety of texts that we simply ran across, we also systematically read several books together between 1998 and 2000 and commented on them on a regular basis. When we began to distance ourselves gradually from the group, they continued to meet to read books together that they were able to provide for themselves from their family libraries and others that were donated to the group.

We chose the books according to what we perceived to be their interests or because the señoras explicitly asked for them. For example, several of the women belonged to a sewing cooperative; they shared many activities and often had difficulties organizing their work and managing a steady flow of jobs. When we discovered this situation, we proposed that we read Las vacas de Martín (Martin’s Cows), a collection of testimonies written by adults participating in similar types of cooperatives. The reading of the autobiography Benita, a social activist during the 1940s in Mexico, was a huge success; the women in the group identified with the protagonist, especially with her personal struggle to get ahead and live her life according to her own principles. Benita’s experience was close to theirs in some ways, and their reading inspired many ethical, moral, and political discussions on topics the women cared about deeply, such as whether a mother-in-law should charge her daughter-in-law money for taking care of her grandchild; whether it is immoral to steal if one is hungry; whether a mother should live subordinated to her children’s and her husband’s desires; and whether a woman should have more than one partner in her lifetime. These discussions emerged from their reading and were part of their attempts to understand the text and, in the process, their own experiences as mothers, grandmothers, and women. After reading one of the initial parts of Benita, in which the protagonist steals money from her father so that she can eat, the women considered whether they thought that Benita had done the right thing. They commented:

| Carmen: Yo sí, cuando yo era chica y me iba a robar las lechugas. | Carmen: I did; when I was small, I stole lettuce. |
| Delfina: Ah, pero una pa comer sí, pero no pa vender, pos no. | Delfina: Oh, but to eat, yes; but to sell, no. |
They found meaning in the text for their own condition as women: their direct experience of poverty and hunger allowed them to explain certain events, their actions in the world, and the actions of others. In general, they condemned the act of stealing; it was not acceptable or desirable, but in a situation of hunger, when there was no other choice, it was understandable. Stealing to eat was comprehensible; stealing to sell was inexcusable.

Reading the autobiography of Benita Galeana was so enjoyable that we proposed that we read the story of another woman whose experiences were somewhat more distant but not completely unfamiliar. Our next choice was the autobiography of Rigoberta Menchú, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her defense of indigenous people’s civil rights in Guatemala. The book, Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (written in collaboration with Elizabeth Burgos), allowed us to draw comparisons between the lives of women in Guatemala and Mexico. It introduced a new element—the current situation of indigenous peoples—and presented new challenges for constructing meaning (far off places, words in Mayan, exotic customs). After finishing this book, the señoras told us explicitly that they wanted to read about romance, something “lovely,” because they had read enough about suffering and poverty. Given this request, we obtained copies of the novel Amor en el tiempo de cólera by Gabriel Garcia Márquez. When we finished reading it, one of the women brought in a copy of Love Story by Eric Segal, which she had had at home, for the group to read aloud. This was followed by a story by Clayton Bess entitled “Cuento Negro para una noche negra.”

Each time we began to read together, we commented on what we had read during the previous session, and at the end the participants exchanged ideas and wrote a short passage in their notebooks about that day’s reading. For two of the books (Benita and Love Story) we only had one copy for the group to share; so it was handed from reader to reader, and everyone read a passage. The women who were the more fluent readers read as much as a couple of pages aloud to the rest; the others read a few lines. In the case of other texts, we were able to obtain a copy for each person. The participants developed a series of ways to help each other during this activity. When a reader was

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2 Our thanks to Daniel Golding from Fondo de Cultura Económica for donating a copy of Bess’s story to each participant.
having difficulties with the text, the others would help her by reading along with her a word or phrase that was holding her up. When we had multiple copies, the more experienced readers would sit with their less experienced classmates and help them to follow along. They also took responsibility for the turn-taking: when one of the women had not read out loud, the others insisted that she take a turn. One day, during the reading activity, Delfina had not read and her friends insisted that she do so:

| Gudelia: Ah, sigue usted comadrita Delfi. Y luego nosotras. | Gudelia: Ah, you are next, Delfi. And then the rest of us. |
| Delfina: ¿Yo? | Delfina: Me? |
| Delfina: No voy a poder. | Delfina: I don’t think I can. |
| Carmen: Haga usted la lucha. Porque si no, le va a pasar lo que a mi... pues yo ya me estaba achicopalan-do.³ | Carmen: Make an effort. Because if you don’t, the same thing that happened to me is going to happen to you... I was starting to feel bad. |

One of the constant concerns when reading together was to give a voice to all of those present. Among themselves they insisted that each and every one of them read a part of the text. As in the above example with Delfina, many times they tried to back out of reading, but the rest would not let a reluctant reader go without doing her part. Their attitude was one more of solidarity than coercion; they insisted that they were all capable of reading aloud to the rest of the group. Even Carmen was adamant—an interesting fact when one considers that she herself tried to avoid reading whenever it was her turn; her concern was that Delfina might experience what she herself had experienced, referring to a moment earlier in the same session when she had not wanted to read. Finally, at everybody’s insistence, Delfina read, and she read very well.

Reading one text often resulted in reading another. On several occasions, we consulted other books: for example, during Benita, Gudelia commented, “Well, Benita comes from Guerrero, no? I thought, let’s get out the Atlas and look where Guerrero is and we’ll have a quick geography lesson.” This same type of situation arose on at least four other occasions: since they were mentioned in Benita, we looked at a book

³ A term in Mexican Spanish that indicates feeling bad about yourself.
on the Mexican muralists to understand better who the painters Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros were; we consulted a map to locate Guatemala; we looked at a book on human anatomy to understand the menstrual cycle, which came up in a passage in Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography; and we read some recipes when we were writing recipes for local home remedies. Generally, these other materials remained in the study space and the women could look through them on their own or with others when they had a spare moment.

The comparison of books was done orally: the similarities in genre between Benita and Yo soy Rigoberta Menchú facilitated several comparisons while reading the second book and in later conversations. The women contrasted life in Mexico with life in Guatemala, looking for the resemblance between one story and the other, acknowledging the value of the personal bravery of each character, and contrasting narrative style. Karina and Gudelia, for example, mulled over these texts together:

| Karina: Si, yo aprendí mucho [...] yo soy muy este ... yo soy, de que me da hablar, hablo, y de que no me quedo callada. Y este: y ahí yo me enseñé a ... a hablar más o menos um poquito, no, todavía no aprendo a hablar, y también de Rigoberta se enseñó a ser ... más que hablar, a enseñarse a hablar, a ser valiente ¿no?, en todas las situaciones difíciles en su país y entre su comunidad. Ella es una mujer que le gusta, le gustaba, le gusta, y hasta que ella deje de existir, le va a gustar, luchar, le va a gustar más que nada, comunicarse entre su gente ¿no? ayudarla. Ese es un ejemplo para mí ¿no? porque ... tanto Benita Galeana como ella son ejemplos de mujeres que han luchado, mujeres que han salido adelante en su lucha ... Porque dice aquí, dice ella que no aprendió en escuelas, tanto Benita como ella no aprendieron en escuelas, sino su escuela fue la vida, la vida misma. Los problemas que ellas veían entre su gente, no sé, más que nada porque los soldados estaban |
| Karina: Yes, I learned a lot [...] I am very ... I am, well, if it comes to talking, I talk. I don't keep quiet. And I learned, I learned to ... to speak a little. I still haven't learned to speak (well), and Rigoberta taught herself to be ... more than talking, to be brave, didn't she? In all the difficult situations in her country and her community. She is a woman who likes, who liked, who likes to struggle, more than anything else to communicate with her people, right? To help them. This is an example for me because ... both Benita Galeana and she are examples of women who have struggled, women who have gotten ahead because of their fight ... Because it says here that she didn't learn in school, like Benita; they didn't learn in school, life itself was their school. The problems that they saw with their people, mostly because the soldiers were terrible, really terrible. Any rebellion, and they murdered them on the road or, like the book says, |
pero si tremendos, tremendísimos. Cualquier rebelión ya...o los asesinaban en el camino o como dice en el libro, los secuestraban y los mataban. [. . .] Me llamó mucho la atención de que todavía a fin de siglo y todavía se sigan utilizando maneras de reprimir una revolución, pero es de una manera fea, de una manera que es espantosa [. . .] se utilizan en algunas partes de México y en algunas partes del mundo, yo digo ¿no? ¿Por qué existe eso? ¿Será tal vez porque quieran poner el orden de una manera? Yo digo que eso, es un salvajismo.

Gudelia: Algunas compañeras, unas compañeras que yo tuve cuando trabajé en Estados Unidos, me decían que sí había mucha pobreza allá y todo y luego hasta de Nicaragua, decían que como aquí, y luego me preguntaban sobre Zapata, sobre Venustiano Carran... todos aquellos, me preguntaban que por qué peleaban y todo. Le digo pues supuestamente porque pues todos querían el poder, ¿era la guerra civil ¿no? que pelearon, porque eso es lo que estamos pensando nosotros de eso que está sucediendo en el país, todos quieren el poder y los afectados somos los títeres de abajo y por eso es que hay mexicanos en [Estados Unidos de América] pero hay un montón de El Salvador, de Nicaragua, de Honduras, de Guatemala, qué bárbaro.

they kidnapped them and then murdered them. [. . .] I was surprised that at the end of the century they are still using ways to repress a revolution, but such brutal ways; it was terrible [. . .] they do the same in parts of Mexico and some parts of the world, and I think, why does this exist? Isn’t their another way to keep order? This is savage.

Gudelia: Some of my friends, friends I made when I worked in the United States, they told me that there was so much poverty there, and that in Nicaragua, they used to say it was like here. And they asked me about Zapata, about Venustiano Carran... all of those people; they asked me what they fought for. I told them, supposedly they fought because they wanted power, it was a civil war, wasn’t it? They fought because this is what we think about our own countries, what is happening there. Everybody wants power, and the most affected are the puppets on the bottom, and that is why there are Mexicans in the United States, but there is a ton of people from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala. Incredible!

Karina began by talking about herself and comparing herself to Rigoberta Menchú, pointing out that she, like the book’s protagonist, did not keep quiet and expressed her opinions. Karina lives in extreme poverty, and through the character’s words, she finds value in what she has learned from life (neither Benita nor Rigoberta learned from school, “they learned from life, from life itself”). In a similar way, she validates her own experience: she also went to school for only a few years and had
to start working when she was very young. She admires these women’s fighting spirit and recognizes it in herself. The degree of violence and suffering of the people in Guatemala and the way the army operated with no restraints scandalized her. Gudelia also brings her own experiences to her reading, as a way of weaving her comments with Karina’s, with what she read and her own thoughts. She linked the narrative she read to her own life story. Her understanding of what she read helped her to comprehend her experience with the emigrants from different parts of Central America whom she had met while working in the United States. Gudelia and Karina constructed meanings for the autobiographies they read through talk, using their lives and their condition as women who struggled to understand what they read and using the text to understand what they had experienced in life. They had access to the text because, as they spoke, they made sense of it by relating their reading to their own knowledge, thoughts, and experiences. Instead of looking for a single meaning for the written texts, they found multiple ways of understanding it.

Reading aloud in a group allowed for the appropriation of other aspects of the text and ways of working together. The learners developed strategies of solidarity to read together; they helped each other to sound out unknown words and they examined some aspects of language. In the following example, they stopped reading in order to comment on the word *chingar*, a curse word they were quite surprised to find in writing.

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4 Rocío Vargas and Guadalupe Noriega collaborated in the fieldwork at different points in the project. Ms. Vargas had a key role in the development of the activities related to the calendar, entering the women’s handwritten texts into the computer, and transcribing the audio tapes. Ms. Noriega helped to collect data, transcribe tapes, and work on the analysis of the collaborative reading (see Noriega 2002). To facilitate reading the selected fragments of talk, we use ‘I’ (*investigadora*) in Spanish and ‘R’ (researcher) in English to signal a conversational turn of anyone of us.
Gudelia: No, es que yo cuando me hacen enojar mis nietos les digo “¡vayan a ver, hijos de la chingada!” [Una vez] fue el cacique de aquí, de Mixquic; un día, dice que, fue a la sacristía con el padre. “Quiero una misa para mí”. “Sí, hijo, sí”, dice; ¿cómo la quieres, rezada o cantada?”. “Ay, yo no sé, padre; yo sólo sé que quiero una misa chingona” (risas). Y pa’ que le digas así al padrecito, (se ríen).

