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Review

Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities, and Schools: Intersections and Tensions

**Edited by Jim Anderson, Maureen Kendrick,
Theresa Rogers, and Suzanne Smythe**

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The New Literacy Studies Movement has broadened the notion of what counts as literacy and has issued an invitation for new forms and contexts for research on the way ordinary people conceive of and practice literacy beyond the classroom. *Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities, and Schools* answers that call, rendering detailed portraits of literacy in a range of school, family, and community sites across the globe, from the East London homes of Bangladeshi immigrant children to a community of Aboriginal elders in northern Ontario. Included in this edited collection are reviews of recent literacy research, critical essays examining literacy programs and policies, and a good number of qualitative studies that draw on the texts, words, and images of everyday people. These detailed accounts reveal the situated and particularistic nature of literacy and at the same time demonstrate the permeability of the borders we often perceive between different sites of literacy and across diverse populations. In traversing these borders and in noting the generative conflicts they produce, the contributors to this volume point to fruitful possibilities for change.

Many of the eighteen chapters are drawn from papers presented at a 2002 international literacy conference held at the University of British Columbia. The group of international contributors contextualize their work in relation to three perspectives: "critical literacy, social literacy, and multiliteracy," frequently referring to the work of the New London Group and New Literacy Studies scholars (2). Illustrating the disjunctions between dominant models of literacy and actual (and often marginalized) uses and perceptions of literacy outside the bounds of educational institutions, the authors show how narrow, print-based definitions of literacy can stunt the literate agency

of learners. Moreover, they point out the limited availability of social positions from which subordinated groups might use literacy to promote their own interests. These authors affirm the need for expanded definitions of literacy that value the knowledge and multimodal practices of local people; that “challenge . . . relational structures”; and that “provide students with the social, cultural, and political insights and skills to create new . . . positions for themselves and for their communities” (51, 317).

The chapters are organized into four sections: Family Literacies, Early and Youth Literacies, Community and Adult Literacies, and Literacy Policy Issues. Two of these sections also include brief commentaries (“snapshots”) by participants in the programs studied. Although the move to include these voices is admirable, their number (only three) is small and they are not well integrated into the rest of the book. Nonetheless, the book’s accessible style, its editors’ overview of emergent themes in literacy studies (particularly the intersection of literacy, power, and identity), the range of methodologies and contexts considered, and the persistent and useful attempt of its authors to connect research to policy and educational practice make this a useful resource for graduate students, scholars, program developers, and practitioners.

The first two sections of the book explore tensions and transformations that occur as children and in some cases parents move from home to more formalized sites of literacy learning and back again. The first section emphasizes the need to understand and critically evaluate how literacy operates in family versus school settings, not to supplant home literacies with school practices (an oft criticized goal of early family literacy programs) but to negotiate new, more empowering literacies for children and families. In some cases, participants themselves create their own spaces for such transformation. Eve Gregory, for instance, observes how elementary school children of immigrant families in London use imaginary play to introduce younger siblings to school literacy. Rather than reproducing school literacy, however, these children blended their first language and cultural practices with school lessons, forming a synergistic and inventive atmosphere of mutual learning.

In other cases, program developers encourage border crossing as a means of reflecting on and negotiating literacy education. Jim Anderson, Suzanne Smythe, and Jon Shapiro, for example, report on a project in which parents observed classrooms and compared literacy pedagogy in school versus at home. This initiative revealed some classroom materials to be inappropriate to the values and needs of the community; it bridged the cultural divide between schools and families; and it created alliances

between parents and teachers arguing for school reform. Trevor Cairney also traverses the boundaries of school and home. He draws on data from a 13-year study comparing literacy in Australian classrooms to literacy in students' homes in order to propose a critical framework by which teachers might reflect on the way school discourse (e.g. teachers' questioning practices) might exclude students' knowledge and limit their authority and control over the material they learn. Examining the interstices of literacy at the borders of home and school can promote more equitable partnerships and critical awareness of the consequences of formal literacy instruction. However, as several of the authors note, the insights gleaned from this work do not easily translate into specific revisions to practice and policy; change is incremental, and educators need strategies and resources for implementing it.

