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Reviewed work:

Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice and Power. (2007). Victoria Purcell-Gates (Ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Pp. 256. ISBN 805854924. \$27.50

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This book was carried out under the aegis of the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study, whose principal investigator is Victoria Purcell-Gates. The work of the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study has two main goals: “(a) to theorize marginality in relationship to schooling in ways that will suggest real possibilities for schooling; and (b) to design curricula that promise to disrupt the persistent, almost perfect, correlation between social status and/or marginality and academic achievement” (p. 16). Therefore, this book with its critical position contributes to raising awareness among educators and literacy practitioners on certain issues such as power relations, colonization, and resistance in literacy practices.

Today, literacy is much more than reading and writing due to the multiple modes of meaning-making that are available in a post-industrial society. Hobbs (1997, as cited in Chauvin, 2003, pp. 119–120) stated that literacy is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms.” This book, however, deals with two specific literacy practices: reading and writing. The whole book was greatly influenced by the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) ideas of cultural and linguistic capital and by the Australian critical literacy researcher Allan Luke’s (2003) concern of the link between out-of-school and in-school literacy practices.

This book presents a collection of 10 case studies (chapters 2–11) around four major areas: (a) language, literacy and hegemony, (b) the immigrant experience: language, literacies and identities, (c) literacy in and out of school and on the borders, and (d) new pedagogies for new literacies.

In chapter 1 (“Complicating the Complex”), the editor sets the theoretical foundations and background for the different tendencies when researching literacy. She discusses the various conceptions held by educators, political leaders, and the general public of what literacy entails. She knowledgeably considers the various labels that literacy has acquired in the contemporary world. Such labels include the new perspective on literacy, multiple literacies, literacy as social practice (or social literacies), and new literacies (p. 2). Purcell-Gates gives a brief account of the work of different researchers on out-of-school (vernacular) literacies who, under Bourdieu’s (1991) influence, “work to resist this hegemony [the academy] and to find ways to ‘legitimate’ the literacies of marginalized groups within academic settings” (p. 6). However, she asserts that the study of vernacular literacies is not enough to give a full account of literacy. The editor points out that other scholars are trying to bridge the gap between vernacular and academic literacies by bringing the vernacular into the school. She believes that literacy research should be carried out on both sides, out of school and in school. Purcell-Gates states that when theorizing and researching literacy, it should be taken as “social, multiple and ideological” (p. 10). Therefore, she adheres to the “literacy-as-social-practice paradigm” (p. 10), taking into account that literacy is practiced by different sociocultural groups who live in a globalized world.

Purcell-Gates (2004) advocated an ethnographic approach when researching literacy. Her main reason was that “ethnography is grounded in theories of culture and allows researchers to view literacy development, instruction, learning, and practice as it occurs naturally in sociocultural contexts” (p. 92). The case studies in this book all take a quasi-ethnographic, qualitative approach, where literacy is seen in practice. Researchers in each case study assume an active participant role within the community under study. Procedures used by the researchers include observation, interviews, artifact collection, and analysis and coding of sociotextual domains.

The first section (“Language, Literacy, and Hegemony”) presents two case studies. The first case study “Appropriation and Resistance in the (English) Literacy Practices of Puerto Rican Farmers”, reported in chapter 2 by Catherine Mazak, focuses on a family of land owners and farmers in a rural community in Puerto Rico. The researcher first presents a Puerto Rican language history where the struggle between Spanish and English is central. Mazak’s case study “explores the ways in which reading and writing in both Spanish and English are used by two farmers in the interior of the island. It is a study of language appropriation and resistance, where English is taken up by the participants to meet their own needs on their own terms” (p. 28). These needs mainly consist of access to information in the scientific and economic domains. An interesting finding in this study is the fact that those who know English can act as brokers in the community that resists English colonization. As an English teacher in a Spanish speaking context, I found this case study extremely meaningful as it raises issues of power, identity, and resistance (for issues on language resistance, see Canagarajah, 1999).