Gudelia: No, but when I get mad I tell my grandchildren, “You’re going to be sorry, you little bastards!” One time, a powerful landowner from here, from Mixquic, one day he went to the church with the priest and said, “I want you to say Mass for me.” “OK, my son,” he answered. “How do you want it, with prayers or with music?” “Oh, Father, I don’t know, I only know I want a f***ing good Mass.” (Laughter.) Imagine saying that to a priest! (More laughter.)

The readers were astonished to find words like these in the book. But reading them allowed the women to recognize speech forms that they knew and used; it also let them think about when it is appropriate to say them and when it is not. The anecdote that Gudelia tells about two powerful figures in her town, the cacique (powerful landowner) and the priest, demystified the use of “bad words” and put them in everybody’s mouth, toning down some of the value judgments made about language such as this and, still more important, the people that say them.

During our study, Mexico was preparing for presidential elections. As part of the campaigns, there were several political events in town and the distribution and circulation of flyers with information about the candidates and their political parties. On occasion we found some of the printed matter from the campaign, along with other publications such as local newspapers, magazines, pamphlets that the women looked through and read. At one of our regular sessions in September 1999, the participants found a political flyer on the table and spontaneously read together the heading,

Zapata in the Capital. For a dialogue with us in the national referendum! For the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and an end to the war of extermination! Participate in the dialogue and help set up polls. Vote March 21. (Zapata en el Distrito Federal. Para dialogar con nosotros en la consulta nacional. Por el reconocimiento de los derechos de los pueblos indios y el fin de la guerra de exterminio. Participa en el diálogo e instala una mesa de recepción de la votación. Vota el 21 de marzo.)
This gave way to a discussion about the current situation in Chiapas, where there has been an insurgent movement by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN: Zapatist Army of National Liberation) since 1994. The señoras tried to explain why they were referred to as Zapatistas, and why there was such a violent conflict. One of the researchers asked a question about who was fighting this war and they explained:

| Estela: Pues que son los del (ZL) zeta ele. | Estela: Well they are from the ZL. |
| I: ¿Y esos quiénes son? | R: Who are they? |
| Gudelia: (LZ) ele zeta. | Gudelia: The LZ. |
| I: ¿Contra quién o qué? | R: Against whom or what? |
| Gudelia: Contra el gobierno. | Gudelia: Against the government. |
| I: Porque para que haya guerra, debe haber dos. | R: Because if it’s a war, then there are two. |
| Estela: Este, el EZLN con los mismos del . . . del pueblo, de abí de, de Chiapas. | Estela: Well, the EZLN with the people, from there, from Chiapas. |
| I: ¿Y por qué dice abí que de los . . . los derechos de los indios? | R: And why does this say the . . . the rights of indigenous people? |
| Carmen: Porque así le pusieron, pero pues no. | Carmen: Because that’s what they wrote, but maybe not. |
| Estela: Pues como Zapata ¿no? que peleaba por las tierras para dárselas a los= | Estela: Well, Zapata fought for land, to give it to= |
| Estela: A los pobres. | Estela: To the poor. |

Estela and Gudelia tried to remember what the initials for the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) stood for, picking out first ‘ZL’, ‘LZ’ and finally putting it together as ‘EZLN’. Gudelia defines the situation in Chiapas as a civil war, everyone against everyone else, and refers to another war in Mexico without mentioning which one. From here on, Estela begins to construct the meaning of the flyer by comparing what is currently occurring in Mexico with Zapata, one of the best known protagonists of the Mexican Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century. His participation in the Revolution is part of the standard content of history classes and texts for basic education and is well-known as the defender of peasants and the creator of the revolutionary cry, Tierra y Libertad (Land and Liberty). While they were trying to understand the name of the group in Chiapas and its cause, Estela
remembers the role Zapata played and assumes, along with her friends, that it also has to do with the meaning of the contemporary political movement.

Gudelia and Estela work together in order to understand what they are reading, mobilizing their knowledge of their country and its history. Together they constructed meaning of the text as follows: Estela remembered the initials, Gudelia identified the Zapatistas, and knew that they were involved in a war, and from there Estela related today’s Zapatistas with the original ones. Meanwhile, Delfina listened and followed their conversation, intervening just at the right time to explain that Zapata fought to give land to the poor.

One final comment about the reading activities: it is important to note that there were few individual silent reading activities. In the beginning, we brought in a selection of children’s books for the women to take home and share with the children in their households. In the following session some of the women told us about what they had read and talked about reading to the children. We exchanged books and repeated the activity. Sometimes the women chose a book from the small collection we kept in the shop, picked up printed matter off the table, or took out their INEA workbooks while they waited for the others to arrive. In our field notes we have comments such as “Delfina is absorbed looking through one of INEA’s Spanish language textbooks, she is reading to herself,” where we capture in just a few words these types of events. We consider them meaningful because they provide precise evidence of learning to read and appropriating literacy practices. The acts of spontaneous and self-directed reading constitute a new activity in the lives of most of the women who participated in our study; previously, they had little or no chances to sit down and look at a book. In the context of our class, they also read their own texts aloud as a way of sharing them and as part of the revision process. This was particularly relevant when we worked on the calendar, an activity that will be examined more thoroughly in the next section.

We also know that they read individually sometimes when they worked on the materials provided by INEA to prepare for the primary education certification examinations. However, they did this mostly on Wednesdays and Fridays when we were not there, and for this reason we have no record of how they organized these activities. Generally, in their independent sessions they continued to do some of the other activities (reading, working on the calendar, taking measurements, etc.)
and worked on their workbooks, or went over them together. In the following example, Gudelia describes how they used their time when studying together. First, she shows us a folder where she has placed samples of plants and then a written text for each one of them:

| Lo de las plantas ya, están separadas las que ya se ven, las hicimos, para no estarlas revolviendo porque luego ¿cuál hicimos y cuál no? Entonces aborta es . . . Todas éstas faltan; ésta está inconclusa, ésta es del día viernes. Y luego pues nos pusimos a:: este:: que Carmen este, escribió Delfina este. Todas escribieron algo y luego ya el viernes, también leímos Benita y escribimos . . . lo que pensábamos sobre Benita, por qué, qué pasó, porque apenas vamos de cuando el cuñado le cayó en la cama y le cortó los dos dedos, y que cuando se fue que iba a ser pastora tan elegante . . . Entonces todo eso escribieron, se los pueden mostrar ellas lo que escribieron ¿verdad? | The plants are done; they are in two piles, the ones that are finished, so that we don’t mix them up with the other ones and we don’t know which ones are done and which ones aren’t. Right now, it goes like this: these are the ones that aren’t done, they aren’t finished. And then we wrote, Carmen wrote this one, Delfina did this one. Everybody wrote something, and then on Friday we read Benita, what we thought about Benita, why, what happened, because we are just in the part where her brother-in-law got hurt and cut himself, when she was going to be a pastor . . . So we wrote about this; they can show you what they wrote, right? |

Our planning together tended to be ambiguous; we left many possibilities and ways of participating open to the señor as. In this case, they sewed or glued the plant samples to paper and classified them in terms of which ones they had written about and which ones they had not. This also allowed them to visualize how much they had accomplished and how many samples they still had to write about. Gudelia specifically mentioned that both Carmen and Delfina, the two oldest women in the group, had written about the samples and showed us their contributions. They also read Benita and followed the format of our shared sessions, writing about what they had read. In these sessions they divided the time themselves, decided what to do, and how to go about doing it. The work accomplished during these independent sessions contributed in a significant way to their autonomy as readers and writers, their learning, their interacting and sharing together, and the completion of our shared projects.

As a way of promoting reading, we fostered interactions among readers and texts that were most unusual for our participants: we fa-
vored sharing over individual reading. In many ways this was new for the group members because they thought that reading was supposed to be an individual activity. We also fostered their helping each other and collaboration while reading and accepted diverse ways of participating. As a result, in any given session several women took turns reading, they helped each other keep their place on the page, they explored unknown words, and they talked about what they were reading. We created these access routes so that we could transform the meaning of reading into a social activity accomplished through interaction, so that they could learn to read from and with each other.

At the same time, we introduced modalities of appropriation that invited the women to relate what they learned to their own experience, what they knew about the world, and, as far as was possible, texts they were familiar with or might read together with us. We did this by introducing other books that complemented what we were reading (maps, the book on the muralists, the human anatomy books) or that amplified some of their comments on their reading, on a movie, or at their request to look up a word in the dictionary or find a place on the map. With these modalities of appropriation we tried to direct their attention to different ways of finding meaning beyond the words printed on the page, broadening their reading comprehension to include intertextuality and multiple interpretations of what they read.

We believe that these access routes and modalities of appropriation give access to literacy practices in ways unknown to many beginning readers: traditional ways of teaching reading emphasize the exact extraction of meaning from what is written; for them understanding is synonymous with the ability to reproduce what the text says rather than being a matter of exploring the text or interpreting it from different angles. We supported the less experienced readers by means of reader-to-reader collaboration, helping them to solve the mechanical aspects of the written word that often baffled them. In this study group, reading was mostly a collective and interpretive activity of solidarity, closely linked to talk and opportunities for writing.

*Writing for different purposes: for authentic uses, for thinking, and for cultural production*

Using writing for authentic purposes is writing for genuine reasons, with definite goals in mind (Soifer et al. 1990; Fingeret and Drennon 1997). This means writing and sending a letter for real purposes instead
of being taught the structure and parts of a letter and then writing a letter that will never be sent to anyone. David Barton and Nigel Hall (1999) point out that when teaching how to write letters, the didactic treatment of the topic usually describes and analyzes them but rarely captures their communicative meaning; this tends to turn them into inappropriate and irrelevant textual objects. We tried to avoid these types of distortion by coming up with writing activities that had a clear, defined communicative purpose. During our study sessions, we did several writing activities: we wrote an oficio, a formal letter; we drew up a list of prices for the sewing workshop’s services and products; we kept records of books that we lent out to each other, grades on INEA exams, and the different commitments the women accepted as part of our projects. We wrote each of these in class; the texts were chosen, for the most part, because the women asked us to write them. We emphasized that these uses were real or authentic since we did not simply invent and dictate them or have them copied as an excuse for writing. Each one of these activities was related to a group situation, event, or project.

Our ideas about teaching others to write is perhaps best illustrated by a collective letter we wrote and sent to a local public servant. In it we asked for financial aid so as to purchase eyeglasses for several members of the group. Between August and December 1998, on at least twelve different occasions, members of the group mentioned that they needed glasses, that they could not see the letters, that they had headaches, that their eyes were tired. On several occasions, we discussed the possibility of going to a public health clinic or a local organization to obtain the aid they required. Gudelia thought that they could apply for help to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the majority party at that time, which was conducting a free healthcare campaign. Gudelia knew about this program because it was advertised on the stone fences in
Mixquic. She commented to her friends: “The PRI has a healthcare drive. Let’s write them a letter.”

