

BEYOND WHAT WORKS: READING LITERACY RESEARCH—A REVIEW ESSAY

THE ANNUAL REVIEW OF ADULT LEARNING AND LITERACY: VOL 1

J. Comings, B. Garner, and C. Smith (Eds.) (2000). The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

LITERACY FOR LIVING: A STUDY OF LITERACY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN RURAL CANADIAN COMMUNITIES

William T. Fagan (1998). St. John's, NF: Memorial University, Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER).

LITERACY AND THE MIND: THE CONTEXTS AND COGNITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF LITERACY PRACTICE

Allan B. I. Bernardo (1998). Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO Institute for Education and Luzac Oriental.

Three recent books on adult literacy and learning offer diverse perspectives on the broad topic of what works: from research and policy in mainstream adult basic education (ABE) and English as a second official language (ESOL) programs in the United States, to the living of literacy in Newfoundland-Labrador in Canada, and the relationship between cognition and literacy acquisition in the Philippines. Each of these books offers readers a variety of findings and arguments to consider; they each raise questions about the methodological and theoretical frameworks that inform literacy research, and the polarization that seems to exist between functional perspectives (what works) and critical sociological perspectives (works for what, and for whom)? In this review these points are examined for each book in turn, and implications are extracted in the final paragraph.

The Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, Volume 1 is the first in a series, coordinated by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), in the United States. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is a collaborative effort between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and World Education (a nonprofit organization based in Boston). The annual review series is aimed at "policymakers, scholars and practitioners who are dedicated to improving the quality of adult basic education (ABE), adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and adult secondary education (ASE) programs" (p. xvii). This first volume contains 8 chapters that range in topics from new legislation, youth participation in adult literacy programs, implications for adult literacy of reading difficulties in young children, health literacy, the use of technology in adult literacy programs, and a review of trends and practices in adult learning and literacy in the United Kingdom.

Perhaps a more accurate title for this volume might be the annual review of adult learning and literacy *in the United States*. Although the issues and topics

included in this volume are pertinent and indeed common to policy makers and educators in what is an increasingly global context for adult literacy education, in nearly each chapter readers outside the U.S. must be prepared to wade through extensive citations of U.S.-based statistics, demographics, standardized test results, and legislative acts, as well as to familiarize themselves with terminologies particular to U.S. institutions. The strong representation of surveys and policy reviews in the volume are effective in detecting trends and drawing attention to the need for new research and policies, but means that complex and contested issues are treated with broad-brush strokes.

For example, in Fran Tracy-Mumford's chapter, "The Year 1998 in Review," over 20 new bills, acts, and legislation that shape adult literacy funding, policy, and participation in the U.S. are analyzed. Some acts, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act, outline intriguing and dramatic policy turns. Yet there is little analysis of the social and political origins and aims of this and other policies, or of what, taken together, they may mean for program participants, educators, civil society, and the learning culture in the U.S. For readers to meaningfully understand and analyze these policies requires, as Edmonston (2001) states, "a consideration of the present surface features, as well as a critical attention to the social history or the roots of a literacy reform effort" (p. 621).

The need for a critical perspective is evident in Elizabeth Hayes' chapter, "Youth in Adult Education Programs," which points to the growing number of school-aged youth and youth under 21 attending adult literacy programs to complete their secondary schooling. This highlights the changing learning needs of youth, the impact of increased societal expectations for educational attainment, and the possibility that secondary institutions are not meeting the needs of young people. The chapter is more effective in suggesting avenues for further research than in providing a deeper understanding of the range of circumstances that may drive youth away from secondary schools, or the choices youth make about their education. Voices from youth themselves would have provided a glimpse into what seems to be a poorly understood and little researched social and educational issue.

The compilation highlights several themes that may resonate with policy makers and adult literacy educators elsewhere. In the chapter by Catherine E. Snow and John Strucker "Lessons from Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young children for Adult Learning and Literacy," case histories of six adult literacy learners illustrate how their status as childhood at-risk readers, combined with circumstances of later childhood and adulthood, contributes to their status as adults who struggle with reading. Snow and Strucker draw attention to the need for bilingual and first language instruction in the early grades and in adult literacy programs (a point that Sussman, 2001, supports in her review of adult

literacy policy in Canada). They also call for adult literacy educators to become familiar with learners' life histories and the nature of their early reading difficulties.

