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## The Word and the World: The Cultural Politics of Literacy in Brazil

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*The Word and the World: The Cultural Politics of Literacy in Brazil* by Lesley Bartlett (review)

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## ***The Word and the World: The Cultural Politics of Literacy in Brazil***

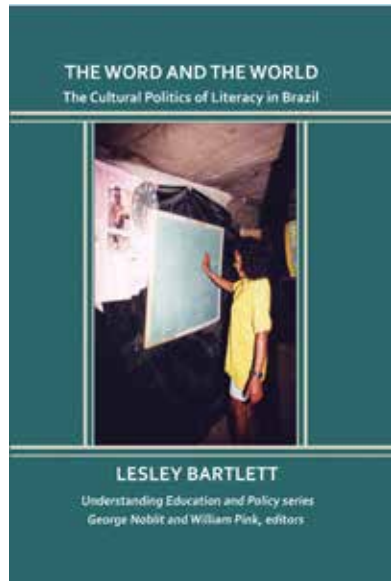
Lesley Bartlett

New Jersey: Hampton P, 2010. 232 pp.

***Reviewed by Katie Silvester and Anne-Marie Hall***

University of Arizona

Lesley Bartlett's *The Word and the World* offers *CLJ* readers a global, comparative perspective on Freirean-inspired community literacy work. Based on 27-months of ethnographic data collected in Brazilian literacy programs, Bartlett's book constructively rethinks Freire's critical literacy pedagogy in its native context as well as the so-called "consequences" of literacy in the larger context of development discourses engineered by international non-governmental organizations. Drawing on a feminist poststructural critique of power and socio-cultural theories of literacy, the book develops three major lines of argument: 1) literacy by itself does not create change; therefore, 2) any discussion of the impact of literacy must include consideration of the social contexts of literate practices and policies, and 3) the study of critical pedagogy as a situated practice reveals the limitations of



Freirean praxis especially around issues of knowledge, power, and the limits of dialogue. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 reflect what Bartlett describes as the "ethnographic heart" of the book, a deeply qualitative analysis of literacy ideologies and praxis among teachers and students in one Brazilian community literacy program. From this analysis, Bartlett concludes that while Freirean critical literacy pedagogy has done much to expand a socio-cultural critique of literacy in people's lives, the insistence among practitioners that critical literacy work will lead to people's empowerment is teleological rather than actually transformative, and hence problematic. Ultimately, Bartlett argues for "new critical literacy studies," as future work that will refresh Freirean critical literacy praxis by disrupting older, limiting notions of what local literacy is and does by carefully critiquing language inequality through power relations both in the classroom and beyond. Consequently *The Word and the World* has relevance for *CLJ* readers looking for a more global perspective, as Bartlett demonstrates how community literacy praxis does, can, and should evolve internationally. At the same time, this book is of particular relevance to literacy workers in the field given its discussion of the obstacles that local

educators face when they try to enact Freirean pedagogy.

As two reviewers with experience conducting ethnographic literacy research in international contexts, we engage in dialogue around *The Word and the World* below. By engaging in this dialogue we hope to address what is surprising and relevant about this work for other literacy researchers and scholars. The review considers three questions in light of our reading: What is Bartlett's criticism of Freire? What is the most surprising aspect of her argument? How does this research inform community literacy?

## What is Lesley Bartlett's criticism of Freire?

AMH: Bartlett merely reads Freire "against the grain" through the lens of feminist poststructural theory and sociocultural theories of literacy. She is ever respectful of Freire's enormous contributions to pedagogy and critical literacy and considers Freire almost a "saint." Still she examines his pedagogy (which she argues is really more a philosophy or social theory than a teaching method) as an *ideology*, a system of ideas and beliefs, and then she proceeds to study the struggles that occur when his pedagogy is implemented by literacy educators in Brazil who are ostensibly trained in Freirean theories. I suspect that one thing Bartlett discovered in Brazil is also true of many educators in the US who use Paulo Freire—they are mostly familiar with his early work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and his ideas about problem-posing education and the banking concept of education. Most know little of his middle work (the talking books) or his later work such as *Pedagogy of Hope*, in which Freire reflects on the twenty years since *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published. In this later work, he cautions that he never intended Freirean pedagogy to become a methodology, and he argues that it is not just learning content that matters but also the understanding of the *whys* of the positions or places in which we find ourselves. Finally, it is the added elaboration on the necessity of hope in our lives that really bookends this work with his earlier, better known book.

Additionally, Bartlett argues that Freire's concept of power leads him to "construct unproductive dichotomies" such as dominant knowledge/popular knowledge, teachers as authoritarian/emancipatory, and education as oppressive/liberatory (117). Bartlett demonstrates in Chapter 5 that these dichotomies stymied the work of the teachers in her study. She uses Foucault to broaden Freire's discussion of power, citing Foucault's argument that power is continually exercised by all people but for different ends and outcomes. Thus it circulates constantly. By deconstructing such binary approaches for the classroom, Bartlett argues that Freire's philosophical pedagogy overgeneralizes power as possession and universalizes oppression.