But at that point the group was very busy with various projects and the letter writing was postponed over and over again. Finally, in January 1999, the issue of eyeglasses came up again. But now, instead of sending it to the PRI, they decided to send it to the local city authority (delegada política) in Tláhuac. Delfina was not sure what this was about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Delfina: ¿Cuál? ¿Cuáles son oficios?</th>
<th>Gudelia: Cuando pedimos la puerta, cuando pedimos =</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delfina: What letters?</td>
<td>Gudelia: When we asked for the door, when we =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: When we asked for the door, when we =</td>
<td>Delfina: = oh, well you do it then. You should do it, not us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: No, well right, but now we are going to do it together . . . I’ll start (she writes something quickly in her notebook). OK, there. Look, I wrote this. Here we have to write the date, but I’ve not put it in yet because we don’t know what day we are going to send it yet. (Reads:) Honorable Margarita López Ramos, Delegada del Distrito Federal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a way of explaining what an oficio is, Gudelia reminded Delfina that they had recently written one to ask the city government for financing for the door to their sewing shop. On that occasion, Gudelia, Delfina, and the other members of the sewing cooperative signed the letter, and they were given the door they needed. The idea was to proceed in a similar way to get eyeglasses. Gudelia began to write, but pointed out that she hadn’t written the date yet. With help from one of the researchers she explained why she wrote the name of the person who would receive the letter, her position, the date, and the use of the letter ‘C’ to abbreviate Ciudadana, and where she positioned them on the page. Gudelia had planned to pass the notebook around so everybody could help write a part of the letter, but the other women began to give ideas about what to put in the letter and she got involved in writing them down. Carmen proposed asking for the glasses as a favor because they could not see well due to their age; others proposed that they should be given glasses because they were studying and could not see their books, that they need the glasses to be able to sew, and so on. Gudelia finally wrote the letter herself and read it to her classmates.
Everybody liked the letter, and they all wanted to have a copy of it in their notebooks. So, at their request, Gudelia dictated it to them and explained some of its conventions while the rest wrote it down.

In this version of the letter, the use of hyphens to separate words can be observed, a common school practice. Also the distribution of the letter is not conventional: the heading and the beginning of the letter are on the same line instead of separated. After this session, the letter was typed up, signed, and sent to the Delegada. The women later received an answer and were allotted financial aid for an eye exam and glasses.

In this context the dictation of the letter had a particular meaning: it was the señoritas' initiative, and they were all familiar with the content of the letter. Unlike other situations in which a teacher dictates an unknown text to learners, in this case the women first helped to compose the letter and then asked their classmate to dictate it back to them. This procedure sets this specific dictation activity apart from other dictation activities in that the learners decided on the content and form of the dictated text. From our point of view, access routes are characterized precisely by the relationship between the participants, as well as by the participants' relationship to the activity. This activity can be described as one of solidarity and autonomy: the appropriation of the form is situated in the elaboration of a formal letter for real purposes. Our objective was to give access to this communicative practice through the direct, shared experience of writing the letter, making decisions about its contents, explaining some of its conventions, and living through its outcome.
Creating a calendar came about in a rather spontaneous and unexpected way. It was August 1998; it was very hot and our session was not going well. We could not seem to concentrate on anything. It was harvest time for broccoli, celery, Swiss chard, and a local sour grass called *verdolaga*, and the women were preoccupied with the work they had to do in the fields. Since we could not seem to get anything done, they suggested that we take a walk through the fields. As we walked, they talked about the different crops, planting techniques, and the local herbs. First, we had the idea to write about the plants, and then we came up with the idea of producing a calendar for 1999, using one plant to illustrate each month. We integrated this activity into the others—preparing for exams and reading together—but, for roughly the next four months, this activity became the most important one. Even though it started out as just another activity among others, it quickly became a project we all shared, participated in, and contributed to.

One of the greatest accomplishments of the calendar was identifying a theme that everybody was interested in. When we read and wrote other things, although they were attractive, some of the group members, especially the older women like Carmen and Delfina, felt they were at a certain disadvantage with regard to their classmates because they were uncomfortable around books, pencils, paper, erasers, and notebooks. They apologized continuously and avoided reading and writing in front of the others: they were reluctant to comment freely on what we were engaged in. But in the fields, they were the experts, the deacons of traditional knowledge, the keepers of each herb’s secrets, the protectors of the time-honored recipes. They knew the names of the different plants, their healing properties, and how to prepare them. They distinguished the poisonous plants from the innocuous ones; they knew how to pick them without pricking their fingers on the thorns; they knew when it was time to harvest them. They immediately became an important source of information for the rest of us, an essential reference for all, but particularly for the university-educated researchers, who knew very little about planting and harvesting. Now we changed places with them vis-à-vis this knowledge: we who were lettered became ignorant, unknowledgeable about plants and herbs.

| Carmen: [La verdolaga] es medicina para obrar cuando está uno estreñido. | Carmen: [Verdolaga] is medicine for moving your bowls if you are constipated. |
| Isabel: Sí. | Isabel: Right. |
The exchanges about the plants opened new topics for discussion and later served subject matter for writing. The use of medicinal herbs has a long tradition in Mixquic and is part of the everyday home remedies used for taking care of health problems. Knowledge about the plants is revered, as are the women who possess it. Transforming this local erudition into the content of planned situations for learning had two purposes: a) to create a situation in which all participants could contribute to a common project and goal and b) to read and write about known content. This second objective allowed us to concentrate our efforts with the señoras on how to represent in writing what they already knew, instead of having to construct new knowledge and learn to read and write it at the same time. The opportunity to extend their existing knowledge (about local plants) and give it a new form (in writing) helped the women to achieve a sense of ownership of the content and commitment to the process of producing a calendar, a cultural product that displays it. Creating a known, socially valued cultural object gave the participants an opportunity to establish a new relationship with literacy where they were using reading and writing in a new way.

This is how a spontaneous visit to the fields began a writing project about local herbs and gave rise to multiple activities and ways of working together. For example, the señoras described the plants and their properties and shared different recipes. Each participant (or a pair
of them) composed a note that described how the plants are cultivated, their uses, and how to prepare dishes with them. Everybody participated in this activity, regardless of their familiarity with writing. Some texts have a sole author, others have more than one author; some were partially dictated from one learner to another. We organized the activities in every way we could think of, combining different forms of writing (individual composition, collaboration, copying drafts, dictation, and so on).

During these sessions, there was a great deal of activity, talk, jokes, laughter, and work. Sitting together around the big cutting table, they wove in and out of conversations, debated the best recipes, talked about cooking procedures (for example, they argued over whether Brussels sprouts should be drained before they are fried in batter), how much of each ingredient to use (the difference between a pinch and a smattering of salt), spelling, where to put a title, and the information that each recipe had to include. We sat and participated with them in their jokes and conversations.

This was an intense period, one marked by tremendous effort in a low-risk climate, where the participants were thoroughly engaged and enjoying what they were doing. The continuous talk among them provided the prime materials for their texts: the ideas, the language in which to express them, and the desire to participate. In our study sessions, questions sometimes arose that we could not answer. On one occasion the women proposed that they interview members of their community or neighbors from the next town when they wanted to know something
about the crops that they did not know themselves. This was the case with *amaranto*, a seed used in cooking and in traditional candy called *alegría*. In Mixquic *amaranto* is not a common crop, although it is widely consumed. When they discussed how to grow it, they were not sure whether it was cultivated or wild. They decided to ask another person:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gudelia: Y quedamos en que íbamos a preguntar [acerca del amaranto] que si no sabemos de=</th>
<th>Gudelia: We talked about asking [about <em>amaranto</em>] if we didn’t know=</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carmen: =trabajo de la alegría.</td>
<td>Carmen: =about planting <em>alegría</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: De la alegría.</td>
<td>Gudelia: About <em>alegría</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delfina: Ay, ¿ya ven que es la alegría de la tarea? (Se ríen).</td>
<td>Delfina: You see what <em>alegría</em> our homework gives us? (Laughter.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They tried to get information about the plant, but they were frustrated because they could not find anyone who would tell them what they needed to know. Carmen thought that the people she had asked knew, but that they simply did not want to share the information.

| Carmen: Pues no dan razón, maestra. No quieren. Yo les pregunté a tres personas. Y le digo ¡justé es de Tulyehualco? Dice si. Le digo, bueno, ¿cómo siembran la alegría, me puede decir, por favor? Dice, no, yo nomás la vendo pero no la sé sembrar. [...] | Carmen: Nobody wants to tell you. They don’t want to. I asked three people. I said, “Are you from Tulyehualco?” They said, “Yes.” So I say, “Well, how do you plant *alegría*, can you please tell me?” They say, “I just sell it, but I don’t know how to plant it.” [...]|
| Gudelia: Es que por ejemplo, yo, mire, yo si ya pregunté de:: muchas plantas y para cuando vamos escribiendo y aquí voy. | Gudelia: Well me, for example, I asked about a lot of plants when I was writing and now I am on this one. |
| I: Y a la mejor es que no le conocen como alegría sino como amaranto. | R: Maybe they call it *amaranto* and not *alegría*. |
| Estela: No nos quieren decir. Dirán que va uno a sembrar. | Estela: They don’t want to say. They think we want to plant it. |
| I: ¿Por qué? ¿Sí está aquí, si se da el amaranto aquí? | R: Why? Isn’t it here already? Does it grow here? |

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5 They played with the double meaning of *alegría*, which also means ‘happiness. They used it to laugh about doing homework, a jab at their past experiences with schooling.
According to Estela and Carmen, the people in Tulyehualco would not give them information about *amaranto* (also known as *alegría*) because they were afraid of commercial competition. The study group members discussed what they knew about *amaranto/alegría* among themselves, to see if they could pool their knowledge about it. Delfina, who, at 79, was the group’s recognized authority on plants and herbs, commented on and amended what they others had to say. Gudelia finally articulated a question they all seemed to have:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carmen: No, se da nada más cuando se riega la semilla.</td>
<td>Carmen: No, it only grows wild.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: Por eso, muy poco.</td>
<td>Gudelia: Right, that’s why there isn’t much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen: Porque nadie se ha dedicado a sembrar.</td>
<td>Carmen: Because nobody has cultivated it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: No se dedican, no, no es el fuerte de=</td>
<td>Gudelia: Nobody has cultivated it; it isn’t our main=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estela: En Tecomi sí, porque luego hay.</td>
<td>Estela: In Tecomi they do; sometimes you can find it there.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estela: Pues yo he visto que la:: ora sí que la:: como que la ensemillan en surcos ya ¿no? porque va creciendo, ve que surcan la tierra.</th>
<th>Estela: I’ve seen how they:: I mean how they::: plant the seeds in the rows, right? That’s where they grow, you see; they cut through the earth and make rows.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delfina: Sí, pero no, no lo van echando en semillas.</td>
<td>Delfina: Right, but they don’t put the seeds in there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: ¿La qué?</td>
<td>Gudelia: What?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ester: O sea no sé cómo =</td>
<td>Ester: Well, I don’t know how they =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delfina: =el almácigo también. Yo porque lo vi cuando lo sembraban, me acuerdo que porque fui al centro y ya estaban sembrando, iban con las tablas (todos hablan).</td>
<td>Delfina: =first they germinate them like others. I saw them plant it once; I remember because I went into town and they were planting them; they were carrying them on boards. (Everyone talks at once.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estela: Eso es lo que digo porque=</td>
<td>Estela: That’s what I thought=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: =como nos falta su procedimiento de cuántas semillas, este: al cuánto tiempo nacen porque ya sabemos que lo tapan por protegerlo de las heladas, del pájaro, del sol y de todo eso. Pero ¿cuántas semillas le ponen? ¿A los cuántos días nace? ¿A los...</td>
<td>Gudelia: =but we still need to know how they do it, how many seeds, how long they take to come up, because we know that they cover them to protect them from the...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
frost, the birds, the sun, and all of that. But how many seeds do they plant at a time? How many days does it take? How long do they wait to put them in the ground? How long does it take to be able to harvest them?

Talk was an important part of learning and writing, as the above exchanges illustrate. Their latched speech (when one speaker finishes another's turn, coded with '='), the simultaneous turns, and the questions and answers indicate conversational cooperation among the participants and the points at which their meanings coincide: the speakers implicitly pick up on when they share a similar view and where they still have doubts and questions. These conversations allowed the participants to establish a different type of relationship with knowledge, which now became theirs instead of coming from a book or belonging to another person. In this type of learning situation, knowledge takes a variety of forms and circulates from one participant to the next. We sought to build access routes to information and new knowledge through the analysis of what the learners already knew and to foster learning through discussion (in and out of the group, in and out of the class sessions), questions and answers, observation, writing, reading, and revising one's own texts.