Chapter 3 (“Language and Literacy Issues in Botswana”), by Annah Molosiwa, is the second case study in the first section. The researcher first outlines the geographical, historical, and language contexts of Botswana. She points out the absence of a print literacy culture in the country, where the oral word is highly appreciated. However, her informants (four women living in the US) link English with power and literacy, a condition that devalues Setswana and other minority languages. The researcher concludes that more research into the “cultural practices of literacy for the different ethnic groups in Botswana” (p. 54) is needed in order to enhance educational policy. One thing that is less convincing in this study is that the participants’ own words are rarely heard. Instead, the researcher summarizes the respondents’ answers or gives her own interpretations.

The second section of the book (“The Immigrant Experience: Languages, Literacy, and Identities”) contains three case studies. The first case study “Sharing Stories, Linking Lives: Literacy Practices among Sudanese Refugees” (chapter 4), by Kristen H. Perry, is an investigation “of the literacy practices of southern Sudanese refugee youth—the so-called ‘Lost Boys’—in Michigan” (p. 57). The researcher first outlines the historical context of Sudanese refugees. Through the testimonies of the four Sudanese refugees who participated in this study, Perry has found that they view “literacy as an important tool in the struggle against inequality and injustice in the Sudan” (p. 67). From my point of view this is a very complete case study and one of the most interesting because it challenges some general traditional beliefs, such as that held by many English teachers who assert that if one does not know how to write in one’s mother tongue one cannot write in a foreign language. The researcher, influenced by Barton and Hamilton (2000), convincingly concludes that “literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making” (p. 58).

The second study (chapter 5) by Gaoming Zhang, “Multiple Border Crossings: Literacy Practices of Chinese American Bilingual Families,” deals with “literacy practices, beliefs, and values in two Chinese American bilingual families” (p. 85). The researcher, a teacher of a weekend Chinese school, examines the relationship between in-school and out-of school literacy practices in these families. Zhang also addresses the question of how two different languages are used across and within sociotextual domains. The researcher also analyzes the role that Chinese American bilingual parents play in shaping their children’s literacy practices. One interesting facet in this study is that the researcher examines not only print and oral texts but also drawings and artifacts. I consider this a very well thought out and complete ethnographic study.

The third study in this section (chapter 6), “Literacy Practices in a Foreign Language: Two Cuban Immigrants” by Kamila Rosolová, has as a main goal “to explore the ways in which literacy and language intersect and are negotiated by immigrants” (p. 99). After investigating and providing solid evidence on the two participants’ backgrounds and their literacy practices in Cuba, the researcher suggests that “their immigrant experiences as regards their English literacy practices vary and appear to be influenced heavily by family literacy practices in their native countries. These practices influenced predilections, values, attitudes and language knowledge...[that] intersect with the social, political, and cultural contexts in which both participants live ” (p. 110). I found this study well supported and interesting in the way the researcher shows the contrast between each participant’s needs and interests in terms of literacy practices.

The third and largest section of the book “Literacies in and out of School and on the Borders” is influenced the most by the work of Luke (2003), who stated that “[l]iterate practice is situated, constructed, and intrapsychologically negotiated through an (artificial) social field called the school, with rules of exchange denoted in scaffolded social activities around particular selected texts” (p. 140). This section is composed of six case studies.

In the first study “Breadth and Depth, Imports and Exports: Transactions Between the In- and Out-of-School Literacy Practices of an ‘At Risk’ Youth” (chapter 7), Stephanie Collins explores the case of an 11-year-old academically unsuccessful student. She explores the sociotextual domains to which the participant has access and where she is successful. These domains include bureaucracy, community organizations, entertainment, personal and public writing, and social cohesion. The last domain is important because of the acquisition of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991) that it entails. Social cohesion in this case includes reading of “hip-hop lyrics and brand names labels on clothing—both forms of cultural capital among their peers, both vehicles for signifying *community-appreciated style* [italics added], be the community actual or imagined” (pp. 126–127). I found this case study interesting because it demonstrates how this “at risk” youth obtains validation from the community, and not from the school. However, I found the writing overly sentimental, possibly due to the involvement between the participant and the researcher who was the youth’s literacy tutor.