I was particularly impressed with Bartlett's nuanced discussion of dialogue. While aware that poststructuralists critique dialogue as the "hegemony of reasonableness," Bartlett troubles the notion that teacher-student dialogue does much more than move a student toward a "correct" readings of a text or situation. Dialogue in a literacy education project is never innocent and frequently, well-intentioned teachers ignore

the politics of linguistic interaction, thinking somehow that correct thinking and knowledge lead to emancipation (142).

KS: Bartlett's exploration of Freirean critical literacy pedagogy as ideology is interesting, especially in the way she asks us to think carefully about what we, as literacy educators and researchers, mean by our educational projects. Early on in the book, Bartlett expands the scope of educational projects as not just skill-driven initiatives, but also socio-cultural and political initiatives. Accordingly, Bartlett defines literacy programs as "durable (but not permanent) constellations of *institutions, financial resources, social actors, ideologies, discourses, pedagogies, and theories of knowledge and learning*" that shape the way people think about schooling and its purpose (52). Her overall argument is undergirded by an ideological view of literacy, which Bartlett borrows from seminal works in New Literacy Studies. In these works, two competing views of literacy are often scrutinized for their social implications. The first view is of literacy as "autonomous." That means reading and writing work independently from other social factors, in people's overall development. An "ideological" view of literacy, on the other hand, argues for a more situated perspective of people's development wherein the cultural understanding and practice of literacy plays a constitutive role. For Bartlett, as well as other New Literacy Studies scholars, it's not literacy's outcomes that are as significant or as interesting as people's *beliefs* about what literacy is and what literacy does. Bartlett's research centers on these ideologically framed questions—what people believe about literacy and how they enact these beliefs in everyday practice—in the context of critical literacy projects in the birthplace of Freirean pedagogy, Brazil.

Students' and teachers' ideological views of literacy are in conflict in Bartlett's book. The "ethnographic heart" of her research is grounded in observation and interview data and qualitative analysis of teachers' views of critical literacy as a powerful, social transformer. Yet, similar research of student views reveals some disturbance of this ideal in actual practice. For example, while teachers lauded Freirean pedagogy for its emancipatory potential and its power to "alphabetize in order to politicize", students' views of reading and writing index literacy knowledge as "good manners" and "speaking well," not mobilization for social change. Additionally, Bartlett found that at the level of classroom practice, Freirean ideals fall short and that the actual dynamics of power, knowledge, and speech in the classroom do not always reflect teachers' perceived goal of critical literacy to emancipate students' from social inequality. Rather, classroom activity often reified the status quo as students and teachers seemed to lack the skills to manage Freirean dialogue effectively. In Bartlett's observations teachers often let students' unexamined experiences drive classroom discussions in circles out of fear that intervening in students' understanding of their own experiences would be a forceful imposition of "schooled" knowledge onto "popular" knowledge. The middle chapters of the book are mostly preoccupied with the problems of managing transformative, Freirean dialogue and negotiating experience and knowledge in the literacy classroom. These chapters help to support Bartlett and others' ideological view of literacy and the idea that literacy teaching and learning is more than just the transference of reading and writing skills. Bartlett's work reminds me of the deeply ideological implications of

the work we do as literacy educators, especially when our motives seem to spring from good intentions and even claim to be transformative.

### What is Bartlett's most surprising argument?

KS: For me, Bartlett's most surprising arguments come in Chapter 4, "Education and Shame," where she highlights the overlooked dimension of emotions, especially shame, in enabling the cultural production of language inequality. First, Bartlett's use of Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus of field, capital, and habitus in this chapter is worth mentioning for the particular light these terms shed on language inequality in general. Through Bourdieu, Bartlett argues that people encounter literacy in linguistic fields, or spaces of linguistic practice, where different forms of oral and literate production are legitimated differently. These forms are composed of various language resources, which have symbolic exchange value that, much like monetary currency, differs across various social fields. Bartlett calls the symbolic exchange value of people's language resources, linguistic capital. She draws on Bourdieu's term, habitus, to talk about the limits of people's linguistic capital. Habitus in this sense, points to people's socialization into subjectivities, or habits of mind and body and language solidified in years of layered social experience. A person's habitus limits her or his mobilization of linguistic resources as capital since the language usage of differently socialized subjectivities is considered more or less acceptable to differently privileged listeners in and across historical spaces of language use. Therefore, Bartlett suggests that the concepts of field, capital, and habitus provide essential theoretical terminology for thinking about the value of literacy tied to the social contexts in which it is situated. For Bourdieu there can be no universally significant form of linguistic capital, for all language is situated. However, Bartlett departs from Bourdieu on this point, arguing that while theoretically language and literacy are situated practices, many people continue to believe in and desire a language and literacy concept that is more universal. In her work, the desire for a universal and autonomous literacy is tied to language shame, that is shame over vernacular ways of talking and being in the world, and is repeatedly expressed by the informants in her study as strong motivator for taking up literacy work in the community.

