

A Review of Expanding Literate Landscapes: Persons, Practices, and Sociohistoric Perspectives of Disciplinary Development

By Kevin Roozen and Joe Erickson, 2017. Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State University Press. [ISBN 978-1-60732-6601 <http://ccdigitalpress.org/book/expanding>.]

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In *Expanding Literate Landscapes: Persons, Practices, and Sociohistoric Perspectives of Disciplinary Development*, Kevin Roozen and Joe Erickson (2017) contend that students' vernacular literacies, i.e. those they develop in contexts beyond the "official" spaces of classroom and workplace, shape how they learn and use dominant academic and professional literacies, and vice versa. In arguing that writing instruction should better account for this interplay, *Expanding Literate Landscapes* contributes to a growing body of writing studies scholarship showing that students' learning incomes—i.e. their cultural, linguistic, and racial identities—deserve as much attention in teaching writing as student learning outcomes (Anson, 2012; Guerra, 2016; Hall, 2014; Hendrickson & García de Müller, 2016; Kells, 2007; LeCourt, 1996; Parks & Goldblatt, 2000; Poe, 2013; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Villanueva, 2001). But Roozen and Erickson push their findings one step further to challenge what they call "the assumed borders of autonomous disciplinary terrains" (1.01: Writing and Learning within Autonomous Terrains, para. 22). Theorizing disciplines as such, the authors warn, "effectively erases a person's rich histories with writing for other disciplines, for work, and for their everyday lives in telling the story of disciplinary development" (para. 22). Before presenting five supporting case studies of individuals' literacy learning over time, *Expanding Literate Landscapes* makes the theoretical and methodological case for interpreting disciplines as more fluid, and individual writers more agentive, than what "the dominant metaphor of disciplinary writing" presumes (para. 22).

It's at least a tad ironic then that the chapters in which Roozen and Erickson make the case for disciplinary porosity and malleability are also the most impenetrable and unyielding for anyone who isn't already a writing theory wonk. A lot of that quality derives from the book's grounding in the theoretical and methodological insights of Paul Prior (1997; 1998; Prior & Hengst, 2010; Prior, Hengst, Roozen, & Shipka, 2006; Prior & Shipka, 2003) and Ron Scollon (2001; 2005). Take for instance the following passage from the section "Resemiotization of Practice across Nexus":

Like Scollon's notion of "discourse itineraries," "semiotic remediation" offers a dialogic perspective of semiotic practices in the world by illuminating how meaning-making involves

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people drawing upon semiotic resources from their near or distant pasts, transforming them for use in a present interaction, and orienting them toward future responses and activities. Such a perspective is crucial for understanding the situated deployment of semiotic means as being located along historical trajectories that reach across people's lifeworlds.

Readers not already comfortable with thinking about writing as “the situated deployment of semiotic means . . . along historical trajectories” will likely struggle to decipher what that phrase means, let alone appreciate why semiotic remediation is crucial to understanding the phenomenon it describes. Those already familiar with the genealogical roots of this passage will, however, appreciate the significance of Roozen and Erickson's choice of a “dialogic perspective” that perceives “semiotic means” as reaching “across people's lifeworlds,” as these terms offer insight into what the authors' analysis illuminates and obscures.

Explaining the significance of Roozen and Erickson's choice of terminology requires a bit of backstory. Over twenty years ago, David Russell (1997) identified “a central problem in writing research” as being “how to trace the ways people change as writers, individually and collectively, as they move within and among various social practices” (p. 505)—basically another way of saying that writing researchers need to trace “the situated deployment of semiotic means as being located along historical trajectories that reach across people's lifeworlds.” The answer, Russell proposed, was cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), which offers a dialectical account of how writers develop by resolving contradictions that arise between old and new writing situations. In emphasizing the role of contradictions in learning to write, as well as the importance of authentic learning and writing situations, CHAT assumes the existence of identifiable borders—between history and biology class, for instance, or classroom and workplace. And CHAT now assumes a central role in how writing is theorized and researched, as evidenced by its prominence in recent award-winning works such as Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's (2015) *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies*, and Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak's (2014) *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*.

But even as writing researchers began to adopt CHAT more than twenty years ago, it was already adapting in an attempt to avoid what Paul Prior described in his foreword to Roozen and Erickson as “a view in which activity systems become the kind of autonomous, discrete territories that discourse communities have been” (p. 277). Along these lines, Prior began to draw from a different sociohistoric tradition to develop theories and methods more capable of describing learning to write as dialogic, or a process of negotiating the means and ends of a given writing situation as one node in a network of mutually informing writing situations across time and space. This perspective blurs the lines between writing situations, thereby challenging CHAT's dialectical premises that 1) borders between writing situations and the contradictions that arise between them are the catalysts of learning to write; and 2) the act of learning to write is a resolution of contradictions between writing situations.

If there were any doubt that *Expanding Literate Landscapes* was intended to challenge dialectical theories of learning to write, Prior removes it in his foreword:

It is this *worlds apart*/discourse community ideology that has animated arguments in writing studies and education about the extreme challenge of getting learning to “transfer” to new settings (see, for example, discussions in Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014).