Mary Hamilton and Juliet Merrifield's chapter "Adult Learning and Literacy in the United Kingdom" provides the international perspective in the volume; they portray a social historical and critical perspective that allows readers to effectively analyze what works, for what purposes, and for whom in terms of literacy policy reforms in that region. In their long, detailed chapter, they explore how the UK's participation in the new world order (a global world economy, increasing poverty, social inequality and unemployment, the shrinking of public services, and the centralization and standardization of education qualifications) has influenced ABE. The chapter is interwoven with "lessons" for readers in the U.S. (equally applicable to readers elsewhere) regarding curricula; accreditation of learners; and the professionalization of teachers, research, and partnerships. They conclude with the caveat: "Our concerns about the underlying purpose of ABE, the discourse about literacy, and the ways in which these can be overtaken by other political and social policy agendas [in the United Kingdom] could as easily be expressed about adult literacy in the United States" (p. 286).

In essence, the topics in this book are relevant, the chapters are well written, and the information and research are well placed, but a broader range of perspectives beyond what's happening and what works is missing. A more critical sociological orientation that asks, what works for whom, for what purposes, requires that future *Annual Reviews* include a broader range of research, theoretical disciplines, and the textured experiences of community-based settings within and beyond North America.

In *Literacy for Living: A Study of Literacy and Cultural Context in Rural Canadian Communities*, William T. Fagan sets out to document "the impact of literacy (or illiteracy)" (p. 14) on the lives of residents of Bridget's Harbour (a pseudonym), a Newfoundland community of 1, 600 people not far from St. John's. Fagan's core argument, and indeed the conclusion of his research, is that "literacy can not be understood in isolation from the larger socio-cultural context." The study should be of interest to researchers, policy makers, and practitioners seeking ways to link local culture and literacy programming. Major themes in the first half of the book include the meaning, role, and relationship of literacy to work, culture, and linguistic changes taking place in the daily lives of Bridget Harbour residents. In the more readable and intriguing second half of the book, Fagan considers the interplay between Newfoundland dialects and written language as this is played out in schools and literacy programs, particularly those associated with The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy (TAGS, a Canadian Federal

Government education and economic package for Newfoundland and Labrador following the demise of the cod fishery).

Drawing on the work of Taylor (1996), Fagan analyses the power relationships between the federal government scientists and bureaucrats and the cod fishers and how these are played out through literacy practices. The interplay among literacy, identity, and power in this chapter is fascinating. Residents who considered themselves and were considered by their community as literate suddenly found, with the demise of the fishery, that they were not literate enough to "make it" in employment retraining programs outside the fishery. Moreover, bureaucratic literacy—"Our lives are bunch of forms" (p. 203)—had overtaken their lives. Perhaps the strength of this section can be attributed to Fagan's extensive use of raw data on TAGS.

Although the study is about "cultural values and literacy" (p. 20), Fagan cautions at the outset that it is "not an argument for a socio-cultural interpretation of literacy" (p. 11). Rather, he states, "it is an attempt to use the actual data to suggest interpretation and to use theory to explain the living of literacy in the particular communities" (p. 11). There is, however, an awkward relationship between interpretation and theory throughout the book which relates both to the research methodology and the theoretical framework.

Fagan describes his study as an ethnography, but it is more accurately a survey complemented by participant observation. Data collection methods included participant-observation, the consultation of local print materials, and a survey—the results of which are presented in tabular form throughout the book. After a year of participant observation, Fagan developed the survey questions and four women in the community carried out the survey. Fagan then interpreted the survey responses from his "theoretical insights largely based on data arising from participant observations" (p. 24). In the absence of in-depth interview or participant observation data made available in the text, the reader must rely on Fagan's interpretation alone, a situation not normally associated with the *thick descriptions* of ethnography. Fagan argues, "There were too many participants for such ethnographic description" (p. 24). Without such thick descriptions it becomes important to consider the interpretive framework Fagan uses to explain the "living of literacy" (p. 11) among his respondents. Although there is a large and growing body of interdisciplinary research that explores literacy in social context and as a social practice (e.g., Barton, 1994; Mace, 1993; Street, 1995), and despite its similarities to his own in terms of the aims and methods, Fagan makes little reference to this newer research. Indeed, the majority of the texts cited in the research are from the early to mid 1980s, which leads to a rather anti-climatic conclusion: "The data point to the emergence of a new literacy in which different factors become focal, and these factors must be addressed by literacy policies and programs" (p. 214).

