

# Review:

**Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell.**

***Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2010.**

**Katherine Silvester,**  
*University of Arizona*

---

**A**rtifacts are sensory, material objects that can travel through time and space. As they travel, artifacts hold memories and tell stories. They are texts in contexts, and as such, they can be used as a point of entry into different forms of writing, text making, and narrative. Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell's *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story* proposes a new approach to literacy learning and teaching predicated on the "artifactual." They argue that artifacts can bring together two domains of situated literacy practice — home and school — in ways that help young people mediate difficult physical, cultural, and linguistic crossings. If school-based literacy is a site of struggle for students whose home languages and literacies are underrepresented in the classroom, then everyday objects, or artifacts, can be used by students as leverage to open new spaces for themselves in writing and in other forms of public discourse and identity performance. Readers of *Artifactual Literacies* who are familiar with Norma González, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti's *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities,*

*and Classrooms* will note similarities between the two approaches including a focus on the connection between community literacies and classroom practice through ethnographic research.

Seeking to define an artifactual approach to literacy, the book is organized around the following guiding questions: How do artifacts connect communities? How do artifacts lead to talk (and other transmodal and multimodal interactions)? How do artifacts lever and create new kinds of power relations? How do artifacts lead to writing? How can artifacts lead to teaching literacy in new ways? Chapters one through four feature artifactual literacies within the cultural space of the family and neighborhood and consider ways of connecting families and neighborhoods through collections of artifacts and the stories they tell. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) concept of "social space" in which he distinguishes between "perceived space" produced in social practice, "conceived space" produced in ideology, and "lived space" produced in everyday life, Pahl and Rowsell suggest ways that community spaces might be reconfigured as "listening spaces" that challenge place-based inequalities through public, artifactual story sharing. Reconfiguring community spaces as listening spaces is clearly tied to the work of teachers and scholars committed to civic engagement and community literacy. The Ferham Families Project helps to illustrate this connection.

Pahl and Rowsell discuss the Ferham Families Project as one example of how community partners worked together to reconfigure community spaces as listening spaces. The project involved five families who immigrated to the UK from Pakistan in the 1960s and settled in the Ferham neighborhood of Rotherham, South Yorkshire. Ethnographic researchers teamed up with the Clifton Park Museum in Rotherham, the Women's Art Project, and a children's creative art program at a local school to develop a community exhibition showcasing family artifacts. Artifacts were identified based on key themes that emerged in ethnographic interviews conducted in the home. Family stories connected to the artifacts also emerged through follow-up interviews. Together the artifacts, and the stories connected to them, were used to frame the exhibition, which drew many other local families to participate. The Ferham Families Project illustrates what happens when artifacts are made to travel from one domain,

such as the home, to another, such as the community, in an effort to make connections across difference. Pahl and Rowsell suggest that this “domain crossing” is a significant act of meaning making and communication that helps us to see communities as textured and material spaces.

Chapters five through seven, move from the everyday spaces of home, neighborhood, and community to the institutional space of school where artifacts are used as points of entry into content-area literacies for students who struggle with academic discourse. In these chapters, Pahl and Rowsell mediate formal, print-based literacy approaches with an artifactual approach through digital storytelling projects. The projects were documented as part of a multi-year classroom-based action research study involving a grade nine English support class at Princeton High School in New Jersey in which all students had scored poorly on a language proficiency assessment test. Working with the instructor of the class to implement an artifactual approach, Pahl and Rowsell helped students engage difficult course texts through the lens of mediating artifacts and storytelling. For example, in a unit in which students were required to read and write about Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, Pahl, Rowsell, and the instructor of the class developed an assignment that had students compose Facebook profiles that would, like artifacts, help to tell the story of each character’s identity performance and domains of crossing.

By the end of the book, Pahl and Rowsell have mapped various ecologies of literacy across homes, communities, and schools and among migrant families and language learners in the UK and the US, and connected these ecologies to traveling artifacts in ways that are both concrete and theoretical. Locating an artifactual approach to literacy not just in classrooms and communities, but also in writing as a technology and composing as an art, it becomes clear that literacy is more than just the ability to engage in print-based technology; it is also about text-making and the power of narrative to re-vision community and school as connected, participatory spaces through art installation, exhibition, and digital storytelling and in collaboration with museum curators, community artists, and researchers.

*Artifactual Literacies* works like a teacher's manual or activists guide for implementing and theorizing an artifactual literacies approach via multimodal and ethnographic methods and social theories of the production of space. The book has a wide scope and could be used in classrooms, pre-K through adult, or in community contexts. This scope is one of the attractive potentials of an artifactual literacies approach and is what makes it so fitting for readers of *Reflections*. Readers concerned with rhetoric and civic writing will find this book useful and simultaneously provocative for its critique of power, place, and space and the role of artifacts in mediating writing across domains of literacy practice.

---

---

***Katherine L. Silvester*** is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona. Her dissertation explores English language teaching and community literacies in refugee resettlement contexts in the U.S. and Nepal.