These conversations were the basis for writing about the plants and their recipes. Often while they talked they wrote together; sometimes one would dictate to the other, sometimes one would write and the other would make suggestions or revise as they went. At first, the women expected us to correct their drafts so they could copy them over, but we invented a procedure to help them to revise their own words: we helped them to identify when they had omitted some important content, when a passage was incomplete, when some of their uses were not conventional (superficial problems such as spelling errors and punctuation) without directly telling them how to correct their texts.

During these sessions, their exchanges were seldom linear. Yet this did not seem to be an obstacle for progressing through the activities. One day in September, for example, Gudelia, Estela, and Carmen were sitting at the table, looking at the different plant samples they had brought back with them from the field. They were all talking at once about the herbs’ uses, how to collect them, how to cultivate and har-
vest other plants. *Hedionia, epazote,* and *verdolaga* are all wild herbs; others, such as *chayote, chile verde,* broccoli, and celery, are cultivated plants. At one point they decided to write about *chayote,* and then they concentrated their efforts on producing a text together.

Gudelia wrote the title, but instead of writing *chayote,* she wrote *chacote.* They began to brainstorm ideas and phrases about *chayote,* while Carmen looked out the window and noticed that there was a *chayote* vine climbing the wall in the patio outside the workshop. She picked up on her friends' conversation and added:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carmen: <em>Es planta pero puras guías da . . . como ese que está sembrado.</em> Bueno, <em>la guía</em> y de las guías sale la fruta. Entonces cuando ya está bueno se corta y se cuece y se hace ensalada. Y a la vez también en comida. Estela:* Toma un chayote grande porque eso es semilla. Es más grande, se escoge el más grande y ése se deja unos tres, cuatro días. Se cae, por decir se cae, cuando le brota ya está el = Carmen:* = la guía. Estela:* La guía. Cuando empieza a brota la guía, ya se siembra.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carmen: <em>It's a plant, but vines grow out of it . . . like the one that's planted over there. So, the vine and from the vines come the fruit. That's when it's ripe, and you cut it and cook it and make a salad. It's good in other dishes, too.</em> Estela: <em>Take a big chayote because it has the seed. A big one; take the biggest one and let it sit three or four days. When it falls off, when it blooms, then a = Carmen:</em> = new vine grows out. Estela: <em>A vine, when the vine begins to show, then you can plant it.</em></td>
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</table>

Carmen comments that the *chayote* has to be planted in a hole, and the others comment on what size it should be. Some think that the hole should be small; others think that it should be the exact size of the vegetable. Gudelia begins to dictate as she writes in her notebook, “The *chayote* should be planted in a hole,” and Carmen latches on to Gudelia’s sentence by saying, “five centimeters across.” This provokes a discussion about the size of the hole. Gudelia finishes the sentence she had started to write by adding, “In a hole that is dug according to its size.” Delfina arrives, says hello to all, and sits at the table. Gudelia passes her the notebook and asks her to help out with the *chayote* recipes. This revives the discussion again about the size of the hole to plant it in. Delfina gives the final verdict: twenty centimeters wide so that the entire seed fits well inside it and the vine is pointing towards the outside. Carmen observes, “I was wrong. I thought it was only five [centimeters]. It’s a good thing you came. You made us think about this.” The conversation continued about how and where to plant *chayotes:*
In their conversation the women began to discuss other vegetables, the lack of rain, how to use wire to guide vines, how often plants need watering. While Carmen and Delfina continued to talk about chayotes, Estela and Gudelia began to talk about rosemary and then a local edible sour grass called verdolaga. At one point the two conversations came together:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Delfina: Y se le pone palos para que, bueno, varas de árbol para que jale para arriba. Bueno, sobre todo se siembra junto a un árbol. [...]</th>
<th>Delfina: And you put stakes, well, branches from a tree so it grows up. Well, above all, plant it near a tree. [...]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: Así póngale usted. (Delfina escribe). Entonces se viene dando como en el mes de:::</td>
<td>Gudelia: Write that. (Delfina writes.) So it sprouts around the month of:::</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estela: Se siembra en marzo, como algo así ¿no?</td>
<td>Estela: It gets planted in March, or about then, right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delfina: Sí.</td>
<td>Delfina: Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia: Y en septiembre, se empieza a dar, ¿no? [...]</td>
<td>Gudelia: And in September they start to bear squash, right? [...]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delfina: Cuando ya dio, ya es desde agosto. Se extiende hasta octubre.</td>
<td>Delfina: They start to bear fruit as early as August. All the way through October.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chayote

Procedimiento

Se siembra en un hoyo junto a un árbol para que enrede la guía, en el mes de febrero o marzo.

Después se le pone un poco de maíz y se le enreda un poco de cabello de ser humano.

Se tapa con tierra y al mes nace.

Se riega cada tercer día.

Se cosecha en los meses de agosto, septiembre y octubre.

This conversation is very fluid; the women move from one vegetable to the next and one topic (preparing the soil) to the next (watering). They compare what they know about the different plants; they demonstrate to each other with hand motions; they question each other’s judgment (“Every four days?”) and explain procedures (“Because if you don’t, you might step on it”). They don’t get lost in their talk, and from this exchange came many ideas that they later used in their writing.

Estela asked Delfina to keep working on the short text about chayotes by pointing to the sheet of paper where Gudelia had started writing and saying, “You write it here, Delfina.” Delfina finished the text. Then Gudelia picked up the pen again and added after the word ‘October’ “it gets harvested.”

At first sight the lack of conventionality in Delfina’s text is not only evident, it also makes reading it difficult to the point that it would not have made sense if it were not for the fact that we had listened in on their conversation and knew that what was written was embedded in

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6 In Spanish, an edited transcription of Delfina’s text (correcting only unconventional spelling but respecting phrasing) says: “Se siembra en un hoyo de acuerdo al tamaño. Se le riega. Cabe para sembrarlo. Se siembra junto a un árbol en marzo para agosto y septiembre.” An approximate translation into English would be: “It should be planted in a hole according to its size. It needs to be watered. It fits for planting. It should be planted next to a tree in March for August and September, and in October harvested.”
what had been talked about. The writing itself is for the most part alphabetic, although there are some words that lack letters (juto/junto; rda/riega). The unconventional spelling (ce simbra/se siembra) illustrates Delfina’s knowledge of some analog forms of grapho-phonemic representation (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1980).

However, the forest should not be missed for the trees: writing this text is evidence of important progress in Delfina’s literacy growth. It should not be forgotten that she was usually reluctant to participate directly in reading and writing activities. Here she had a lead role in her study group: everybody was talking at the same time; they changed topics constantly; and writing their ideas implied synthesizing what everybody else contributed in random order. Delfina found herself in the position of group scribe, a difficult task even for a seasoned writer, and still more so for an inexperienced one. She had to participate and listen carefully to the talk, select what to write, and write it down.

Within the conversation there were also multiple opportunities for learning. Due to limited space, we presented only a fragment of a discussion that lasted almost two hours, during which they talked and wrote about plants. Nevertheless, even in this abbreviated version, several important exchanges can be identified: they compared different plants; they discussed size and exact measurements, reconsidering errors, the germination and growth process of chayotes. Everyone participated in this discussion, verbally articulating their knowledge and displaying content that could be written about afterwards. Delfina arrived a little late, joined in with the others, extracted the main ideas (watering, planting the chayote next to a tree, when to plant and when to harvest) and put them into writing, creating a first draft for the rest of the group then to work on.

Through learning activities such as these, we sought to create the social conditions necessary for them to have access to literacy. We intervened at different points, sometimes reading, writing, or talking, sharing what we knew about different vegetables, planting, and watering and, in the process, learning new uses and forms of written language ourselves.

At the beginning of September, as part of a longer conversation, Carmen suggested that they include a recipe for tortas de brocoli (broccoli cakes), explaining to one of the researchers how to make them:
Carmen accepted the job of writing her recipe after receiving a fair amount of encouragement from us. Her first question was, “How do you spell ‘egg’?” We helped her by writing on a separate sheet of paper the different words she needed help with so that she could copy them into her text. Her draft looked as follows:

This was a tremendous accomplishment for Carmen, who rarely participated, and when she did, she had to overcome great fears. Usually, she just watched and gave excuses for why she could not join in. She reminded us over and over again that she did not go to school as a child, or that she was tired, or she tried to pass on collaborative reading turns, asking somebody else to read instead of her. Her draft contains all of the basic elements, similar to the way a phone message might (beaten egg-oil fry it), and she also compared the broccoli cakes with other common dishes in Mixquic (stuffed chilies and spinach cakes). From the perspective of her participation to that point, her text reveals remarkable progress.

7 The text reads: el huevo batido—aceite freírla torta de Broccoli es la de chiles Torta de Espinaca. An approximate translation would be: “beaten egg-oil fry it—Broccoli cake is chilies cake spinach cake.”
It might be argued that Carmen’s writing is not really a recipe because another person could never follow it and because it lacks a conventional format. Both of these observations are correct; and it could also be pointed out that her writing is incomplete, she is missing letters, and she does not use capital letters correctly. This is also true, but we do not claim that Carmen produced a polished text on her first try. Our expectations were to create the conditions necessary for Carmen to be willing to take a risk and try to write, something she rarely did. The idea was that her writing should also be a contribution to the group project that would allow her to continue talking and writing with her classmates. From this point of view, the activity was extremely successful: we gave her the opportunity first to rehearse the content orally and then face the challenge of writing it down. During her explanation of how to make the broccoli cakes (which is presented in a summarized version), Carmen answered questions, fine-tuned her ideas, demonstrated with her hands how to make the cakes, and compared them with other well-known dishes as a way of explaining what she wanted to say. The notion of access routes serves as a guideline for teaching and has to do precisely with the possibility of carefully cultivating interaction and shaping trusting relationships among participants so that learners are willing to take the risks of trying to do something new in a friendly, supportive environment. In this example, Carmen accepted the challenge of writing, knowing that what she wrote would not be conventional or correct on the first try, and we accepted her efforts and participation as valid.

The next example is a fragment of a text written by Gudelia, Estela and Delfina on verdolagas, a local sour grass used in cooking. Once they finished the first version of their text, Rocio Vargas typed it into the computer exactly as they had written it and underlined the unconventional uses and phrases that required revision.

Su hoja es chiquita ¡arriba es color berde y abajo media sombra y media blanca ¡es chiquita y obalada, redonda y se come en barias comidas tambien en ensaladas y como remedio tambien.
Gudelia, Estela, and Delfina worked on this text together, and Carmen listened in, giving her opinion whenever she overheard something that she did not agree with. In this session they made various decisions: they made changes in the wording of their text, substituting *arriba y abajo* (on the top and on the bottom) for *derecho/al revés* (the front and the back), they separated words, corrected orthographic errors, and, with our help, inserted a grammatical subject for the verb *crece* (grows), divided up a run-on sentence, and inserted punctuation.

Because of its length, it is not possible to reproduce here the entire production process for the calendar. However, several situations are worth analyzing as a way of illustrating specific learning situations, some of them involving a research team member, some of them not. In the work on the calendar, there were many opportunities for the women to socialize their knowledge. In one session, Estela, Gudelia, and Delfina were writing a text about celery (*apio*):

| Estela: ¿No lleva 'h'? ¿No, verdad? | Estela: It doesn’t have an ‘h’, does it? |
| Gudelia: ¿Apio? Yo digo que no. | Gudelia: *Apio*? I don’t think so. |
| Estela: No, yo digo que no. | Estela: No, I don’t think so. |
| I: *Apío*. | R: *Ap-e-o*. [Pronounces *apio* as it would sound if it were accented.] |
| Delfina: *Del apio*. | *Del apio*. |
| I: *Apío*. | R: *Ap-e-o*. [Pronounces *apio* again as it would sound if it were accented.] |
| I: *Apío*. | R: *Ap-e-o*. [Repeats *apio* as it would sound if it were accented.] |
| Estela: *Apío*. | Delfina: *Apio*. |
| Delfina: *No entonces no*. | Delfina: No, it’s not [accented]. |
| Estela: *Es apio*. | Estela: *Es apio*. |

The women are unsure about how to write *apio*. First, they wonder if it begins with an ‘h’ (which is silent in Spanish) and they also think that the ‘i’ might be accented. The researcher pronounces the word with an accented ‘i’ so they can hear how it sounds, but does not tell them how to write it correctly. She leaves it up to them to decide. Delfina is the first to respond, repeating it with the correct pronunciation. Estela then responds by repeating *apio* as *apío*. Finally, all three agree that *apio* does not have an accented ‘i’.