Authors contributing to the second section of the book locate their work in rich contact zones, including heritage schools in multilingual Montreal, South African preschools, an at-risk youth literacy program in British Columbia, and an Afghani orphan community in Pakistan. In examining the ways in which young people interpret and enact literacy in varied settings, the authors underscore the need to recognize and teach multiple modes of representation. Asking young children to draw pictures depicting their literacy acquisition and use, Maureen Kendrick, Roberta McKay, and Lyndsay Moffatt found that children conceive of literacy as a complex, hybrid, and multimodal practice they call on for many purposes. They argue that children have great "communicative potentials" to manipulate literacy for their own ends (195). Educators need to prepare children to tap into this full range of possibilities. Theresa Rogers and Andre Schofield emphasize the value of a multimedia pedagogy that can engage youth alienated from the system, allowing them to reflect on stories of their emerging and changing selves and to create spaces where their in-school and out-of-school experience can merge in "imaginative interplay" (218). The purposes to which these expanded and blended literacies are put is, of course, key. In comparing the pedagogical orientations of several South African schools, Mastin Prislloo and Pippa Stein suggest that simply adding culturally specific materials to pedagogy that continues to stress rote learning and other docile, imitative behaviors is far less empowering for children than pedagogies that demand critical reflection, student choice, and adaptation.

The adult and community literacy section of the book offers only half the number of chapters as the two previous sections, perhaps reflecting the field's continued emphasis on early literacy acquisition. Allan Quigley suggests in his chapter on lifelong

learning that the paucity of programs and research in the area of adult literacy and the tendency to separate adult and younger learners is a detriment to both groups.

Two of the chapters in this section consider adult literacy in Canadian Aboriginal communities. The authors go beyond describing local practice, to argue that marginalized practices can enrich society's dominant yet limited ways of knowing and learning. In Inuit culture, for example, literacy is deeply connected to place and the ability to read shifting landscapes. Jan Hare documents how decoding symbols of the natural world, embedding their meanings in story, and passing those narratives down constitute literate practices essential to the community's physical survival and cultural identity. She explains how scientists and environmental groups studying global warming might benefit from the interpretative practices and adaptive behaviors elders have developed through centuries of close observation of the Arctic environment. Integrating this valuable knowledge would of course require recognition of the Inuit's predominantly oral, narrative literacy—historically rendered inadmissible through colonial policies—as a legitimate form of historical evidence.

Ningwakwe/Rainbow Woman similarly argues for the integration of Aboriginal knowledge into educational practice. Adapting concepts from the Aboriginal medicine wheel, she constructs a holistic model of literacy that has been successfully implemented in learning programs that serve Aboriginals. Jenny Horseman also encourages practitioners to develop more effective models of literacy instruction by considering the unique needs of learners who have experienced violence. She encourages practitioners working with these groups to critique the dominant discourse of service professionals. This discourse, she argues, promotes narrow definitions of literacy and education, brackets issues of violence and disassociates them from the “proper” business of learning to read and write, and can silence learners, creating barriers to healing.

The volume closes with two chapters on literacy policy, both of which argue that literacy must be understood not just in relation to the local contexts (institutions, communities) in which it is practiced but within the broader context of globalization. Patricia Duff reports on the effects of globalization—particularly the spread of English—on national policies, international relations, and workplace literacy. Elsa Auerbach's closing chapter underscores the need to challenge the social structures that subordinate some groups, warning that literacy alone does not guarantee large-scale social change. Those who develop educational policy and programs must, she argues,

resist the literacy myth and find more direct means of resisting globalization. She urges literacy workers to join social justice movements. Thus, in the chapter's title, she argues for a pedagogy of "not literacy." This is a provocative yet somewhat curious conclusion for a book that demonstrates the transformative promise of literacy, at least at the local level. Many of the portraits rendered in this book depict students, parents, literacy workers, and marginalized groups struggling to create positions from which they can express themselves. They construct hybrid and alternative literacies to critically evaluate and resist dominant practices that often dismiss their own expertise.

