

New Literacy Studies: Some Matters of Concern

Mariolina Salvatori

As I write this response, the end of the term is nearing, and with it, the end of my weekly meetings with a diverse group of graduate students (literature program, writing program, school of education, composition program) enrolled in my “Literacy and Pedagogy” seminar. The issues raised by this symposium’s contributors resonate and echo back with the seminar’s term-long collective investigation, so it is from within this context and through the concerns these graduate students have articulated throughout the term that I want to join the conversation.

But first a few words about the seminar itself, the historical, theoretical, and ideological scrutiny of literacy and pedagogy it calls for, the reflexive inquiry it incites, and the contributions this kind of inquiry can make to a discussion of “the implications of Literacy Studies research, theory, and practice for Composition Studies” (*LiCS* Mission Statement). I started teaching this seminar in the late 1980s. What I had initially proposed was a seminar in histories, theories and practices of pedagogy (which eventually, led to my articulation of “pedagogy as reflexive praxis” (Salvatori 4). The intellectual atmosphere of my department at the time was beginning to be hospitable to the idea that advanced graduate students from our different programs, with their different teaching experiences and theoretical backgrounds, could benefit from such a course of study. But, it was suggested, it might be strategic for me to combine “pedagogy” with “literacy,” since as the subject of a graduate seminar, literacy would carry greater intellectual weight than pedagogy, and attract more students (and, I sensed, raise fewer faculty eyebrows). Needless to say, I was taken aback by the suggestion, but because I was equally invested in the study of theories of literacy, I complied and decided to foreground in my course proposal what would have been in any case two of my planned lines of critical inquiry: what kinds of literacy different theories of reading and writing, and their pedagogical enactments, assume and can presume to foster (*Cultural Literacy* was earning large numbers of academic and non-academic acolytes); and what can a critical and reflexive study of pedagogy contribute to and draw from the study of literacy. The “and” in the title became and has since remained the central focus of the seminar’s theoretical investigations, a nexus that through the years, because of different texts and different students, has consistently disclosed new and exciting “matters of concern” (Latour) for graduate students who are about to make crucial decisions about their professional future.

Since the very first time, the diversity of students’ backgrounds and interests led to more expansive and inclusive articulations of the seminar’s original *keywords* and concepts (Glascott), and *consequently* of the seminar’s affordances (Vieira). Even before we read Street, the use of the singular for literacy and pedagogy in the original title soon felt inaccurate, constrictive, but for bureaucratic reasons, it could not be changed. Thus “the singular” remained. But it consistently occasioned early

and productive acts of terminological and conceptual problematization.

I am retiring next year. So this is the last time I will have taught this seminar (I guess the real motivation for my writing this “little narrative” (Young) is to offer it as a thank-you note to current and former students for the literacy *they* sponsored). Undoubtedly reflective of a complicated set of local and global reasons (from departmental graduate course offerings to disciplinary trends to job market prospects), to my delight and without much prodding on my part, since our very first meeting participants have tended to invert the order of the key words in the title, consistently focusing on pedagogy as a means of investigating and assessing literacies’ affordances and they have cogently articulated trenchant critiques of what they have perceived as facile and debilitating conceptualizations of pedagogy in some of the assigned texts. Focusing on pedagogy as reflexive praxis, they have raised astute and cogent questions about the extent to which those who claim to be theorists of pedagogy need to make manifest the assumptions about the literacies that undergird their projects so that they can reflect on and assess what they can plausibly and responsibly teach. And they have raised equally astute and cogent questions about the pedagogical possibilities of *both* academic and non-academic, schooled and everyday, literacies (Flannery, Horner).

In spite of their theoretical, programmatic, intellectual and institutional heterogeneity, the ten seminar participants have tended to return, over and over again, to three sets of interlocked issues, which the six contributions to this symposium suggest should be areas of concern for the future of both literacy and compositions studies: (1) the enervating *definitional vacuity* resulting from frequently un-theorized definitions and un-reflexive uses of the terms literacy and pedagogy (emotional, sexual, political—and the list goes on); (2) *reconceptualizations of literacy* that although valuable and necessary seem to elide or take for granted *reading* and *writing*, literacy’s fundamental acts; and (3) some of the unproductive consequences of current *totalizing valorizations* of the ideological model, resulting in a lack of attention to what is a much needed inter-animation, reciprocal interrogation, and cross-pollination between schooled and everyday literacies, academic and non-academic literacies, the autonomous and ideological model of both literacy and pedagogy (Flannery, Horner, Graff, Vieira). I wish my students had had a chance to read the Symposium’s contributions: they would have been reassured about the relevance of their concerns.

In different ways, and for different purposes, the symposium’s contributors call attention to two *divides* affecting literacy scholarship and their potential limiting effects for composition studies. There is of course the original divide between autonomous and ideological models, a divide that seems to prevent literacy scholars from questioning blanket indictments and rejections of concepts, traditions, terms linked to all or most of what is on the “other” side of it. This is a recurrent, and maybe initially necessary moment in history. But I think the work of New Literacy Studies can now afford to look back, consider the negative consequences of reifying dichotomies (Graff), and uncompromisingly assess what may still be useable and necessary in what has been left behind. The other divide is within New Literacy Studies themselves: it separates non-academic from academic, schooled from ordinary literacies. While scholarship in non-academic literacy has great potential and is enormously interesting and exciting it often stops “there,” in the other context, intimating but not necessarily engaging what my students have come to formulate as a two-pronged “so what?” question : *how can*

these understandings of literacy help us do a better job teaching reading and writing? And how can we use these understandings of literacy to challenge the cultural norms of academic literacy (Horner)? One of the reasons often adduced for what seems to me a peculiar type of truncated inquiry is that non-academic literacies are not immediately applicable to classroom work (why should they be?), and to make them so would require implausible curricular and institutional changes. Yes, they might require radical changes, which institutions may not be willing to invest in. But each one of us can and needs to make an impact, even if only within one's classroom or program. We in composition studies are above all teachers. It is our responsibility to examine and to acknowledge the value of "the intellectual tools we have" (Flannery) and use them to understand that which all kinds of non-academic (and academic) literacies and knowledges can never *automatically* teach us.

Like Glascott I believe that in composition studies, theories of literacy more than studies of rhetoric are in tune with and can honor the different kinds of knowledge our students, graduate and undergraduate alike, bring to the scene of instruction, and can thus sponsor copious and reflexive understandings and responsible revisions of our pedagogies. But it is our responsibility to discern how to use them and to guide our students to develop this kind of know-how. As we learn from as wide a gamut of literacy practices as possible, we must also decide which can enable us to put pressure on and re-form traditional practices and curricula that otherwise risk becoming unrecognizable and unreadable relics of the past; which can enable us to engage the needs of individual students; and which, in some institutional settings, might be actually drained of their power, become ineffective, and even counterproductive.

University of Pittsburgh

WORKS CITED

- Flannery, Kathryn. "Babies and Bath Water." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.
- Glascott, Brenda. "Constricting Keywords: Rhetoric and Literacy in our History of Writing." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.
- Graff, Harvey. "The Legacies of Literacy Studies." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.
- Hirsch, Jr., E.D. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: First Vintage Books, 1988. Print.
- Horner, Bruce. "Ideologies of Literacy, "Academic Literacies," and Composition Studies." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.
- Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-248. Print.
- Salvatori, Mariolina, ed. *Pedagogy: Disturbing History, 1820-1930*. Newer ed. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2003. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Language, Literacy and Culture.
- Vieira, Kate. "On the Social Consequences of Literacy." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.
- Young, Morris. "Sponsoring Literacy Studies." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.