Although this exchange seems very simple, it illustrates our teaching stance and our effort not to resolve the learners’ uncertainties di-
rectly; we preferred to create the conditions for them to answer their questions for themselves as far as this was possible. In this case the researcher modeled a simple approach: she pronounced the word the way it would sound if the vowel were accented, but she made no mention of a spelling rule or distracted them from their main activity. Based on their own knowledge of their language, they were able to decide which written representation of the word in question was correct.

In the following example, Carmen was writing a recipe for quesadillas filled with verdolagas. She wanted to begin her recipe by writing “1/4 kilo of tortillas,” but was unsure how to write the fraction so she asked the researcher to write it for her. Then Carmen wrote the list of the other ingredients, verdolaga and cebolla (onion), and asked another person to help her to write tortillas. Estela is nearby and wants to work with her; she asks Carmen about the list of ingredients she has written and suggests that the recipe needs a title by saying, “But where does it say quesadilla?” Estela then comments to Carmen that the list of ingredients is not enough; she needs to explain how to make them step by step. Carmen insists that the only thing that is required is to fold the tortilla and fry it. Estela begins to write and dictates the opening line “and prepare them . . .” (y se . . .), and Carmen finishes the line for her:

| Estela: Y se:: preparan para freír. | Estela: And prepare them for frying |
| Carmen: Por eso. Ahora sí es todo. | Carmen: Right. That’s all. |
| Estela: Ya acabó su receta. | Estela: The recipe is finished. |
| Carmen: ¿Pero para las quesadillas? Sí nomás van a ser pa comer. | Carmen: But the quesadillas? They are just for eating. |

Even though Estela is the one who has the pencil in her hand and is actually doing the writing, Carmen participates by dictating what she believes the text should say and how it should say it. She considers that, since quesadillas are such a common dish, it is not necessary to give the recipe a title, explain the ingredients, or include the required quantities. But Estela reminds her that for quesadillas, the verdolagas are prepared in a specific way:

| Estela: Pero es que está en quesadilla. Carmen: Por eso. Se revuelve todo muy bien y se preparan para freír. Ahí ya saben que van a ser quesadillas. | Estela: But it’s in the quesadilla. Carmen: Right. Mix everything well and prepare them for frying. They already know that they are going to be quesadillas. |
Estela displays essential knowledge when she works with Carmen on their text: she knows that authors write with certain readers in mind and what they compose is not for themselves but for their potential readers; for this same reason, she also recognizes that sometimes it is necessary to include information in a text that may seem redundant or obvious to the writer. The author’s identification of the reader is an important criterion for selecting contents or determining the degree of detail that has to be included in a text. When Carmen listened to Estela’s observation, she decided to give her recipe the title “Quesadilla de verdola” and include instructions on how to make them, even though quesadillas are very common. Carmen only wrote the list of ingredients, but through her interaction with Estela she helped shape the language and contents. Through her participation she learns about producing written texts for readers who are not present.

In the process of working with writing, the modalities of appropriation are characterized by the ways of contextualizing literacy in interactive situations. In a way similar to collaborative reading, the expression and exchange of ideas were verbal rehearsals for elaborating written texts. The transition from oral expression to a finished written text is achieved by revising writing, selecting and organizing contents, adding precise information, fine-tuning compositions for the potential reader, and paying attention to specific aspects of writing (formats, spelling, punctuation, grammar, style.) We first fostered the fluency of writing as much as was possible, leaving corrections for later. For this reason we did not view all of the writers or their text in the same way, and we decided as we went along what to perfect and when to perfect it. Revising in this way helped us demonstrate to our learners that an error could be thought of as something to be reconsidered and something to learn from, rather than an incurable defect.

In the course of these activities, we opened access routes that helped the learners to define their relationship with writing. They decided when to copy, when to dictate (or take dictation), when to compose texts. By organizing the activities in different ways, we gave them the opportunity to work both collectively and individually. In some cases their participation consisted in contributing ideas, expressions, or content; in others, they worked as the group’s scribe responsible for writing down what was being said. Our intention was to link their existing knowledge with new forms of representation and thus to advance their access to a variety of writing practices. This fostered both
their learning how to put what they already knew into a new form (writing it down) and extending their existing knowledge to include new insights, information, facts, know-how, and understanding.

Preparing for certification examinations by collaborating on INEA workbooks

Once or twice each week the learning group would meet without us to study together. Originally the idea was that they would use this time to do the exercises in the workbooks provided by the INEA in order to prepare for the certification exams. They had different certification goals: some wanted to earn a basic literacy diploma, others a primary education certificate; Gudelia wanted to complete the 7–9 junior high (secundaria) requirements. When they were approaching the examination dates, they would spend more time on their workbooks and ask us for help. Besides this, many of the study meetings included talk about the upcoming (or recently passed) exams as well: before taking an exam they would comment on their fears, what they were unsure about, and answer each others questions. During the weeks that followed the exam, they shared anecdotes and impressions about the test and they speculated about the results; once they had them, the results were discussed as well.

Taking the exams was itself difficult. For most of the participants, it was a new experience, and they were unfamiliar with the formats, the answer sheets, and the rules (the requirement to work alone and in silence, for example). However, according to Gudelia’s testimony, even in this situation they were able to help each other:

| El sábado que fuimos con Licha, y sabe. Sabía leerlo pero a la hora de la pregunta, pues en su vida había hecho examen y, estaba bien nerviosa. Entonces le dije a la muchacha que sí le podía yo ayudar porque pues no, la pobre, nomás veía yo que hacía, y nada. Entonces es de que como ustedes nos dicen que nos pongamos a leer a Benita, ahí entendí yo y comprendí de que pues como el examen que me vino ¿no? de una narración, de qué se trato y qué sacar todos los personajes de ahí lo más importante. Entonces le digo a Licha, aquí de qué es, porque era de un español que estaba... |
| Saturday we went with Licha, and she knows. She knew how to read it, but when it came to the questions, well, she has never taken an exam in her life and she was pretty nervous. So I asked the girl [proctoring the exam] if I could help her, poor thing, because she was just staring at it but she wasn’t doing anything. Then it was like you told us when we read Benita; I understood it there and I understood the exam. It was like a narration, what it was about, who the important characters were, and what the most important ideas were. So I... |
told Licha, what it was about, because it was about a Spaniard that was very poor and lived in misery, and his mother was horrible to him, and I don't know what else. I say to Licha, "Which one do you think is the right answer?" because there were three choices. And she says to me, "I think its this one." She read the first one and she wanted to check it.

Because we did not go to their meetings on Wednesdays and Fridays (nor did we go to their exams), we do not have field notes about them. Sometimes the women would tell us about their sessions on Mondays, how they went, describing who was there and what they did. At first they found it difficult to use this time, but we continued to suggest activities and ways they might collaborate with each other. The comments we were able to register revealed basically two tendencies: a) when they were together, they worked on a variety of activities (addition, subtraction, division, collective reading, writing recipes), and b) they organized their activities in a variety of ways: they worked individually, in pairs, and as a whole group. More advanced learners helped others to participate.

As time went on, they met more constantly and by September 1998 they were meeting on a regular basis. The more we worked with them on the calendar, the more time they put into it without us. When we began to withdraw from the community, they continued to meet together to read, and continued to do so for as long as they had books.

We do not have enough evidence to know exactly how the activities that we organized with the study group affected their performance on the exams. At first, Delfina, Lidia, and Carmen stated that they wanted to obtain a basic literacy certificate; Juanita, Isabel, and Estela wanted to finish the primary curriculum, and Gudelia, the 7th-9th grade cycle. By November 1999, all of them had reached their goals except for Juanita, one of the members who left the group early on when the instructor stopped attending. Joaquina joined the group early in 1999 and about one year later had also obtained a sixth-grade certificate. What we do know is that our work together gave them confidence in themselves and their capabilities, a confidence they previously did not have. Isabel thought that working together helped her to speak in public situations:
A problem I had before was that when I spoke, UUUF! And that’s not true now. When I speak now, I don’t, I mean now I feel brave and I don’t break into tears [. . .] Before, I spoke and I trembled, my hands trembled, my feet, and I think that even my mouth trembled. Then I would cry, but not anymore. I stand up straight and I say what I have to say; I say it once and for all and I am not afraid.

Isabel’s words remind us that learning is not a linear process, not even in formal education programs. Learners construct different types of knowledge that do not necessarily have one-to-one correspondence with our explicit teaching objectives. This is one of the most powerful reasons for arguing for education processes that are open and rich in material, in opportunities for participating, in products and interactions. Being part of this study group gave the women access to different kinds of social participation and enhanced their ability to express themselves. By working together and collaborating, they constructed their autonomy and strengthened their sense of independence.

From great expectations to tangible outcomes

We have learned from education projects such as this one that the results are more likely to be specific achievements rather than sweeping transformations of learners’ lives. For this reason, it is important to define what we consider to be the tangible outcomes of our intervention. Sharing our education project with the women of Mixquic did modify in some ways their social lives in that we created a literacy-generating space and enhanced their daily existence in a number of ways. Through their participation, the group members created a new social space with their neighbors and had the opportunity to participate in new activities: reading books and other kinds of texts, writing, analyzing social situations, discussing topics of shared interest, exploring ethical and moral dilemmas. Because these women have few opportunities to break away from the routines of domestic life, the possibility to socialize with other women was a strong incentive for them to attend on a regular basis (Stromquist 1997).
The project also offered new forms of participation and learning. Some of the women believed that they were illiterate (they said that they could not read), but while they were in the group, they read between three and six books, depending when they joined and how long they stayed. They also collaborated together to use their local knowledge to create a useful cultural product. The production process required reading and writing in a variety of different situations and for different purposes (drafting, organizing ongoing activities, collecting information, etc.), but all were oriented towards finishing the calendar. This suggests that access to literacy is constructed through the gradual socialization of reading and writing practices and the circulation of ideas.

They also accomplished their personal certification goals, working together independently without depending on a volunteer instructor. They organized their sessions, worked their way through the INEA materials, one by one, according to their interests and possibilities. They learned how to ask questions, to help each other, and when it was necessary, to ask for further assistance to answer any unresolved doubts. They had to face the exams and take them, something they were mostly unfamiliar with.

By participating, the women showed signs of redefining their position on literacy. They approached a cultural object they considered distant to their lives and out of their reach. At first, the señoras were reluctant to get involved; they were embarrassed to read aloud or show what they had written to others unless it was the person they identified as the teacher, whom they expected to correct their work and red-line their mistakes. Through a variety of situations, conversations, and activities, they began to recognize their ability to learn to read and write. Lidia, one of the older women who could not read or write her name when she began, talked about this repositioning:

| Pues yo desde que era yo chiquita nunca supe lo que es una letra. Porque yo me fijé muy tarde y yo... no me mandaron a la escuela. Como quien dice no tuve mamá. Y yo desde siete años me quedé sola y nunca me mandaron a la escuela. Pero gracias a Dios aborita pues como que ya voy abriendo los ojos. Y yo estaba cerrada de ojos y nunca conocía lo que era una letra. Pero gracias a Dios y a ustedes se los agradezco, me han enseñado a abrir los ojos. De veras. | When I was a little girl, I never discovered what writing was for. I started paying attention late, and I... they never sent me to school. I had no mother and was on my own by the time I was seven; they never sent me to school. But, thank God, now I am opening my eyes. My eyes were closed because I never knew what writing was. But I thank God and I thank you; you have taught me to open my eyes. Really. |
Part of redefining their position on literacy has to do with their stance towards knowledge in general. In the process of putting together the calendar, they discussed, investigated, and wrote about cultivating plants, procedures they knew well but did not readily recognize as knowledge. Re-evaluating what they knew was also part of reestablishing their relationship to literacy:

| Carmen: Yo soy de Mixquic y mi esposo es campesino pero no sabía yo todo lo que he oído y lo que he visto. Y ora pues sí ya sé algo ¿no? de lo del campesino. Estela: Pues sí porque: o sea que nosotras nada más como mujeres es... los señores saben de siembra, de cosecha, de temporal y: Carmen: Y nosotros no sabíamos nada. | Carmen: I am from Mixquic and my husband is a campesino, but I didn't know everything I had heard or seen. But now I do, I know something, don't I? What campesinos know. Estela: Right, because, I mean, we are just women, men are the ones who plant, harvest, and water and: Carmen: Before we didn't know anything. |

What is interesting about this exchange is that they say that they "didn't know" but now they do. The route from not knowing to knowing involved, above all, verbalizing what they knew, putting it into words, and sharing them with others. When they spoke, their knowledge entered the public sphere and came under scrutiny. There it was examined, questioned, and reformulated. Then they wrote and revised it again until they had a version of what they knew that was acceptable to all the participants. What they learned was how to articulate what they knew about planting and then write it, more than about planting procedures per se.