Auerbach describes community-based learning programs that address contested social issues and that involve the reflection and participation of local people. She claims that literacy may sometimes be a by-product of such activist programs but is often not the goal—program directors themselves don't recognize these as literacy programs. Instead of labeling such work as "not literacy," however, it might be more useful to note the kinds of literacies that enable—and sometimes prevent—this kind of social justice work. Discourse is, as David Bloome reminds us in an earlier chapter, both the means and the product of social structuration, thus it may be important to claim community programs like this (as well as individual acts of literacy transformation illustrated in this book) as a kind of valued literacy that can contest the disabling functions of dominant discourse. As much of the work of this book demonstrates and as my colleagues and I have recently argued in our own work (Higgins and Brush; Higgins, Long, and Flower), the most important work of literacy educators and researchers may be to make visible and to encourage and support these local, transformative literacies. True, no set of literate practices or educational programs, even with the best social justice intentions, will lead to revolutionary change. But interrogating dominant practices and developing local literacies that affirm people's expertise, capacity, and right to participate and solve problems in their communities can create positive changes in the lives of ordinary workers and citizens.

Works Cited

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Review

***The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change* by Gwen Gorzelsky**

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005

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In its quest to describe the spaces where community groups and social movements have used literacy practices to combat inequality and oppression, Gwen Gorzelsky's *The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change* becomes an interesting exercise in mapping the relationship between the local and the global, the contemporary and the historical, the academic and the world beyond the academy.

Gorzelsky engages closely with Gestalt critical theory and with field notes from her own ethnographic work in order to articulate—indeed, make literate—the connections among a pair of radical religious movements from the seventeenth century, a depression-era unionizing movement in Pittsburgh, and the author's own work with a community literacy and empowerment program called “Struggle.” In each case, literate practices are intended “to define group goals, to catalyze support for those goals, and to design and implement strategies for pursuing them” (1). Gorzelsky integrates an empirical dimension into her analysis of these case histories, which, when considered within the framework of Gestalt psychology, reveal concrete strategies for promoting social change. Gorzelsky insists that the abstractions of high theory and the potentially counter-productive and invasive discourse of emancipation must be kept in tension with more realistic interventions. The difficulty of sustaining this tension is made clear by Gorzelsky's work with Gestalt theory, which is a persistent, and sometimes intrusive, presence throughout the text.

According to Gorzelsky, “Gestalt theory postulates that humans perceive material and psychological phenomena in wholes or patterns, rather than in fragmented units” (8). Among other things, Gestalt theory provides a new vocabulary for educators. Learning becomes “therapeutic change,” or “the integration of new modes of perception, proprioception, and action into a person's existing structured ground.” From this

perspective, learning is accomplished when teachers engage closely with “how learners’ internalized forms and content shape their perceptual processes and their field of available action,” otherwise known as their “contact style” (35).

Whatever the overall merits of the theory, it is refreshing to see an author reach beyond the sometimes narrow, even self-obsessed concerns of Composition Studies. Gestalt authorizes Gorzelsky to make interesting connections between writing and empirical analysis without constant allusions to the college writing classroom. Unfortunately, that authorization also comes with a certain theoretical cherry-picking that consists of occasionally, and somewhat apologetically, dropping a quote from Gayatri Spivak into her analysis and then continuing to interpret information through a Gestaltian lens. But Gorzelsky quickly redeems such detours by distinguishing the therapeutic foundations of her framework from pedagogical practices, and by demonstrating that, despite different circumstances and subjects, both approaches experiment with language practices and ways to engage their subjects in order to stimulate learning.