In chapter 8, the study “Literacy and Choice: Urban Elementary Students’ Perceptions of Links Between Home, School, and Community Literacy Practices”, by Jodene Kersten, explores the connection between literacy practices at home and in school with elementary school children. One of the most interesting things that I found in this study is the way the researcher converted her young participants into ethnographers and researchers in their communities and how they reflected on their literacy practices. They identified such sociotextual domains of literacy practice as the church, shopping, eating out, journaling, and creative writing. The results of the study show the disconnections between home and school literacy practices. The researcher concludes by stating that “the onus is on schools and educators to acknowledge the values and literacy practices children are bringing to the classroom and use these to inform and shape pedagogy to move toward academic achievement for all students” (p. 153). I consider this study innovative and well evidenced.

In chapter 9 (“‘You Have to Be Bad or Dumb to Get in Here’: Reconsidering the In-School and Out-of-School Literacy Practices of At-Risk Adolescents”) David Gallagher analyzes the case of four at-risk adolescents who were “identified as being deficient and/or resistant of academic literacy” (p. 157) and were being offered literacy tools to succeed in their classes. Influenced by Moje (2002), Gallagher concludes that it is necessary to do more investigations into the spheres of homes, communities, youth cultures, and classrooms in order to understand “how the students negotiate the boundaries of these different spheres” (p. 159). In this way literacy researchers can better understand the nature of literacy in the lives of at-risk adolescents. One of the most interesting points in this study is how these students imported and exported their literacy practices from informal to formal settings and vice versa, thus creating a hybrid literacy. I would have liked to listen more to the participants’ own voices in this study and to actually read one or two samples of their written texts.

In the study “School and Home: Contexts for Conflict and Agency” (chapter 10), Chad O’Neil analyzes narratives, which led to memory and insights, about literacy practices of two undergraduate students. Their literacy practices seemed to be influenced, both positively and negatively, by two sociotextual domains: the family and the school. The researcher analyzes sites of conflicts between these two domains and finds the development of agency in both students “as they sorted out their likes and dislikes and as they responded to the various types of textual practices within the different social domains in their lives” (p. 175). The study is well documented and the voices of the participants are heard in the study.

The last case study “Digital Literac(ies), Digital Discourses, and Communities of Practice: Literacy Practices in Virtual Environments” (chapter 11), by Douglas Eyman, deals with a different domain, that of technology for literacy practice. The study focuses on a writing and technology class at the university level whose goals are “concerned with practices of writing with new technologies and efforts to understand and critically reflect on how these new technologies transform writing” (p. 182). The methodology used in this study was based on observation of the class as well as examination of the coursework produced by the students. These students created a community of practice where they could interact with each other. The researcher could also interact with students in a synchronous and asynchronous way. Interestingly, for these students digital literacy was “seen as a transference of traditional literacy practices (reading and writing) to new media” (p. 186). I found this study well supported theoretically and well evidenced with opinions and illustrations from the participants’ work.

In the final chapter (“Comprehending Complexity”), Purcell-Gates wraps up the book by identifying some common themes recurring in the case studies presented in the book. She provides information on the evolving database of the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study and summarizes and draws conclusions from those case studies. Finally, she encourages researchers to continue investigating literacy practices in order to better design literacy curricula at school.

Despite the use of formal terms, this book is reader friendly, with a few typological errors. The book contains two appendices. The first is an example of a semistructured interview of literacy practices, and the second is a format for keeping records of demographic information. The book also contains two useful indices: an author index and a subject index. It is worth mentioning that the book is enhanced in some sections by black and white pictures, drawings, and samples of digital writing. I recommend this book to language and literacy teachers and researchers, literacy curriculum designers, policy makers, literacy tutors, and sociologists, among others. Being interested in critical studies, I found this book very illustrative in terms of literacy practices as sources of power, knowledge, resistance, and agency.

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