

Review

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

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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.