We promoted interaction more than any other strategy as the basis of learning in almost every one of the activities we proposed. When reading aloud, for example, they helped each other, they took turns reading; they collaborated on difficult fragments or words; and they talked about what they read. Sometimes they wrote what they thought about what they read and shared it. In these exchanges they resolved their doubts, listened to different ways of thinking about situations relevant for their lives, and moved from the printed page to issues related to their own existence, to the world they lived in, and what they had personally dealt with in their daily lives. These conversations were the foundation for understanding what they read. Literature occupied an important place in our project, giving the notion of functionality a
broad definition. The possibility to read and discuss literature is a highly valued social activity, a cultural practice that contributes to the intellectual, linguistic, and communicative development of human beings.

The project itself was innovative and interesting: we were able to achieve a certain degree of self-direction in the group, giving them the responsibility for a significant part of their time. We encouraged their autonomy and decreased their dependence on external agents without overlooking the importance of giving the emergent readers the opportunity to interact with experienced ones. We tried to spend time with them more than teach them: we accompanied them in the process, but tried not to restrict our interaction to what we thought that they “should” learn. Because we were open to many possible topics and activities, we came up with writing the calendar, as well as other learning situations.

However, this required us to define our position in accordance with the foregoing objectives. If our intention was to develop their sense of autonomy and command over their activities and learning, we had to step aside and let events occur without trying to plan or control all of them. In a more traditional educational format, this would not be possible: this scheme presupposes that teachers (or volunteer instructors) will direct proceedings. In our case, part of the process was to detect learners’ needs and interests, create a relevant program, use their immediate context and previous knowledge as starting points for our proposals, let the group share the responsibility for working on the content, doing different activities, and facing their difficulties, as well as their successes. We accompanied them through an important part of the process, and our presence and direction was planned and decisive: we knew that it was important to support their learning, but even during the sessions that we attended, we gave them a broad latitude for participating. At first, when we insisted that they participate directly in the sessions and in activities that they believed “belonged” to the teacher, it confused them. Sometimes they even complained to us that we were not behaving appropriately as teachers. One of them, Isabel, got angry one day and said, “Plants, just plants! What I want is to learn to read and write!!” She was afraid that she was wasting time in a class that was not teacher-centered and teacher-directed and where the content was not presented in a lesson-like format. She was afraid that once again she would not learn what she wanted to know.
Even though in our work we promoted learners’ independence, we are in no way suggesting that the educational solution for marginalized youth and adult populations is self-teaching such that it keeps learners from having contact with teachers. We think that it is indispensable for learners to be in close contact with fluent readers and writers as a way of enhancing their learning and their literacy environment. It is precisely experienced readers and writers who can introduce new books and texts, can suggest literacy routes, reveal the intricacies of reading and writing, details about how written language works, and demonstrate ways of constructing meaning. Within a community it is important to develop mutual support for learning, opportunities to socialize knowledge and to take advantage of local resources. This is easier said than done, but it must not be forgotten that adults organize and direct many of their daily activities and different aspects of their lives. We need to recognize this and capitalize on it in educational processes.

Our project was possible because the group was heterogeneous and we tried to use the diversity of experiences, schooling, and ideas as the raw material for their self-direction and learning based on their solidarity with and commitment to each other. There are other aspects of this project that can also be useful to other educational actions. First, we were very consistent in our attendance. We made a point of never missing a session and, when it was strictly unavoidable, we let the group know ahead of time and reprogrammed the session with them. Second, we adjusted our schedule to their possibilities. Our class started at 4:00 in the afternoon, but we rarely got started before 4:45. The waiting time was filled in a couple of ways: we talked, we looked at books or other printed matter (pamphlets and flyers on a variety of subjects, books, magazines, and newspapers), we gave a learner individual help when it was requested. There were times when somebody would arrive very late, but we would welcome her and help her to settle right into whatever we were doing. Our motto was “It is never too late.” Third, we respected their other activities and needs. Mixquic has several important celebrations that involve the whole community’s participation, and on certain dates their attendance was encumbered (when children start and end the school year, during the harvest, during other crop-related jobs). Finally, we gave ourselves a period of time for exploring different activities and materials before finding the ones that were the most successful for this specific group. We gave ourselves time to get to know our learners and to discover their interests and tastes.
At the end of 1998, we had a meeting to take stock of the year, and Isabel, the woman who did not want to write about plants anymore, made the following comment about what participating in the group meant to her:

> Yo les pido una disculpa por lo que, yo [andaba] de malas o de enojada o no sé, aburrida tal vez, la vez que yo le dije pues que: que para mí yo todo esto ya sabía y conocía ¿no? pero: pues como dicen todas, poco a poco pues se va aprendiendo un poquito más y como dice Gude también, este:: también yo revolvía mucho las letras mayúsculas con minúsculas, y quizás aún todavía pero [ahora] luego me acuerdo y las cambio. Lo que hemos hecho sí nos ha servido y digo me ha servido también a mí, me voy allá con Gude, nos vamos todas en su casa, y a este, a seguir aprendiendo, por lo menos desaburrirse de estar pensando en las costuras, qué voy a hacer, cómo las, cuándo las voy a entregar. Y pues:: también les doy las gracias que nos han enseñado. Y más que la verdad ya no, ya no tenía interés de nada. Ya no. Y me dice mi hermana “no, todo eso es bien fácil” dice, “el examen es bien fácil”, le digo “pues será fácil para ti porque ya fuiste”.

I apologize for what . . . I guess I was in a bad mood or angry or I don’t know what, maybe just bored, that time that I said that, well, that I knew all about this, but bit by bit I learned a little more and its like Gude said too, I also mixed up letters, capitals and small case, and maybe I still do, but now I remember and can change them. What we have done has helped us and helped me too. I go to Gude’s house, and we keep on learning and at least we aren’t bored thinking about sewing, what I have to do, when am I going to turn it in. I am also grateful for what you have taught us. The truth is that I wasn’t interested in anything. Nothing. My sister told me, “Go ahead, it’s really easy.” She said, “The exam is easy.” I just answered, “Maybe to you since you already took it.”

For Isabel the study group was a break from her work as a seamstress; it turned out to be interesting for her, and, above all, she learned when she attended the meetings. Isabel was very reluctant at first; she wanted us to direct each session like a class and wanted the INEA adult workbooks, grammatical and spelling rules, and arithmetic problems to be the main contents and exercises. Her idea, shared by the others, was that if we did not teach the class, they would not learn anything, and they believed this because they believed that they did not know enough to study without exact instructions and follow-up from us.

Besides reading and writing, the señoras also learned that collective effort, solidarity, commitment, and direct participation were also valuable and powerful aspects of education.
ACCESS ROUTES TO LITERACY AND EDUCATION

Picking up a book and not knowing how to read it is like being mute, isn’t it?

Carmen, 64
For decades it was assumed that adult literacy and education would contribute to economic development, democratization processes, political participation, and likewise have profound effects on people's lives. By these standards, for a program to be considered successful it would have to be able to report radical changes in the living conditions and daily lives of the people who participated in them. However, today we know that education alone does not necessarily guarantee major changes in the daily lives of those involved in such programs; its effects are more limited, and we recognize that deeper changes in the living conditions of marginalized populations require socio-political policies and actions on a different scale. What education can offer, however, are new cultural options, including access to new knowledge and know-how, the expansion of existing knowledge, and the development of tolerance, understanding, and coexistence.

The results to be discussed in this final chapter are presented in this light: rather than boast about transformations of sweeping dimensions, we shall report on some clearly defined accomplishments made due to the way in which we worked with this group, as well as some evidence of what our participants learned. We shall begin by revisiting some of the issues dealt with throughout this book and then link them to others. First, we take another look at our research questions about literacy practices in the community, learners’ previous knowledge, and participants’ use of their knowledge in learning situations, as well as at considerations about teaching. Then we extend our discussion by examining the relationship between education research and intervention, the usefulness of renewing teaching practices, and the impact that this project has had on the participants’ learning.

At the outset of this book, we constructed a theoretical vision of literacy that threads through the rest of the text: we proposed that literacy is both a learning process and a process of using written language in such a way that readers and writers come to manipulate written language deliberately and intentionally in culturally valued events and in relation to others (Dyson 1977; Heath 1983). We argued that, because
learning to read and write is more than decoding and encoding simple messages, becoming literate is more than the rudimentary use of written language: it implies constructing communicative practices in specific contexts that include social processes, a relationship with knowledge, and connections with other readers and writers. From this point of view, and with the señoritas in our group, we sought to create a literacy-generating space whose educational objective was to enable different written language practices to emerge and then to create access to reading and writing through their use. Put in the terms used throughout this study, we wanted to construct access routes to and foster different modalities of appropriation of literacy practices. We sought to cultivate the material and social conditions necessary for learning something more than the most mechanical aspects of letters and sounds; we assumed that being literate means being able to use reading and writing to participate in the social world.

In the work we did directly with the group, we developed three premises that guided our efforts. First, we considered that exploring the local context would allow us to identify, at least partially, the sources of some of the learners' previous knowledge. Second, the design of learning situations had to take local communicative practices (both oral and written) into consideration. Third, the heterogeneity of the group included each participant’s knowledge about literacy, in accordance with their experience and trajectory through diverse social spaces in which reading and writing take place. In this final section we shall present a series of considerations about each of these premises and propose answers to our research questions; we shall examine our findings from the perspective of the theoretical concepts and guidelines currently circulating in the world of adult education. To this end, this chapter is organized around four main topics: the social distribution of literacy, access routes to and modalities of appropriation of literacy, the relevance of this study, and educational policy.

The social distribution of literacy

Mixquic is a community with an ample repertoire of literacy practices, printed matter, and opportunities for reading and writing. The written language practices and print materials that we were able to locate contributed to characterizing the community as a place in which people read and write. In some situations, texts are prescribed by some readers for others (in school and in the church), accenting a view of understand-
ing built on the assumption that comprehension is equivalent to recovering precise meanings. We also discovered reading and writing practices that occur as part of everyday life: as part of commercial transactions, official procedures, religious activities, and work. The most important sources for recreational reading were the local library, the commercial press, newspapers and magazines for sale at town newsstands or that were delivered by mail. The most common forms of writing were in predetermined formats (such as forms, receipts, and lists), highly structured texts (such as formal letters), and school-related materials and homework. We also found evidence of more open uses of writing organized by writers: personal letters and registers, such as the one Gudelia kept for her shop.

Each one of these reading and writing activities is organized in different ways, and their meanings are constructed in the intersection of the context of use and the texts, and shaped by the purposes and position of those who are reading and writing. Reading and writing events occurring at home, school, church, and work, or in other places; they create important access routes to literacy for the people living in Mixquic, and especially for those women who seldom leave the community. Their direct or indirect participation in these situations are their principal sources of knowledge about different ways of accomplishing literacy, satisfying social demands for reading and writing, and using written language for personal ends.

The literacy practices, knowledge, know-how, and technologies involved, and their ideas about reading and writing are diverse and are the result of responding to situations that occur in different community contexts (Scribner and Cole 1981; Street 1993).

