

## \* Reviews

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*Situated Literacies. Reading and Writing in Context.* By David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic (eds.) London: Routledge, 2000. ISBN 0-415-20671-5. £17.99 paperback.  
*City Literacies. Learning to Read across Generations and Cultures.* By Eve Gregory and Ann Williams. London: Routledge, 2000. ISBN 0-415-19116-5. £15.99 paperback.  
*Global Literacies and the World-Wide Web.* By Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selffe (eds.) London: Routledge, 2000. ISBN 0-415-18942-X. £16.99 paperback.

The three books under review are first publications in a new series, Literacies, edited by David Barton. *Situated Literacies* in many ways sets the tone for the series, as we might expect from the series editor's direct involvement, but also offers a distinctive contribution in its own right. Thirteen chapters contain a useful balance between more theoretical work, discussing social theory and ethnographic research, and more empirical reports of projects pursued by individuals. All contributors are members or have participated as invited visitors, in the Lancaster University Literacy Research Group, and this is evident in the essays' common concerns and vocabularies. It is a point of strength, not weakness, that much work is recognisably extended from earlier publications such as Barton and Hamilton (1998), or will be partly familiar to BAAL members from conference presentations. Cross-references, though not extensive, are meaningful, rather than forced; issues and themes recur because they arise from this larger project, not meretriciously. The same point can be made about the series as a whole, where single chapters -again not a criticism, quite the opposite -could easily have appeared in another volume. Concluding chapters by James Gee and Janet Maybin, and a brief foreword by Denny Taylor, add depth and relevance for those working outside the UK or in areas not quite coincident with the range of fields reported in this collection.

'Literacy practices' are the interest of all this work, 'social practices in which literacy has a role' (p.7), in particular 'vernacular literacies' (p.12) as opposed to the dominant literacies of education: 'what people do with texts and what these activities mean to them' (p. 9) in their everyday lives. Thus six more empirical chapters begin with Anita Wilson on prison literacies (Ch.4), Kathryn Jones on Welsh farmers at market (Ch.5), or, as new takes on literacy and education which fully recognise the importance of what goes on outside classrooms, Chs. 6-9 (Ormerod and Ivanic; Pitt; de Pourbaix; Pardoe). Other chapters concentrate more on theoretical or methodological issues (Barton and Hamilton, Ch.1; Hamilton, Ch.2; Tusting, Ch.3; Gee, Ch.11; Maybin, Ch.12; Tusting, Ivanic and Wilson, Ch.13). Anita Wilson's work reinvigorates the tired label 'Applied Linguistics', and reminds us why academic research should make a difference. She presents literacies' role in the struggle against 'losing your mind' in extended incarceration, the struggle for identity, and in relating prison existence to the 'real world' Outside. Here is ethnography at its best as extended long term participation, even if, as fully recognised, Wilson is in the completely different situation of being able to go home after a few hours. At the same time, the consistent misspelling of Bhabha as

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'Bhaba' pointed, with the references to Gee, to a certain quality of bricolage in the theoretical model proposed, where prisoners are seen to occupy a 'third space'. This may be a case where the researcher will do better to develop her own theory from the data rather than borrow and apply pre-existing models. Ormerod and Ivanic report a longitudinal observation of primary children's literacies. The strength of the piece is its attention to the children's projects as material objects. The disappointment, in my view, is the failure to signal awareness of related work which could deepen this investigation (leaving aside dangers of wheel re-invention), in the work of Chartier or Darnton (history of the book as a material object, editing) or, in particular, McGann (1990, for example). This is a very exciting area where the applied linguists and the textual critics should be talking to each other. Interdisciplinarity should be integral to New Literacy Studies (NLS). I also felt that in a collection devoted to literacy as a social practice, the authors had not fully reported the extent to which these children's projects (I speak as a parent and parent observer!) are collaborative projects. There was too much of a sense of the 'author' [sic] as single artist, where again, McGann or Chartier tell a very different story.

Lest I sound more critical than I intended, let me recommend in particular two of the theoretical chapters, those of Gee and Pardoe. In Pardoe's 'Respect and the pursuit of "Symmetry" in researching literacy and student writing', the social theory (the Science Studies of Latour (1993) and others) is very plausibly integrated and contributes to the developing idea, in itself simple and fundamental, of the need for listening and understanding in dealing with students, taking 'poor writing' very seriously rather than taking the 'deficit' view of student literacies in higher education. This is the essay to show doubters who argue that NLS does nothing to help students who 'can't write'. Such a view, as Pardoe argues, focuses 'on what is not there, rather than what is there' (p.150). '[N]on-standard and low-status literacy practices may also be highly functional, and even highly rational, in different social contexts' (p.151). Thus 'respect' and 'symmetry' recognise, crucially, 'that we have something to learn from the texts and practices of unsuccessful writers, and have something to learn even from their own accounts of these' (p.154). 'Symmetry' theory, derived from 'sociology of knowledge', chimes well with the NLS programme, as Pardoe demonstrates. In line with much other contemporary research on academic literacies, Pardoe shows the multiple and conflicting goals feeding into the product such as the 'essay' which receives a weak mark for being 'badly written'.

