

Epilogue. Many Paths, Many Futures

Abstract. To advance constructively, theoretically, empirically, and humanely, literacy studies needs to be framed as historical, comparative, and critical. Literacy studies scholars should stop congratulating themselves and end their sometimes reckless pursuit and celebration of the “new.” In many ways, literacy studies should learn from, though not return to, its roots. I propose five paths to revised, renewed literacy studies.

Literacy and Literacies Are Relational and Dialectical

The conceptualization and investigation of interrelationships must replace the presumption of dichotomies and divides.¹ The explosion of many, multi-, and multiple literacies without an explicit search for their relationships, connections, and associations, including their dialectical shaping and reshaping of one another, jeopardizes both the original breakthroughs and risks the loss of recognizable forms of literacy in theory and practice. We must trace relationships among literacies and languages across media and modes of comprehension and expression, from the alphabetic to other symbolic, visual, spatial, embodied, and performative.

Historical Awareness Is Fundamental

Conceptions and practices of literacies are historically constructed, established, institutionalized, revised, and transmitted. This awareness of the direct and indirect, explicit and implicit, persistence of theories and expectations should inform scholars’ analysis of what is new and what is, instead, the familiar presented in a new guise. Similarly, it moderates the usual overemphasis on change and underestimation of the power of continuities.

Context Gives Meaning to Literacy and Creates the Ground for Its Study and Practice

The most effective path to avoid the conundrums and contradictions that result from formulaic notions of progress and decline in the historical study of literacy lies in the specification of context. Fundamentally, literacy has no meaning outside of distinct temporal and spatial locations, which are neither local nor global but are defined by their connections to and differences from other settings.

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Translation Is Inseparably Intertwined with Matters of Literacy

Literacy involves making and communicating meaning across media and modes of understanding and expression from one person or set of persons to others via the symbol and sign systems that constitute languages. Acts of reading and writing that cross time and space and link disparate groups are usefully viewed in terms of the theory and practice of translation. This recognition facilitates placing literacy in its proper comparative communicative contexts. No less importantly, it reduces the need to invent redundant neologisms such as transliterate, translingual, and transnational, which proliferate the varieties of literacies and segregate rather than interrelate them. This path also promotes learning from the wide range of theories and practices of translation and the critical distinctions they offer.

Negotiation Provides an Especially Human Approach to the Study and Practice of Literacy and Literacies

In recent years, literacy studies scholars have sought new concepts and metaphors for reading, writing, and beyond. In a critical discussion of hybrid literacies, Elizabeth Moje mentions the transcendence of either/or binaries via third-space or “thirdness” as one articulation with respect to identities and locations. After reviewing alternative terms, Moje favors navigation as a “term of distinction.” “The concept of navigating thus acknowledges the roles of space, time, and context in how people engage in literate practice or enact identities in a new way that hybridity or hybrid literacies cannot” (Moje et al., 2008, 366). Moje’s primary focus falls on teaching and learning in a relatively formal and normative sense.¹

My focus is broader; it aims to include but go beyond schooling. For that reason, I find the concept, theory, practice, metaphor, and notion of negotiation more fitting, flexible, relational, and deeply human than notions of navigation or hybridity. It parallels translation. Negotiation is not deterministic, essentialist, limited, or oriented toward a finite goal; it is more adaptive and can be individual or group-centered. If a person can navigate as part the process of negotiation, the term recognizes the agency as well as the constraints and contradictions, of leaders and learners, their choices and options, experiential learning by doing amidst the give and take of the widest variety of contexts or environments. It embraces both individual and collective, formal and informal activities. I believe it is more amenable to exploring and practicing a dialectical interrelational approach to multiple literacies across different media and modes of understanding and communication.

Anne Haas Dyson (1989, 2003) offers the fullest demonstration of negotiation in the development of literacy in her study of elementary school learners

in Oakland, California. Dyson's pioneering use of the concept of negotiation is richly suggestive. Although I developed and adopted the term developed independently, this concurrence shows its potential. We learn from Dyson's example and her description of how young people recontextualize across media and modes of understanding and expression.

Following her interest in how youngsters "tinker with drawn and written worlds" (1989, 76), Dyson shows how they negotiate social compromises among themselves and the styles and genres they use to move between their media sources. She portrays an elementary school student "negotiating among his imaginary, social, and experiential worlds" (182) and "negotiating between symbolic media: visual and verbal magic" (186) as they developed and changed. In the process, these first and second graders "renegotiated the relationship between drawing and writing." Manuel, a first grader, learned "to coordinate his pictures and his texts more closely, not by making art notes but by finding words for visual images without abandoning narrative action." He "worked to bring his drawn and written art closer together, capturing the physical beauty of his pictures in his texts" (186). "In his search, Manuel also kept in mind the language of the story he was developing. He was creating visual art, but he was working within the tension between language, on the one hand, and line, color, and shape, on the other" (197). "Discovering a way to bring his own visual sense and his reflective style into his dramatic texts would contribute to Manuel's emergence as an acknowledged artist—a social star—in the second grade" (183).

Negotiation claims a central place in new studies of literacy, I suggest.

Following these and other paths, literacy studies, old and new, may change for the better.

Why does it matter?

That is a question I ask each of us to ponder and to answer for ourselves and together. I quote the Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung:

What would happen if the whole world became literate? Answer: not so very much, for the world is by and large structured in such a way that it is capable of absorbing the impact. But if the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively—the world would change. (1976, 93)

Note

The words "negotiation" and "navigation" appear fairly often in writings about children's and adolescents' reading, but a thorough bibliographic search turned up no work that developed or reflected on these concepts.

References

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