Gorzelsky sees in Gestalt theory a way to help generate broader understandings of how community-based educational workers can approach their scholarship. Despite the interesting and important outcomes of her commitment to Gestalt, it is rarely clear why such a schema is necessary in order for her to come to her conclusions. An important exception would be her linking of the negotiation of identity—a Gestaltian preoccupation—with the literacy worker’s approach to fieldwork. This linkage is most impressively expressed in Gorzelsky’s *Struggle* ethnography.

The *Struggle* project is intended to help urban teens and the significant adults in their lives articulate their life projects and chart particular features of the course they will take to reach their goals. As part of this process, participants map their past experiences, current locations, and intended future path. This strategy is meant to increase understanding about the ways unique facets of an individual’s experience interact and “relate to one another” (56). Map construction becomes a tool for recognizing broader frameworks of meaning which discursively inform our identities. This is significantly interrelated with the book’s broader project: to map the connections between contemporary, modern, and distant historical cases of literacy development.

To explore these connections, Gorzelsky turns next to the seventeenth century and the English Civil War. It is a strange leap, and continuity is provided only by the

omnipresent Gestalt framework. Gorzelsky focuses on the written work of Gerrard Winstanley, Puritan intellectual activist and the leader of the Diggers movement, who advocated a 1640s version of Christian communism that earned his adherents the dismissive title “the Levellers.” Although the Gestalt-driven descriptions of Winstanley’s writing become tedious, Gorzelsky’s decision to look closely at the writing itself—to locate meaning and importance at the level of particular inscriptions and to understated rhetorical gestures—makes the analysis pedagogically interesting even to a composition purist.

This gesture then leads to another historical moment of radical community literacy practices: the Pittsburgh steel industry union movement in the 1930s and 40s, which was supported by the *Union Press*. As Gorzelsky describes the connection, “Like the seventeenth-century groups, the unionizers’ platform posed a threat to their society’s established habits of behavior and perception” (160). The use of the term “perception” presages more Gestalt terminology and analysis, but it also means more close readings of the literature used to create new perceptions and identities. The link between these projects goes beyond their status as failures and seeks to redeem them as possibilities with significance for our contemporary moment. We are asked not just to learn from where they went wrong but to see in them a radical potential that could inspire new projects to take up their cause in a different context. So Gorzelsky will describe and quote at length—in a self-reflexive manner that is intended to implicate her own text in the strategy—specific instances where the *Union Press* effectively links political and economic issues, and these examples can be used today in order to model “the rhetorical and perceptual habits readers...use to interpret mainstream media themselves” (180). This means that the experiences of the past can be connected with the language we use to describe our contemporary experiences and, consequently, can aid in the development of new strategies to promote social change.

Unfortunately, much of the critical analysis of writing is folded back into the need to create a new “contact style” (194). References to that ambiguous category can be found throughout the text and they tend to reduce the interesting work of mapping and of the extended textual analyses to a poorly defined utility. That impulse is symptomatic of so much scholarship in the field she tries to downplay, which frequently likes to make heavy-handed arguments for an immediate use-value that is presumed to be beyond its readers’ capacities to discover for themselves. This rhetorical strategy, regardless of its author’s intent, is reproductive of the kind of rationality that would disregard the most significant features of Gorzelsky’s own text as “mere writing.”

Those circumstances would be regrettable in the case of *The Language of Experience*. In spite of its reliance upon a largely unconvincing Gestalt framework and a lack of appreciation for other theoretical and emancipatory articulations of literacy practices, Gorzelsky's work draws and then connects bold, intelligible lines between seemingly disparate social, rhetorical and pedagogical practices. Ultimately, Gorzelsky's concern for differences that can "result from a focus on different empirical circumstances, varying theoretical models, and divergent experiential knowledge" provides the requisite flexibility for increasing the capacity of community-based writing scholars "to generate more nuanced, complex understandings" (224) of how their own work can promote change.