The first research question that we posed at the beginning of this study was What are the identifiable literacy practices in different local spaces? The following list gives a (necessarily abbreviated) range of responses to this question:

- **Silent reading**: This occurs before signs painted on local stone walls, at newsstands and in other public places. Any materials purchased at newsstands or received by mail at home at work can also be read in this way.
- **Collective reading**: It is common in a number of situations (at home, at school, in public places, at the library where young people gather to do school assignments).
• **Reading and writing public texts:** On public thoroughfares there is an ample display of texts announcing community events, political propaganda, commercial advertisements, and graffiti. These contents are generally known; celebrations follow a calendar, political parties have local activists and their accomplishments are widely commented on, many of the stores that advertise are local. Reading these texts can be organized in a variety of ways, as discussed above. Another type of public writing occurs in cultural exhibitions, on signs, and on posted instructions.

• **Reading and writing different in types of formats:** At stores and in public services there are different types of forms that writers must fill out, using the special arrangement of those types of printed pages to organize their writing.

• **Record keeping:** Lists and notes as part of work and daily activities are kept by some.

• **Collective writing:** There are formal and informal scribes who help others to write the texts and documents they need.

• **Reading and writing school texts:** There is an ample variety of literacy activities that surrounds formal schooling: reading in a number of ways, copying, taking dictation, doing exercises in workbooks, filling out questionnaires, doing general reading assignments, selecting of texts to do homework. Many of these activities are done at school, but some are also done at the library and at home involving other participants (classmates, family members, library staff, and friends).

• **Connecting written language to orality:** In several contexts we found that written texts were approached through oral language, where access to written contents was conveyed orally. This is a common practice at school, church, home, and in the street. The principal difference between the classroom and the church is that at school written versions are also available. In these contexts, access via oral language is accompanied by other activities, such as reading aloud, commenting on texts, identifying signs painted in public places, answering questions in writing, repetition, and memorization. These occur in specific ways at school and at church, oriented by the goal of teaching and a concern for learning specific contents.

• **Filing:** A common practice is the safekeeping of important documents in files at work, in homes, and in institutions.

The content and meaning of these practices varied according to purpose and materials. The women were familiar with them to different de-
degrees and had had important experiences with them which they were able to contribute to our study sessions.

Another research question was *How do the women relate their knowledge of the social world to the use of literacy in different communicative contexts?* In Chapter 2, for example, we presented data about the printed matter that circulates in Mixquic through school, church, the mail service, or direct sales. Each one of these types of text can be read in various ways (oral reading, mediated reading, silent reading) and can be organized as both individual and collective activities; their use requires different intentional manipulations of language, such as argumentation, interpretation, or comparison. When participating in a learning situation, the women used their knowledge as the raw material for understanding what they read or to propose contents to write about: this was illustrated both during our reading the autobiographies of Benita and Rigoberta Menchú and for writing texts for the calendar, as well as others.

For those whose lives take place basically within the confines of their town, their opportunities for accessing literacy are limited for the most part by what they might encounter there. Only those who have contact with other contexts (through employment, education, or friendship), or who participate in cultural activities (such as theater, preparing local displays, or choral music) or any other form of expression that uses oral and written language in ways that differ from those prominent in Mixquic, will have the opportunity to construct a broader repertoire of practices. Though it was not part of this study to explore the impact of television on reading and writing in Mixquic, it is safe to assume that the recognition of commercial and cultural products (such as wrapping and brand names or actors, TV programs, television networks), as well as familiarity with some national events and their protagonists, has to do, at least partially, with watching and interacting around television.

From this perspective literacy distribution, and the inequalities associated with it, can be understood as the result of social phenomena rather than the product of individual will or capability. Both the availability of written language (the material conditions for reading and writing) and access to literacy (the social conditions for reading and writing) are saturated with power relations that influence their appropriation. The result of putting written texts in the hands of catechists, for example, but not in the hands of other church members, is that
some have direct access to the sacred through reading while others learn about it through the catechists' oral interpretations. The fact that decisions about what to read and write, who reads and writes, when to read and write, and how to interpret or compose texts, have a political dimension should not be ignored; they illustrate that how literacy is approached is not simply a matter of individual choice and that the attributes of a literate society go beyond the sum of the number of reading and writing individuals.

Access routes to and modalities of appropriation of literacy

We learn the language that surrounds us, including written language and its uses. For this reason, learning to read and write depends on interaction with other readers and writers; our knowledge about the multiple uses of written language grows from the opportunities we have to participate in communicative events where literacy is continuously used. Furthermore, reading and writing practices always occur in a context of social relationships that at once permeate how we read and write and are a part of these practices.

The principle purpose of our efforts was to construct a certain type of social relationship around literacy while also constructing forms of participation that committed the participants to their educational process. Consequently, we gave priority to those activities that fostered interaction, independence, involvement, and critical thinking among learners. Those situations in which the exchange of ideas, the collective exploration of texts in shared reading, and collective writing predominate tend to build solidarity and trusting relationships that contribute to an environment in which learners can discuss, dissent, agree, display knowledge, and learn. In this project we not only allowed group members to establish their priorities and procedures and organize their activities; we also encouraged them to do so and to assume this responsibility, for one of our goals was to promote their independence as learners and involve them in their learning process. This is why our direct work with them was limited to one session each week and why we let them decide what to do at the meetings we did not attend. They decided if they would meet, if they would read together or do something else. Without us there, they worked on the materials from the INEA and prepared for the certification exams. On these days of independent study, they articulated the questions they wanted to ask us the next time we met. In both our shared and
separate meetings, interaction and independence were prevalent. The group members had multiple opportunities to ask questions, to delve into a topic, to reconsider their own ideas and the ideas of others, and to solve problems.

Fairly early on in our project, we were able to answer the research question *What are some of the literacy practices the women value and want to learn?* At the beginning of our contact with them, they stressed their interest in learning the literacy practices they associated with schooling: they wanted to know how to spell, grammar, and basic arithmetic; they wanted to read fluently and have nice handwriting. These contents and forms, valued and promoted by school, were their first priority. They also thought that knowing these things would help them to “get ahead,” secure gainful employment, and help their children and grandchildren with their homework. They expressed a similar interest in books, the symbol par excellence of literacy. It was in this vein that Carmen stated one day that “picking up a book and not being able to read it is like being mute.” For her, reading meant giving voice to books and, in the process, finding one’s own voice. But perhaps the most interesting of all were the ways they wanted (and demanded) to learn at first: through copying, taking dictation, doing rote exercises, being corrected and graded. This is why Isabel was unhappy, as reported in the previous chapter: she thought that reading and writing about plants was a waste of time.

Given the above situation, we decided to introduce other modalities of appropriation of literacy: instead of presenting fragmented aspects of written language based on normative and prescriptive criteria for teaching, we created situations in which reading and writing were necessary if one was to participate. In the context of reading and writing specific texts, we looked at spelling, grammar, and other conventions of written language. One of our objectives was to broaden their view of what literacy is and what it is for. We emphasized practices, their recreational characteristics, and shared our joy of reading. We invited them to read and enjoy literature, explore different types of books, and look at different types of materials. We organized reading activities in a variety of ways: all together, in pairs, and, when it was appropriate, individually. By incorporating in the activities ways of relating to knowledge, our aim was to further the women’s view of themselves as capable, intellectually active, and experienced, possessing as they do important ideas and know-how that were of interest to others. Similarly, we created oppor-
opportunities for using writing for new purposes (for thinking, preserving local culture, learning) and, above all, we proposed forms of learning that emphasized understanding, thought, expression, production, and revision of their own texts, showing them at the same time how to pay attention to the conventional aspects of writing necessary for what they were trying to do. We taught the normative features of writing by using their knowledge as the starting point, as well as collaboration processes in which everybody’s contributions were important.

We were also able to answer the question *How do the women use their knowledge about the social world and literacy to enrich their participation in their study group?* One of the objectives of our pedagogical intervention was to mobilize the women’s existing practices and knowledge as part of the solutions to the different problems that the learning situations posed for them. This was illustrated in several examples: Gudelia’s proposal of how to write a formal letter; Carmen’s copying the book she took home to read to her grandchildren. Estela was able to explain the connection between the guerilla fighters in Chiapas and Zapata, giving new value to what she knew and her ability to participate. During our work on the calendar, the women’s knowledge about the properties of the plants and planting procedures was an important source for their drafts. Our visit to the fields and the work of the local herbs allowed us to identify activities that not only involved our learners but completely absorbed them. In each discussion and the writing of each text, they had the opportunity to contribute content, refine details, discuss with their friends, negotiate meanings, and pose new questions concerning a topic they already knew a great deal about.

This work has taught us that certain forms of interaction and learning situations promote access to literacy. These are conditions that we can create within a classroom setting. In this group we promoted solidarity and mutual support among its members, and we encouraged them to help each other; we accepted many forms of participation as valid and invited them to take part in new ways (for example, dictating a text to someone else, or writing a text in their own words, even if it turned out to be very short). We created a cordial climate so that we could work together on reading and writing while also encouraging their independence. They participated by helping to define the activities, contents, sequence, and organization. They came up with solutions for finding needed information; they met without us to read and write together and to prepare for their exams. From our point of view,
what is innovative about this experience is the way in which we conceived of it, the view of literacy that guided our actions. We assumed that learning would occur because of the social and cultural dimensions of development, rather than an emphasis on the cognitive development of each individual. Given the outcomes, we believe that fostering independence among adult learners is a modality that deserves further attention and inquiry.

An important lesson for the researchers was to recognize that the certification of different education levels was a significant goal for the participants and that this motivated them to continue to attend. For them it was a long-felt desire to have their grade level achievements certified, which meant achieving the social recognition of a person who had gone to school. The challenge we met was to figure out how to go beyond the contents and school reading and writing practices in such a way that they would have a deeper and broader understanding of literacy. For this reason the central question became *How can we facilitate access to literacy?* We found answers to it within the study sessions, the social space in which diverse opportunities for learning emerged. The majority of the activities that we promoted were grounded in collaboration, the exchange of ideas, different ways of approaching and producing texts, the display of knowledge, and the raising of questions. Furthermore, we encouraged everybody to participate, to ask each other questions, to solve problems together, and to recognize their own doubts in someone else's. It was by means of this type of socialization that learning took place.

Pedagogical theory has pointed out that collaboration among learners promotes the occurrence of learning; it contributes to the development of horizontal relationships and creates a climate of trust in which learners can express their uncertainties without fearing ridicule from others. For any person to learn, but especially for women like the ones who participated in this project, showing what they have written, reading in public, asking questions, asking for help, and helping others are important access routes for getting information they need and constructing knowledge. Our presence was important because of our experience as readers and writers, which, through our interactions, provided the group with new practices, knowledge, know-how, and content. One action that had a particularly powerful impact was the constant flow of different types of materials and texts: we brought in books for them to continue reading after we began to reduce our presence with the group.
The use of multiple copies was particularly successful; each reader had her own book and could follow along in the text; some of them would read on their own at home.

An important portion of the group attended our sessions for almost two years. Despite the fact that the learning circle was about to disappear, we were able to consolidate it and welcome new participants at different times. For adult education experiences, where permanence is an important issue, this is a noteworthy result and suggests that certain conditions (openness, autonomy, co-responsibility, and the steady flow of materials) can help to overcome the problem of adult learners deserting education programs. Evidently, any educational project that promotes learners' independence and self-direction substantially changes the role of the instructor. Their work has to be guided by a flexible and open stance and sensitivity so as to recognize learning opportunities as they arise. For example, it was only because we went for a walk in the fields one day at the women's invitation that we came up with the idea for the calendar, which would include descriptions of the
plants and herbs and their recipes. This turned out to be an activity loaded with learning opportunities for all us.

This proposal challenges the profile of most adult educators and is a strong argument in favor of professionalizing instructors to teach marginalized adults and youths. Teachers need to be recruited and specially trained to understand the challenges of working with this population. Although this proposal requires trained personnel, it also allows one person to work with several groups because they do not require the instructor’s presence all the time. The creation of learning spaces that encourage learners’ independence is an important feature of this proposal, as is the development of solidarity and mutual commitment.

