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Literacy's verb: Exploring what literacy is and what literacy does

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Abstract

This article considers contemporary policy claims about "what literacy is" and "what literacy does." First, the article reviews in-depth the ways in which development discourses define literacy, and the claims made in development discourses about the "consequences" of literacy for economic and political development. I then draw on 24 months of ethnographic research in Brazil with 41 highly impoverished literacy students from four literacy programs in two cities in order to demonstrate that there is no predictable "impact" of literacy on development. Instead, I show that the opportunities afforded by literacy depend greatly on the *types of literacy* and the *types of literacy programs* made available to students, as well as students' cultural understandings of literacy and the social, political, and economic contexts within which they attempt to assert new literacy practices. The article concludes that we should not consider literacy as an actor with some "impact"; instead, we should examine how people use literacy in ways that are conditioned by social and cultural forces.
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Keywords: Literacy; Literacy policy; Education for all; Development discourse; Brazil

1. Introduction

Popular conceptions hold that literacy has some kind of "effect," that it provides those who become literate with improved job prospects and/or empowerment. In their laudable attempts to garner international monetary support for literacy programs, development publications also suggest that literacy "confers benefits," such as improved employment opportunities and/or political engagement. Drawing on 24 months of ethnographic research among literacy programs for youth and adults in Brazil, this article examines the so-called "consequences" of literacy education in terms of economic mobility and political participation. I first review claims in mainstream development discourse about the "consequences," "effects, or "benefits" of literacy, and I critique these models that suggest literacy will have some kind of automatic, universal "effect." I then present two key findings from my case studies of both public and non-governmental, Freirean literacy organizations. First, the economic mobility achieved by students as a result of participating in these programs resulted from the *relationships and networks* they cultivated through and in schools, rather than the literacy they learned in school. Second, while several of the literacy programs I studied seemed to have little effect on students' political engagement, one of the Freirean organizations did, in fact, encourage a limited increase in some students' political engagement by organizing students to participate in various political events. Notably, however, it was not *literacy*

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per se that encouraged political engagement for some students; it was the visibility of accessible political events as well as the rhetoric, in class, urging participation. This article concludes with a reflection on the conditions under which it might be reasonable to expect critical literacy programs to promote social change.

2. Orienting concepts

Much of contemporary development discourse about literacy constitutes what anthropologist Brian Street called an *autonomous model of literacy*. The autonomous model of literacy treats literacy "as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character" (Street, 1993, p. 5). The autonomous model is really more like a bundle of beliefs or ideologies about the nature of literacy. Autonomous ideologies tend to conceptualize literacy as a skill learned gradually as the individual moves through universal stages of cognitive and physical development. This skill, many claim, results in individual rational thought, intellectual development, social development, and/or economic mobility. Autonomous approaches also assume a homology between the individual and the society; they predict that literacy at the individual level will result in economic, social and political development at the national level. Most importantly, as Street (1984) writes, the autonomous model "isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic 'take-off' or in terms of cognitive skills" (p. 2). Proponents of an autonomous model tend to understand literacy in fairly narrow terms, ignoring the incredible diversity of literacy practices; they privilege certain kinds of literacy and certain ways of using literacy, disregarding the arbitrary nature by which certain practices are elevated as superior to others. An autonomous model of literacy prevails in current literacy policy and popular discourse.

In contrast, anthropologists and other sociocultural scholars generally subscribe to an *ideological model of literacy*. Advocates of this position "view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts" (Street, 1993, p. 7). An ideological model

> forces one to be more wary of grand generalizations and cherished assumptions about literacy 'in itself.' Those who subscribe to this second model concentrate on the specific social practices of reading and writing. They recognize the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of such practices. The model stresses the significance of the socialization process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for informants, and is therefore concerned with the general social institutions through which this process takes place and not just the specific 'educational' ones. (Street, 1999, p. 56)

This "social turn" in literacy studies resulted from a steady stream of influential research produced over the past 30 years.[1] Recent scholars have shown how contexts such as schools, religious organizations, and families radically alter what counts as literacy and how it is practiced (see, for example, Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton et al., 2000; Hull and Schultz, 2001). Gee (1996) emphasizes the serious sociocultural negotiation of identity and self that all people do when they engage particular literacy practices (see also Bartlett, 2007a). Scholars have questioned the unity of literacy itself, emphasizing the multiplicity of literacies, which vary by language, script, domain, role, network, participants, context, and other factors (New London Group, 1996, 2000). From this analytical perspective, literacy cannot and should not be defined *a priori*, as it is by most conventional measures of literacy; instead, what counts as literacy is itself the result of on-going, complex sociocultural negotiations. Finally, the realization that literacy practices shape and are shaped by larger power structures owes much to Paulo Freire's insistence that, while both the absence and presence of literacy have generally served to oppress the poor, reading and writing "the word and the world" might also contribute to their liberation (Freire, 1970; Freire and Macedo, 1987). Critical scholars of literacy continue to investigate the connections between

[1] Key contributions were made by Heath (1983) and Scribner and Cole (1981), among others. See Street (1984) for a full review of the key studies that informed his distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy; see Collins and Blot (2003) and Collins (1995) for a helpful overview of the broader field.

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