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Reviewed work:

Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace. (2004). Mary Ellen Belfiore, Tracey A. Defoe, Sue Folinsbee, Judy Hunter, & Nancy S. Jackson (The In-Sites Research Group). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Pp. 306. ISBN 0805846220. \$37.50

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Across industrialised nations there is a concern that the literacy levels of adults are inadequate for the demands of reading and writing at work. This situation is often described in terms of a crisis and governments reach for simplistic back-to-basics approaches that ignore the complexities of learning to read and write and the context-embeddedness of literacy skills.

Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace takes a *social practices* view of literacy in the workplace through ethnographic research in four workplaces in North America. A social practices view of literacy rejects the concept of literacy as “simply the isolated skills of reading and writing” (p. 4) and is concerned with how readers and writers use their literacy skills to be participating members of social contexts. This social focus adopts a multidimensional view of literacies “as plural and as complex, multifaceted social and cultural practices” (pp. 4–5). The main concern of the book is how literacies fit into everyday working life in the new workplace and its primary audience is workplace educators, although the book offers much that academics could integrate into university courses concerned with adult literacy.

The introduction presents theoretical ideas that have underpinned the research of the authors and their concern for workplace education—changing ideas of literacies and understandings of the new workplace (Barton, 1994; Cope & Kalantzis, 1999; Gee, 1990; Hull, 1995). The book is then divided into two parts. Part I contains four chapters presenting narratives of working life in

the research sites—“a food processing plant, a textile factory, an urban tourist hotel and a high-tech metal parts manufacturer” (p. xii). Using pseudonyms, the authors describe these workplaces as “diverse in their products, their levels of technological innovation, their degrees of conformity to the ‘new workplace’ and the cultural profiles of their workforce, but showing a great deal of similarity in the dynamics and dilemmas surrounding the changing practice of workplace literacies” (p. xii). The narratives in Part I are told by the researchers who spent 6–8 months in the workplaces they describe. The narratives are first-person stories of engagement; for example,

It’s three p.m. My feet are killing me and my whole body aches. I am absolutely exhausted from being on my feet for eight hours in my new, stiff unbearable steel-toed shoes. ... It’s the end of my first full day as a participant observer at Texco. (p. 63)

Through these narratives the reader is given an overall picture of the workplaces and how issues are viewed differently by managers and employees. For example, documentation in workplaces is crucial under quality systems such as the International Standards Organization (ISO) 9001 and this aspect of literacy is explored in the narrative around the textile factory. Here managers are concerned with

better completion of the forms that employees have to fill out when something goes wrong, and they want more responses in the ‘Comments’ section of the form on how a product runs through each stage of its process for the purposes of new products being developed. (p. 70)

However, the researcher in this context, Sue Folinsbee, is able to pick up a mismatch between the need to respond quickly to customer requirements and to complete documents, which gives mixed messages about paperwork. Workers reported to her that “there are subtle and not-so-subtle messages that getting the product done and out the door is more important than paperwork” (p. 75).

Part II contains four chapters that reflect on what can be learned from the research, with one chapter examining barriers to learning and using literacies that were revealed through the research. For example, there is a tendency for managers to interpret non-completion of paperwork as simply a lack of skills on the part of employees. However, at all sites the researchers identified resistance to participating in this literacy practice, resulting from unresolved issues around “social relations, power, risk and blame” (p. 232). Two chapters explore the challenges and possibilities offered by a social practices view of literacies for workplace educators. One interesting example presented in Part II is of the researcher and practitioner, Tracy Defoe, discovering her own illiteracy in reading engineering drawings. The writers draw from this exploration an affirmation of “how dynamic, relative and relational literacies are in real life” (p. 225) and use this example to remind workplace educators that no-one can attain all literacies and people in the workplace have a range of different literacy skills from which workplace educators can learn. The final chapter is a conversation between the researchers about the “joys and pitfalls of collaborative research” (p. xiii). The appendix focuses on the research methods and offers further reading suggestions on ethnographic research.

The strength of this book is in the in-depth research that the authors were able to undertake over 6–8 months in the four workplaces, giving insights into inconsistent workplace practices and perspectives that make it difficult to plan workplace literacy programs. These include over-simplified analyses by managers of employee skills, resistance to literacy practices that can mask abilities, inability to deal with workplace documents, and the tendency to view literacy as simply a set of skills outside of social practices. The narrative style of the first part gives the reader a sense of shadowing the researchers and first-hand understandings of how simplistic back-to-basics individualistic approaches can often lead to blaming individual employees for systemic problems. The second part offers workplace educators ways of understanding theoretical orientations to literacy and their relevance to workplace literacy education, the complexity of workplace practices that involve literacy, and ideas for implementing more effective programs.

For those who want to dip in and out of the book, the chapter and section titles can be a little elusive and could have been more directly signalled. The narrative style at times becomes a little too personal. However, for me as an experienced workplace educator, the stories in this book resonated. I think it provides an interesting insight into the complexities of the constantly changing modern workplace. It is especially relevant as governments internationally emphasise adult literacy outcomes for work and look for simplistic approaches, with no understanding of how people practise multiple literacies and not a single literacy. A more complex view of reading and writing is essential in workplace education where educators are trying to understand complex networks of social and cultural practices in which the literacy skills of employees are embedded. The authors “see the workplace as a tapestry and literacies as the multiple threads woven into the whole” (p. 2), and their book makes an interesting contribution to understanding the intricate networks of workplace literacy practices.

References

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About the Reviewer

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