The relevance of the study

The research reported here was carried out with a small group of women in a community on the outskirts of Mexico City. A common question is: What is the relevance of a study with these characteristics? Our position is that in-depth knowledge of specific situations provides clues for understanding other situations and can provide important guidelines for other research and intervention projects. For our approach, what is meaningful is not constructed based on statistics; rather, what is significant is built from the point of view of the participants in their particular context. While we do not aspire to present abstract generalizations that can simply be applied to any situation, we do wish to present a series of considerations that may be relevant to others in future work.

The local culture, the ideas and knowledge that circulate in the community, and local language practices are fundamental for education. This is where we locate one of the most fruitful links between basic research and intervention. Systematic research has important conceptual tools, methodologies, and formats for reporting findings and for the analysis of the specific cases, processes, and conditions studied. For educational intervention, these are valuable resources, and it is a must to take advantage of the knowledge produced through research if one is to devise new options for learners. In this study we came across literacy practices that nourished the ways we approached teaching: we discovered ways of reading and writing that served as a bridge between orality and literacy. We knew from the research of others that literacy is a mosaic of practices, ways of using reading and writing, and that what people think about what they do is as much a part of specific
practices as what they do. In this particular case, we discovered that the women shared a view of reading and writing based on their version of schooling and their life experiences with literacy; they held that knowing how to read and write was useful and desirable, but, at the same time, they distanced themselves from written culture. This shared position was also the basis for the way they related their knowledge of the world to written language use: they are women with little or no schooling and removed from many of the contexts in which literacy takes place. Yet, though they did not acknowledge it at first, they had specific ideas about reading and writing. Our work with them was the start of changing this relationship; we centered many of our efforts on giving them access to new uses, ways of being literate and doing literacy, options for approaching written language as a cultural tool that could be useful to them.

We learned that spaces are alterable. By working on the calendar we modified family recipes, traditionally an oral form of discourse in Mixquic. We transformed them into a highly valued written cultural form. This implied re-elaborating the recipes, which created numerous and diverse opportunities for interaction and learning. In the same vein, we located practices we thought might be useful for broadening the learners’ experience of reading and writing. One of them was the writing publicly displayed around the town, both on fences and inside buildings. Even though the library is used mostly by school children, it is nevertheless a space that could potentially promote reading and writing among the people of Mixquic through organized programs and activities.

Another question that often arises is the possibility of somebody else doing a project similar to ours in another place. We cannot attempt to divorce our results from those of the women who participated in this project. Almost immediately the issue of trained instructors versus volunteers comes up. The results of this study make a strong argument in favor of investing and promoting the training of professional adult educators and the need to further a research agenda such as this one and to develop materials aimed at this particular group of learners. At the same time, it should be pointed out that this study demonstrates that attending to adults’ educational needs requires time: there are no quick fixes or magic solutions. For this reason we regard programs that boast of possessing “express methods” for learning as understanding little about what the process of becoming literate entails and contribute little to disseminating written culture. Literacy learning requires multiple
experiences with written materials, opportunities for reading and writing, and situations for interaction and use.

Finally, it is important to underline one of the most important lessons we have learned in this study: education policies aimed at literacy had traditionally fenced off initial literacy learning from other learning dubbed post-literacy and/or basic education. This has provided the underpinning for generations of didactic materials that separate letters from texts, based on the idea that first one must learn the alphabet, and then the rest follows. This study presents evidence that places this premise in question once and for all and promotes the contemplation of the possibility of literacy learning (and teaching) processes that do not necessarily begin, or proceed, letter by letter, sound by sound. Literacy begins with texts and the uses of reading and writing; the objects of learning are literacy practices, not letters. Knowledge about the mechanics of written language, its purposes, and its use in context is constructed in an integrated effort to understand what kind of cultural tools reading and writing are, how they work, and how they make meanings. It has also been suggested that adult education processes should be separated from children’s processes, but our study gives reason to believe that the contact between generations, the ways mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters share and spend time together is an important form of social organization that can and should be taken advantage of in educational programs.

On educational policy

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in adult education, as is evidenced by the growing number of world meetings and conferences being held. A result of these conferences has been the development of a series of policies and guidelines for educational programs aimed at marginalized youth and adults. In Chapter 3 we noted three of them which are particularly relevant for this study: 1) educational actions must consider the context in which learners live and carry out their daily activities; 2) the starting point for educational interventions should be learners’ existing knowledge and know-how; and 3) educational projects must recognize and respond to learners’ heterogeneity.

Throughout this project we have invested each of these policy guidelines with specific content. While we researched the community, we also learned about the participants, trying to understand both the history and the current situation of the social use of written language
in the town and how they lived these processes, both as individuals and as a group. We saw the heterogeneity of the learners as a resource and not an obstacle to their education: all groups of human beings always have a certain degree of diversity, no matter how homogeneous they may appear to be. In the case of this group, there were important differences among the women in terms of their experiences, knowledge, expectations, and identity, even though they were all women and for the most part were born and raised in Mixquic. Some read with difficulty, others with fluency; some had been beyond Mixquic, others practically never left their little town; one was an activist and the head of her household, others were mothers, another involved in church activities. Each of the women brought knowledge and know-how to the group; each posed questions and revealed uncertainties that turned out to be interesting to the rest of the group. It is in the discovery of our shared likenesses and the exploration of our differences that we learned the most.

We learned that we unveil our most intimate sides only by spending time together and sharing as educators and learners, and that the revelations about ourselves are gradual and keyed to the rhythm of the growth of our mutual trust. From this we draw what we consider to be an irrefutable conclusion: the human factor is essential in any educational process and the figure of the teacher (whether it be called instructor, facilitator, or volunteer) can decide the success or the failure of work with groups of adult learners.

This study also illustrates how to give content to these and similar policies. By researching the local context and working directly with a group of learners, the context, their previous knowledge, and heterogeneity took on specific meaning within the limits of the place we were in. The context offered opportunities for reading and writing, working, sharing, and moving; their previous knowledge about orality and literacy, written language uses and conventions, local history, the nation, and the surrounding world—and, above all, about being a woman—was expressed within our study sessions; their heterogeneity was revealed in their experiences, their generation, their gender. In order to work in accordance with the policy guidelines set forth in international forums, we gradually had to collect evidence from the community and the learners and think about it before directly acting on what we had found; we had to reflect before, while, and after we worked together.
Policy is important for orienting educational actions, but it becomes relevant only when it acquires specificity, concreteness. Precisely because policies are guidelines, they tend to be general; but implementing them requires understanding social literacy processes in order to do fine-grained education work. This gives relevance to local actions and educational programs because it is there that innovative options can emerge as solutions to specific problems.

Our inquiry in the community also taught us the importance of developing cultural policies that can complement educational ones. These policies would have to increase the social spaces for reading and writing beyond the classroom; we need policies that promote the construction of cultural spaces in which activities occur (such as theater, poetry, journalism, creative writing, music, and the use of new information technologies), spaces in which written language is an important tool for participating, where the participants have the opportunity to interact around (and with) literacy and learn from each other. For the same reason, it is imperative that we supply communities and programs with diverse print, film, and electronic materials. The experience we had in making various materials available to the women in our group illustrates the power of putting books into the hands of people who are in the process of learning. While the availability of texts does not guarantee access to reading and writing, it is certainly an important ingredient for this to occur. For this same reason, the design of literacy efforts would have to trace local practices, identify opportunities for reading and writing, define access routes to literacy present in the particular context, and understand how literacy-demanding, literacy-scaffolding and volunteer literacy situations fit into literacy-generating spaces. Literacy education projects should create different situations that lead to and establish written language practices. Locating these kinds of written language within the community and understanding the different ways readers and writers participate in them will pave the way for thinking about how to exploit them within a classroom.

In Chapter 2 we described a large number of literacy-generating spaces and in Chapter 3 we presented a variety of learning activities with similar characteristics. As a way of summarizing what was discussed there, the following table presents contrasting examples of literacy-generating situations in the community and in our study group taken from those chapters:
Table 4.1. Literacy-generating situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy-generating situation</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples from daily life</th>
<th>Examples from the study group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demand</td>
<td>Requires reading and/or writing to be able to participate</td>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>Taking a certification exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>One reader or writer support's another's participation</td>
<td>Defining the Registro Federal de Contribuyentes number</td>
<td>Reading together, one reader helps another keep her place in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>One chooses to read and write as a way of participating</td>
<td>Reading publications posted on news stand</td>
<td>Look through print materials while waiting for session to begin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These observations are also valid for and applicable to basic education programs in general and not just those aimed at marginalized youth. One of the principle missions of schools is to teach students to read and write fluently; literacy practices found in the community are relevant not only for adult learners but for children and adolescents as well.

Perhaps one of the best known and most frequently reiterated positions on adult education is that it is necessary to secure sufficient and adequate funds. It goes without saying that programs such as the one proposed here require financial policies that guarantee the material conditions (for example, physical spaces, reference books, teachers’ salaries, collections of multiple copies for shared reading, writing materials, new technologies) which are necessary in order to enact our recommendations, offer innovative projects, develop new materials and programs, promote options for cultural participation, and design new proposals that incorporate computers and online information in a well thought-out and intelligent way. All of this requires resources and funds that allow educators and community members to respond to these and other needs. Education is a universal right, and it is primarily the responsibility of the state to guarantee that society has the resources it needs.

Towards the future

The research reported here points to several important paths to be followed. First, we need to secure more detailed knowledge about the trajectories of individuals through different life-contexts and situations and the access routes to literacy that they were able to travel. Second, we know little about the social process of literacy distribution—the factors that
historically helped to establish or increase literacy practices in the communicative lives of individuals or the rhythm of their dissemination across generations. Furthermore, it would be of great interest for adult educators to have descriptions and analyses of specific education programs (of what was done, how learners participated, how decisions were made, what tensions arose in the process and their different solutions). In this connection, it would be useful to examine what it is that makes a program work and what are the criteria for considering it successful.

A more general concern is how to overcome the major obstacles associated with the education of people who did not go to school as children or who did not complete a basic education. Some of the impediments are related to their living conditions, but others are of a broader social, economic, and political nature. We know that educational endeavors require the political will necessary to promote research, develop new programs, train instructors, and provide the necessary resources. As long as adult education is considered to be a secondary concern for society, with improvised teachers and mediocre programs, any certification that is obtained will continue to have little social value or prestige. To improve our efforts we need to share our experiences with one another, particularly the most daring ones, those that are able to reconceptualize and redefine the pedagogical project of teaching adults, those that give priority to learning by keeping the learners' historical and concrete conditions in mind. Adult education sorely needs to challenge the imagination of policy-makers and teachers and to invent new forms of educational organization and interaction.

Reading and writing are cultural options that offer important opportunities to participate in contemporary life: they give access to the experiences of others, nurture possibilities for thinking about our world, give voice to our ideas and opinions and give us a way of expressing them, explain important phenomena almost invisible to the untrained eye, and entertain and delight the imagination. Access to literacy is a social path into the world in which we live and to the people with whom we share it. From this perspective, literacy is a central feature of human culture and not just the mechanical ability to read and write. Education will likewise become central to human culture once it has the knowledge, concepts, and practices necessary to mobilize and transform the practices of literacy. To achieve this, a good starting point is to seek to understand the access routes to literacy and the community contexts in which it is located.
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Access Routes to Written Culture
for a Group of Women in Mexico

This winner of the 2002 UNESCO International Award for Literacy Research examines the many routes which a group of Mexican women living in a small town on the edge of Mexico City has taken to full participation in written culture. In this volume, 'literacy' is understood to be the development of knowledge and the use of written language in the social world and in cultural events. Highlighting the success that a self-directed study group can have when given tailor-made support, Judy Kalman draws a number of important conclusions regarding the significance of literacy and its discovery in its local context for adult education. She shows how the attributes of a literate society go beyond the number of reading and writing individuals, presenting as well a strong argument in favor of professionalizing instructors who teach marginalized adults and youths.

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