Roozen and Erickson's theoretically framed and empirically documented narratives . . . [suggest] “transfer” is what we should expect, not something difficult, not something in need of careful pedagogical structuring, but rather something essentially unavoidable for the person and for the practice because no person, no practice, no discipline, no situation exists as a pure

neo-Platonic ideal, as an ahistorical fragment. (Foreword: We Need to Follow the Developmental Pathways of Literate and Disciplinary Practices Wherever They Lead, para. 4-6)

Despite such explicit attempts in its opening chapters to draw a theoretical line in the sand between dialectical and dialogic theories of learning to write, *Expanding Literate Landscapes* avoids overt partisanship in presenting its five longitudinal case studies of developing writers in rich detail, partitioning the more explicit analysis into each chapter's discussion, which carries the added benefit of rendering the case studies extremely readable for a lay audience. Integrated video allows the reader to also see and hear each co-researcher (Roozen and Erickson's more agentive term for their research participants) describe their composing process with reference to texts on hand. Readers familiar with Roozen's work will appreciate how *Expanding Literate Landscapes* extends several previous studies published primarily as text-based journal articles, partly by providing a more robust multimedia rendering, and partly a more comprehensive and therefore complex account of the interplay involved in learning to write across a range of contexts. The multimedia format of *Expanding Literate Landscapes* complements its subject matter by modeling multiple literacies at work. Furthermore, the format of the web-based text allows each robust case study to stand on its own merits while nevertheless co-informing the others.

The cast of recurring characters includes Charles, whose experiences as a journalist help and hinder his writing in basic writing, introductory journalism, and kinesiology; Kate Sharer, whose fan fiction draws from her English studies, and vice versa, even when it's not a great fit, as in her graduate-level creative writing workshop; and Lindsey Rachels, whose background as a graphic design major impacts her work in graduate-level literature and education courses, as a language arts teacher, and later in web development and social media marketing.

Meanwhile, two completely new case studies further extend Roozen's previous work by attending to the "applied" sciences of engineering and medicine. Terri Ulmer's case study describes an insider (as opposed to a novice) embracing and resisting her professional identity through writing. Terri's poetic and religious writing complements and counteracts how she approaches writing as a nurse, while her nursing background informs her poems and devotionals. Furthermore, Alexandra Griffith's case study blends visual and numeric literacies with writing. A first-year civil engineering student, Alexandra draws from her experiences creating tables in everything from Minecraft to fan fiction to scheduling when creating tables for her engineering projects, and vice versa. These two case studies show that the symbiotic relationship between vernacular and dominant literacies is not a phenomenon unique to students learning to write in the humanities. However, it's not difficult to imagine faculty in the applied sciences reacting skeptically to the notion that all of their students are as deeply involved in vernacular writing as Terri and Alexandra, despite Prior's assurance that "the case studies here are not remarkable, not outliers" (Foreword: What's Really Weird Is..., para. 1).

In allowing the narratives to speak for themselves, Roozen and Erickson also expose a crack in their theoretical foundation, in that the case studies of Charles and Kate indicate that disciplinary borders and divisions of labor do play an important role in how students learn to write. Roozen and Erickson acknowledge this in several of the chapters' discussion sections and again in the conclusion, insisting that their methodology—mediated discourse analysis—seeks to account for both synergies and tensions occurring at points where different literacies converge. But the authors are decidedly more concerned with the synergies, placing far greater emphasis on how their co-researchers defy the apparent borders between vernacular and dominant literacies. From this interpretation, the authors conclude that students play a significant role in shaping disciplinary literacies. The implication for teaching is that

Helping undergraduates extend themselves into the privileged conventions of the university is not so much about teaching them new practices as it is about providing students with

productive opportunities to negotiate histories with multiple literate engagements and, thus, about asking ourselves to be flexible and invite the ongoing continuation of literate histories. (8.04: Implications for Supporting Literate Development, para. 16)

Roozen and Erickson provide several interesting examples from their own teaching of what that flexibility might look like: asking students to trace their own literacy learning with attention to the roles of texts and practices that might not immediately seem all that consequential; coaching students in developing their own explanations of how writing works and comparing them with those of other communities; introducing students to a range of terms describing literacy and inviting them to explore what those terms reveal and obscure about their own literacies; and prompting students to examine the obstacles and opportunities that arise while repurposing their own literacies. At the same time, the very fact that “privileged conventions of the university” exist suggests that the “literate histories” comprising them operate under conditions that often resist flexibility and invitation.

Expanding Literate Landscapes suggests through what it illuminates, but also what it leaves obscured, that faculty who intend to “invite the ongoing continuation of [students’] literate histories” need to better appreciate the flexibility of disciplinary literacies. This implication further invites greater scrutiny of the ideological and material dimensions of disciplinary literacies that resist flexibility and the assignment of agency to students. Although both of these charges go back at least twenty years, Roozen and Erickson demonstrate the power of twenty-first century multimedia publishing to present a compellingly robust and novel account of the supporting findings. *Expanding Literate Landscapes* therefore deserves a place of note among the texts we use as models of robust longitudinal ethnographic research and as guides for revitalizing our commitments to the students we serve, especially when that work extends across and beyond the curriculum. Of equal value is the attention the book calls to the apparently intractable contradiction within writing studies between dialectical and dialogic theories of learning to write, and to the work we might consider doing as a field to resolve it.

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