Fagan also presents an essentialist and romantic view of the community and of the past. "The people are intelligent, hardworking, adaptable and independent" (p. 23). Some examples of community culture and values are drawn from Fagan's own memory, (pp. 27, 113) and reminiscences from seniors (in the chapter "Those Were the Times"). Although this makes for interesting reading, the message is that the good old days are gone and "there isn't very much special today, is there?" (p. 125). The absence of documentation of youth culture and oral language leaves the impression that the younger generations have little ingenuity, resourcefulness, or culture to document or describe.

In spite of its shaky theoretical framework, and its questionable status as an ethnographic study, this work contributes to adult educators' understanding of daily life and the living of literacy in one Newfoundland community. Its location outside of literacy programs and large statistical surveys is innovative and a welcome approach, which I hope will usher in a new body of socio-cultural research in Canada.

Literacy and the Mind: The Contexts and Cognitive Consequences of Literacy Practice by Allan B. I. Bernardo similarly raises provocative issues surrounding functional and sociological perspectives. Bernardo examined the effects of literacy acquisition on five cognitive processes (conceptual understanding, conceptual categorization, conceptual comparison, deductive reasoning, and explanation) in four rural and one urban Filipino community. In doing so, he takes on two polarized positions in literacy research and policy: whether literacy automatically leads to global transformations in thought and more abstract thinking, or whether the effects of literacy are more specific to local practices.

The five communities were selected from previous literacy research by other researchers; their profiles make interesting reading on the social, economic, and cultural life of each community and the varying roles for literacy in each of these settings. As Bernardo observes,

The specific features of the communities themselves, in particular the nature of the integral activities and practices of the communities, were also expected to play important roles in determining the effects of literacy on how people know, organize, reason out, and explain the different elements of their experience. (p. 34)

The five middle chapters of the book present the statistical results of assessments designed to reveal the relationship among respondents between literacy acquisition and five cognitive processes. Bernardo found that literacy acquisition in and of itself does not affect thought, rather it is the degree to which literacy skills have been integrated into community activities and practices (p. 124). This concept of literacy integration has important implications for

literacy research and policy; it further challenges the developmental perspective of literacy as having a generalized effect on individual thought, and it calls attention to the community contexts that shape literacy. Respondents who did display cognitive characteristics usually attributed to literacy were from a community with a very active social, cultural, and political life, where they participated in workshops, training sessions, planning related to establishing co-operatives, and so on. Bernardo argues that the current practice in Filipino literacy programs of integrating literacy instruction with livelihood, cultural, and social contextual issues is beneficial because it "responds to local issues while building on cognitive and learning skills that are already in place" (p. 131). He concludes, "in order to ensure the sustainability of literacy skills, literacy practices must be integrated into community activities" (p. 133).

Bernardo's research is innovative in its marrying of quantitative research approaches with locally developed assessment strategies. He bases his study in psycholinguistic and developmental theories and arrives at sociocultural conclusions. I wonder, however: If he had reviewed existing sociocultural research documenting and defining arguments for literacy as social practice, would he have carried out the same study, or perhaps looked for something different? As in Fagan's work and the work of editors and authors in the *Annual Review of Adult Literacy and Learning*, this suggests a need for literacy researchers to situate their work in interdisciplinary perspectives. By ignoring or marginalizing certain bodies of research over others, literacy research, policy, and practice remain at the level of what works. To improve and to understand literacy education, what we literacy educators really need to know is how we got where we are and what the daily experiences of learners can tell us about where we need to be.

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