Gee's chapter is both inspiring and daunting. The fluency with which he summarises ethnomethodology and conversational analysis, discursive psychology, the ethnography of speaking, sociohistorical psychology, situated cognition, cultural models theory, cognitive linguistics, new science and technology studies, modern composition theory, connectionism, narrative studies, evolutionary approaches to mind and behaviour, and modern sociology, not to mention post-structuralist and postmodernist work, as overlapping elements of a 'social turn' in contemporary thought, and assesses their political potential, while it will leave some specialists dissatisfied, is very revealing for those of us (the 'daunting' bit) who can't conceive of time to read and master all these state of the art references across so many diverse fields. This

theoretical-practical-political nexus is clearly central to the project of NLS, as Gee argues, and a long way from fulfilment in days of ‘literacy hours’ and the like, all of which can be very depressing to those of us who research language and literacy rather than dictate glib government policies. Gee does well to key in Lancaster research to ‘new work order’ discourses. The final three chapters of the collection all try to assess how far we have come and how far still remains to travel, and the volume as a whole forms a valuable basis for later contributions to the series. One final characteristic chapter is Barton’s own notes derived from his teaching of NLS, implementing theory practically, making a difference. Another fine example from a stimulating book.

Gregory and Williams, while distancing themselves from any narrow view of ‘new literacy studies’ emphatically add a ‘new’ dimension to the understanding of ‘City Literacies... across generations and cultures’ in their book, namely children’s literacies, seen as neglected by NLS to date (p.11). An essay from *Situated Literacies* which makes valuable introductory reading for *City Literacies* is Kathy Pitt’s chapter (Ch.7) on ‘Family Literacy’ as the government’s new panacea for literacy ‘problems’ in schools and society. Pitt’s nuanced and sensible critical account is part of the same debate as Gregory and Williams’s investigations. *City Literacies* is divided into three Parts. Part I gives a broad contextualising historical introduction to the geographical area covered by the book (map p.xix), Spitalfield, east of The City (of London), to the people who have immigrated there in historical waves in modern times, and to the history of schooling in the area. Part II (the longest) deals with the ‘Childhood memories of literacy and learning’ of three generations in three chapters, mostly female (p.16): those born before 1939 who spoke with the authors; those born from 1945 on, under the Welfare State, attending local schools in the 1950s and ‘60s’; and finally presenting interviews with a group of Bangladeshi-British women born between 1969 and 1977, already relatively successful professionals with tertiary educations. An Epilogue concludes the book. Photos and illustrations really add texture to the book (compare Hamilton’s chapter in *Situated Literacies*), and particularly full notes reflect long and detailed ongoing engagement by the authors. (But why was the blurb written by someone who hadn’t read the book?! Or did the project change from an earlier proposal?). A Prologue and Introduction highlight the main themes for readers.

Gregory and Williams (G&W) begin by critiquing four ‘myths’ surrounding the learning of reading in urban, multi-cultural areas. Myth 1: economic poverty dictates poor literacy skills. G & W investigate successful readers in this study, and stress the success of readers from their economically deprived area. Myth 2: success with reading requires a certain kind of parenting: supposedly ‘good’ parenting reading practices were not generally followed by the parents of the successful readers interviewed here. Myth 3: a mismatch of language and learning styles at home and at school will produce ‘problems’. ‘This book highlights ways in which children syncretise or blend home, community and school language and learning styles to enhance both home achievement and official school achievement’ (xvii). Myth 4: the myth of a ‘correct method’ of teaching reading: the whole approach of teachers as individuals and personalities is found to be important here, but no single method or set of common practices between

teachers of successful readers emerges, despite current government nostrums. Like Pardoe, G & W immersed in the area personally and professionally, look not at what should have happened in principle, but at what did happen in certain specific cases. In fact, beyond simply challenging those myths with counter-evidence, City Literacies could be said to elaborate a briskly oppositional counter-hypothesis with much supporting evidence: the importance of ‘contrastive’ literacies for early reading success (i.e. literacies in different languages and domains).