I think it's important for literacy workers and researchers to think carefully about how literacy practice is socially, discursively, symbolically, and even emotionally mediated in the classroom and beyond and how this mediated language practice reflects not only local attitudes and beliefs about language and people, but also global attitudes and beliefs about language and people embedded in the local. Bartlett structures the narrative of her research by, at first, taking a careful and critical look at a particular pedagogy and then measuring that pedagogy against the language beliefs, practices, and emotional experiences of actual people in local contexts where people's international development, their development relative to other people's development globally, is a national priority. We need more research, like Bartlett's, in the field of community literacy to make the connections—among cultural language attitudes and

people's emotional encounters with language, and among community practices and global language policies—more apparent.

AMH: I was particularly struck by Bartlett's critique of the ubiquitous "literacy myth"—that "narrative of the redeeming effects of literacy" that Bartlett's fieldwork shows is highly overrated. The students in these literacy projects in Brazil were not led to conscientization or to social change by this Freirean/critical pedagogy. Rather what truly benefited students was the experience of being in a setting where social networks and relationships cultivated in school truly improved their economic standing—not the "content" learned in school. I think the romanticism of critical pedagogy is thoroughly disrupted in this text. Literacy contributes to the expansion of social networks and it was those relationships that had an effect on economic mobility. In community literacy programs in the US, I think of how demonstrating a strong work ethic, meeting other people, and improving self-esteem all contribute to empowerment. We need to be more conscious of the affordances literacies offer people and also the capricious ways they are used and linked. I guess I would say this is a point worth repeating: many critical pedagogues who consider themselves Freiristas continue to believe that literacy will conscientize individuals and lead to social change. Or worse, political activism. But for those who work in community literacy programs, it is wise to realize that this is an overly simplified and naïve understanding of critical pedagogy. Bartlett's rupturing of this particular literacy myth is powerful. Literacy is ecological and supports the elaborate relationships between people and their environments. Literacy practices, then, are directly tied to their local contexts where surviving on a daily basis is far more important than engaging in intellectually-challenging literacy pursuits. And I do not mean to romanticize poverty in any way by suggesting that the literacy skills needed to survive involve complex mental strategies and are, indeed, enough. However, it bears saying that there are ways of knowing that are highly skilled and that don't involve "official" constructions of literacy.

### In what ways can community literacy be informed by Bartlett's work?

KS: Readers of *CLJ* might wonder about congruence between Bartlett's critique of critical pedagogy and community literacy. They might ask, in what ways can/should community literacy (or a working definition of community literacy, at least) inform or be informed by Bartlett's work? I think that we could argue that Bartlett's critique of Bourdieu and her focus on the dimensions of emotion, especially shame, in the cultural production of power in education and language inequality may resonate with work in community literacy that seeks to build connections between marginalized speaker/writers and a larger community. Additionally, Bartlett's critique of Freire around notions of experience, knowledge production, and dialogue are key issues being worked out in the more recent scholarship of community literacy specialists, especially in Linda Flower's work regarding the rhetoric of public engagement and Elenore Long's work on the rhetoric of local publics. Certainly, both critical pedagogy and community literacy scholars have something to gain in critically and reflexively considering how teaching,

tutoring, or mentoring practices, literacy sponsorship, and teleology in the field reify universal and/or autonomous notions of literacy. Furthermore, a better understanding of our own and others' emotional attachment to different ideas about literacy is needed in order to more fully explore how universal literacies operate locally. But aside from theory, literacy teaching and learning continues to engage people politically, culturally, and economically for better or for worse.

AMH: Community literacy workers need to continue to see literacy education as a political struggle and always work to create more egalitarian relations in the classroom between students and teachers. It is reasonable to assume that literacy has the potential to make things less unequal; however, it is also important for educators to realize that school-based notions of literacy do not automatically translate into empowerment for learners. Bartlett does an excellent job in critiquing notions of improved self-esteem as somehow resulting in "empowerment." In fact, it was not literacy per se that improved students' lives. Her data showed that literacy had no predictable effect on students because the students applied literacy to such divergent ends. Nor did most students become increasingly economically mobile; indeed, the link between literacy schooling and improved employment was weak. Finally, rethinking power as something that circulates and is "simultaneously exercised and experienced by all" (170) is particularly grounding for community literacy workers. I agree with Bartlett that we need to question the Freirean belief that conscientization, or a full critical knowledge unfiltered by reigning discursive structures and regimes of truth, is possible (174).