

Book Review

Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners

By Lauren Rosenberg 2015

Reviewed by Katie Thomas

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How often did you stop and think about the fact that you are reading this book review? Or perhaps, that if you disagree with the thoughts and opinions expressed here, you have the ability to voice your concerns through writing? Chances are, you did not. The truth is, most literate people take their literacy for granted. As Lauren Rosenberg illustrates in her book *Desire for literacy: Writing in the lives of adult learners*, those that are illiterate *are* capable of intelligent thought, critical theories of self-literacy, and speaking back to the powers that often silence them due to their inability to read and, as is the focus in this book, write. Rosenberg argues that the illiterate are the subaltern according to societal views because society equates cognition with education, and more specifically, literacy.

Assuming the position of an ethnographer and discourse analyst, Rosenberg presents narrative inquiries of adult learners at the Read/Write/Now Learning Center. In doing so, she depicts the pathways that brought each to the desire for literacy, establishing that each of the four learners sought out literacy from a place of betterment, with each attempting to better some facet of his or her life. As these learners acquire their literacy,

their desire to assimilate into the mainstream is met head-on by a desire to resist the dominant discourses revolving around literacy. Because they have been on both sides of the literacy spectrum, they are the perfect voice for disrupting those ingrained ideologies of cognitive ability equates to education and literacy. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1985) definition of the subaltern class, Rosenberg describes how this demographic is continually rendered voiceless because of assumptions of intelligence, yet they push back: "Just because a person doesn't know how to read or write doesn't mean that person is unable to think" (3).

Each narrative paints a picture of the work of restory-ing each subject's autobiographies. From Violeta, who desires to be literate in order to write a letter to her incarcerated son, and in the process becomes involved in creating what she calls her "life book," to LeeAnn, who struggles with the oppression she experiences because of her illiteracy, we see each narrative carefully nuanced and painted. The stories and restories continue with George, who had limited access to school because his family needed him to work in order to keep the family farm operational, and finally Chief who, similar to George, had limited access to school, yet is highly knowledgeable and becomes empowered by his literacy. Rosenberg clearly states her intentions of "standing under" (26) her subjects and appropriates Krista Ratcliffe's (2005) notion of rhetorical listening, eliminating her subjectivities to the subjects' stories and simply telling her story of their restory (26). Throughout this restorying experience, co-construction of knowledge occurs between the researcher and the subjects and a revised sense of self through the literacy takes place.

Throughout the book, the co-construction of knowledge continues, as does the restorying notion. The participants comment on the benefits that their new acquisition of literacy has afforded them, including the opening of doors that were previously locked and the opportunity to speak when previously silenced. In the third chapter of the book, this co-construction of knowledge takes on another dimension when the adult learning instructors' voices are added to the conversation. During this exchange, literacy is viewed as a social practice where the participant, instructor, and researcher are all involved in the discourses. The instructors voice their aspiration to do as Rosenburg has done and facilitate the learners to accomplish their writing goals and, as a byproduct, improve their literacy, giving them voice and choice in what and to whom they speak.

Building upon the ideology of restorying, Rosenburg reanalyzes the data from the participants to determine what critical literacies the learners are cognizant of and expressing throughout their written and verbal discourses. She does this discourse analysis with the participants, continuing again to share her story of their stories rather than perpetuating the silencing that has previously affected those learners. As this shared experience is assembled, the participants become aware of the critical theories represented in their own stories and how those theories shape the reflective knowledge and share it with others to legitimize their voice. Chief's tension primarily deals with his desire to "undo his colonization" (Fanon, 1967), while LeeAnn's theories of literacy represent validation, and Violeta's offer a medium for figuring out her life. George explains that his story may have impact on others and the shame he has felt from literate members of society speak back to the silenced subaltern while asking questions about literacy such as: "Who has the

power?," "Who is oppressed?," and "What discourse can transform such oppressions?" Although the dominant literacy culture indicates the literate have the power while the illiterate are oppressed, the five co-researchers in this book illustrate that critical literacy theories abound, albeit tacitly, even in the illiterate, and these discourses assist in the perceptions regarding the relationship between literacy and power and the subsequent uses and abuses- a Frierian (1970) lens of analysis.

Though clearly a piece of Rosenberg's dissertation, the structure of this book lacks the structure of a dissertation, which impedes the reader's understanding of the overall work. Had the structure been more closely akin to the standard dissertation form, the organizational pattern would have been more easily identified and as a byproduct, comprehension easier to attain. In addition, the themes are often repetitive and much of the reading is rather dense. Where Purcell-Gates' (1995) *Other People's Words* examines adult literacy in a highly narrative format, this book offers narrative excerpts; the majority of the writing, however, is academic and intended for an academic audience. Rosenberg takes great care to not impose her own subjectivities upon the participants and clearly maintains respect for their story and restory. In addition, she gives the authors a platform for a voice and acknowledges the critical theories they themselves apply to their own literacy journey. In doing so, she, with the participants, speak back to the literacy powers that strive to dismiss adult literacies as menial or inconsequential, honoring the value of the participants' stories and accomplishing her intended purpose of resisting dominant discourses on literacy.

Reference

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