Part I’s review of historical immigration and mobility into and out of the area leads to the conclusion ‘that, despite the economic poverty of its population, in cultural terms. Spitalfields must be one of the richest boroughs in the country’ (p.66). Part II recounts participants’ memories from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the present. Jewish children or Bangladeshis are traced attending long hours of out of school formal classes associated with their religions, as well as entering into a whole wide range of literacy practices in their everyday lives. The authors argue that “‘literacy”, “reading” and “writing” cannot be separated from “learning” in general and, indeed, the whole of ‘getting on in life’ (p.71). There is too much of interest to summarise easily here -the importance (not ‘undesirability’) of reading without understanding, the linguistic and metalinguistic fascination of reading other languages, for two. Even so I will enter one methodological reservation at this point. I personally became uncomfortable with the recounting of memories as the authoritative source of evidence. Memory is notoriously creative and fickle. Thus I note Abby (who later became a horticulturist) remembering at one point her enjoyment of daffodils in Kew Gardens (p.96), which have already been reported as bluebells (p.5t). A slip of the researcher’s notes, or symptomatic of a wider issue? The ‘value-free’ style in which these reminiscences are all reported as fact is cumulatively disturbing. The reader wants more of a sign from the researcher-writer that these accounts need to be treated precisely as accounts, and no more (or less) privileged than that. Another related aspect of these reservations is the implicit suggestion that somehow the accounts we are being given are representative, when of course we are actually listening to the exceptions, the successes who have the time and interest to talk to these researchers. While I understand the importance of contesting Blunkett-Bulstrode certainties, life is not all rosy for all children in Tower Hamlets today any more than in the past. The authors explicitly signal this, but I am reporting the tone, the overall impression of the book.

In fact I would have liked more of the kind of interactions and events directly reported in Part III. Chapter 6, for example, looks at the workings of the National Curriculum and its mindset on home and community literacy practices with transcripts. Lest it be thought that my reservations regarding this fascinating and well worthwhile book are unfair, let me quote the authors themselves in their own Introduction, where they present themselves as moving between ethnography and ethnomethodology, and leading me to expect much more of the latter than we actually get: ‘Instead of asking the ethnographic question ‘what is happening here?’ the question posed by ethnomethodologists is ‘what are the structures constituting the activity of interest and how do discourse forms reveal how “knowledge” is produced?’ (p.15).

My last title is perhaps the weakest of a strong bunch, and this may be because here the writers are not joint authors or a research group so much as a mainly North American virtual community, united mainly by forceful editors asking them to orient themselves to Street (1995). I perceive less coherence in this collection, though it is important to juxtapose that comment with the editors' introduction. For Hawisher and Selfe, then, the web is ambiguous: 'what we offer with this collection is a vision of the Web as a complicated and contested site for postmodern literary practices' (p.15). The web is not a 'conduit', a neutral medium of expression. Access, as we know, is limited to wealthier portions and citizens of the world, and the technology tends to form its subjects and their interactions in certain predictable ways. Nevertheless: 'The Web also provides a site for transgressive literacy practices that express and value difference; that cling to historical, cultural, and racial diversity; and that help groups and individuals constitute their own multiple identities through language.' (p.15) And yet...twenty three contributors, only three or four not US by nationality or institutional affiliation? The claims to globalism can sound less convincing than the notes on the importance of the local!

But enough carping. The book is stuffed with up to date references in a fast moving field. Ten chapters in three Parts cover issues of 'culture and difference' in Hungary, Greece and Australia; Identities (Palauan, Norwegian, Japanese, Scottish and American); and 'Conflict and Hybridity' (Mexico, Cuba, Afro-America and South Africa). This is a rich mix, and, significantly, Bhabha is spelt more conventionally in a collection closer to cultural studies than to what some readers of BAAL News may consider applied linguistics. One particularly stimulating chapter was McConaghy and Snyder, 'Working the web in postcolonial Australia' (Ch.3). Here indigenous Australian people are reported to be making progressive political use of the web 'to subvert colonial literacy practices' (p.76). The term 'postcolonial' takes on life as the subjecting of 'contemporary colonial forces to the important processes of critique' (p.78). A naive early UNESCO image of literacy as in itself emancipation for indigenous peoples is nevertheless seen to bear some weight as the web allows the very local to present itself globally. More concrete examples would have helped, but the relevance of the net to the postcolonial project is well argued. Kitalong and Kitalong, 'Complicating the tourist gaze: literacy and the Internet [sic] as catalysts for articulating a postcolonial Palauan identity' (Ch.4) also impressed me. A disastrous bridge collapse, news of which would previously 'have taken months or even years to percolate out to thousands of expatriate Palauans...was available almost immediately' (p.96). In place of the usual 'tourist gaze' internet browsing, a genuine 'imagined community' came into coherence across the net. Kitalong and Kitalong argue with examples that Palauans are finding in this new technology a site where they can begin to speak for themselves and articulate a more authentic identity than the touristic frame usually on offer, even to discover the potential for joint political action. (Compare, whatever you think of it, the petrol crisis engineered by exploiters of new technology in Britain a year and a half ago). These events and ideas are suggestive and have a wider implication, exactly as the editors argue for all their essays.

New literacy studies see literacy as culturally constructed and situated, involving wider ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing and believing. Diversity, multilingualism, multiculturalism and difference in general is to be foregrounded rather than factored out (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996). In all these ways all three books under review contribute importantly to the further establishment of NLS as a productive research paradigm for our times and add up to a very auspicious start to the series.

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