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Review of *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*

By Lauren Rosenberg. Conference on College Composition and Communication/ National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Illinois, 2015. ISBN-13:978-0814110812

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In *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*, Lauren Rosenberg offers readers insight to the journey of four adult learners, participants at the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, as they strive to obtain literacy. Their desire for literacy does not stem from the desire to acquire new job opportunities; instead, they are motivated by their desire for self-improvement. Three of the study participants—George, Lee Anne, and Chief—are retirees over the age of sixty. Violeta, the fourth and youngest study participant, is a single mother of six who receives public assistance. The four participants share their experiences in gaining literacy over the course of Rosenberg's four-year study. Rosenberg applies a critical lens to her participants' experiences seeking to answer several important questions: How is the nonliterate community devalued as knowledgeable citizens with the ability to think critically for themselves and about the world around them? What motivates adults in the nonliterate community to become literate? How and why have the voices of the nonliterate communities continued to be silenced in a country where nonliteracy in adults remains a concern? Rosenberg answers these questions and many more, keeping in mind her intended readership: those who shape current literacy programs, curricula, and potentially influence public policy.

Rosenberg organizes *The Desire for Literacy* into six chapters. Although she introduces the nature of her study, methodology, and the four study participants in

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chapter one, “Resisting Nonliteracy: Adult Learners Restory Their Narratives,” Rosenberg focuses primarily on establishing an ideological basis for her work, situated in scholarship that advocates for adult literacy and their ideologies. In referencing scholars, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Krista Ratcliff, Frantz Fanon, and Paulo Freire, Rosenberg lays the groundwork for understanding the position in which the dominant/literate society places the nonliterate community, the importance of allowing the nonliterate to tell their own stories, and the reality that nonliterate lives do not mean a lack of knowledge. Rosenberg constructs an empirical basis for her own credibility. At the same time, what makes Rosenberg’s references to the various scholars a bit unconventional is that she juxtaposes the scholarly voices with those four study participants, each of whom Rosenberg positions as a theorist of literacy in his/her own right. While she is careful in her word choice, Rosenberg clearly wants readers to understand that people in the nonliterate community are very capable of critically viewing and assessing the world around them, despite their deficits in literacy.

In chapters two and three, “Speaking from ‘the Silent, Silenced Center’: Just Because You Can’t Read Doesn’t Mean That You Don’t Know” and “Contemplating Literacy: ‘A Door Now Open,’” Rosenberg shifts the focus of the primary voice of her participants. Focusing on Ratcliff’s *rhetorical listening*, a form of listening that emphasizes close listening and sustained attention, Rosenberg chooses to print the voices of her four participants in standard text, while using italics for her voice, thus positioning herself in typography as the “Other” who “stands under” the words of her participants as those words “wash over” her (26). Rosenberg acts as a witness, becoming the audience to the nonliterate community. In this overt strategy of repositioning their voices as dominant, Rosenberg creates a space for George, Violeta, Chief, and Lee Ann, pseudonyms given to her four participants, to retell their stories, beginning with their unsuccessful attempts at literacy acquisition as young people to their more recent experiences with people in the dominant, literate sector of our society. In addition to their histories and experiences with nonliteracy in the outside world, Rosenberg also spotlights their motivations to attend the Read/Write/Now Literacy Center. Initially, none of the study participants are interested in passing their GED or obtaining a specific educational goal (although Chief and Violeta mention new educational goals as they make gains in their literacy).

Chapter four, “Literacy and Nonliteracy: Reflective Knowledge and Critical Consciousness,” focuses less on the participants’ narrative voices; rather it presents more details of some of her interviews with the participants, as well as of their polished pieces of writing. In addition to witnessing the writing progress made by George, Violeta, Chief, and Lee Ann, readers are also privy to Rosenberg’s analysis of how each

of these participants is able to reflect on the world around them and, with a critical lens, analyze how they see literacy-based power operating around them. For instance, Rosenberg points out how George echoes scholars Paulo Freire and Elspeth Stuckey in his own explanation of how literacy can be used as a weapon against individuals in the nonliterate community. George explains that this form of social “violence” occurs when someone who is literate intentionally gives a nonliterate person something to read “to embarrass [the nonliterate person] around the other people” (93). George recognizes how this “power move” is meant to disempower those who are nonliterate. Despite his literacy status, Rosenberg demonstrates that George, as well as many other people who have not acquired literacy, is critically conscious of the world around him. Unfortunately, people like George are often labeled as being incapable of critical thought. Even more importantly, as Rosenberg points out, each participant’s reflections and analyses support individual goals. While George silently acquires the skill set for a job without exposing his nonliteracy, Violeta copes with a life changed by a positive HIV diagnosis. Additionally, as Chief contemplates the actions he can take in using his literacy to share ideas with others, Lee Ann contemplates how reading, like driving, will allow her individual empowerment in accomplishing daily tasks. Such detailed descriptions of participants’ range of literacies, analyses, and reflections illustrate an important lesson: the nonliterate community is very capable of critical cognitive abilities.

In chapter five, “What Writing Enables,” Rosenberg explains how literacy, specifically writing, allows those who are considered nonliterate to find ways to express their knowledge to communities. Rosenberg examines the direct correlation between the confidence her participants gained as writers, and the likelihood of their writing moving from the private to more public domains. However, it is important to note, as Rosenberg reports on her participants individually, that not everyone’s writing experiences looked the same. Rosenberg astutely demonstrates how some participants viewed writing as a means of community outreach, while others might only value writing for its daily practicality. Nevertheless, even this distinction of writing purposes among participants reinforces the ideology that individuals must be able to tell their own stories. These participants, neither pre- or post-literacy should not be assigned a single standard narrative by the literate community, as the typical narrative is built upon stereotypes of the nonliterate.

The concluding chapter, “The Transgressive Power of Writing,” points to some essential concerns regarding adult literacy in the United States, underscoring the gains from literacy skill sets. Recognizing that many adult literacy programs and the related studies usually focus on GED outcomes (and associated funding), Rosenberg

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advocates that adult literacy programs serve the individual goals of learners. She asserts that if we place an emphasis on writing as an active partner (rather than a secondary activity) to reading, then the transgressive potential of literacy is maximized. As a result, literacy instruction becomes one that directly addresses the needs of the people. In short, Rosenberg maintains her focus on strategies with outcomes focus on the community rather than the functional and employment concerns of the status quo.

Lauren Rosenberg does more than offer her perspective on adult literacy in *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*. She has accomplished an important contribution: giving voices to the voiceless by showcasing the voices of her participants. In earlier parts of the book, readers see that many of the participants' transcribed narratives and writing samples are unpolished. However, as the book progresses, writing samples improve and the voices become even more eloquent, thus illustrating the participants' progress during their time at the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center. Furthermore, the transcribed narratives allow readers to know the people within the narratives. The participants take center stage and expose the truths behind the social violence endured by the nonliterate class. The truths of George, Violeta, Chief, and Lee Ann's lived experiences are not overshadowed by the academic research: their presence is not secondary to those scholarly conversations on literacy. Rather, this monograph combines the empirical with the anecdotal in order to present a new view of adult literacy, providing a call-to-action for educators working to policies and curricula that drive Adult Basic Education programs.

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About the Author

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