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Reviewed work:

Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy: Identity, Agency, and Power. (2007). Cynthia Lewis, Patricia E. Enciso, & Elizabeth Birr Moje (Eds.). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Pp. 205. ISBN 080585696X. \$29.95

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This volume argues that sociocultural theory does not adequately address issues of identity, agency, and power. The editors, Cynthia Lewis, Patricia E. Enciso, and Elizabeth Birr Moje, claim that these issues are highly relevant to the sociocultural practices of literacy learning and literacy research. The book primarily examines and critiques issues related to sociocultural research processes. It is divided into two parts: “Rethinking Conceptual Frameworks” and “Rethinking Knowledge and Representation.” Part 1 argues, at times rather convincingly, that concepts traditionally associated with sociocultural theory, such as identity, agency, and power, are often underconceptualized and require further theoretical consideration as well as more sophisticated analytical treatment within sociocultural research. Part 2 argues that the privileged position of the researcher as knowledge producer must become more reflexive, challenging researchers to acknowledge their “motivational relevancies” (Sarangi & Candlin, 2001, p. 19).

Literacy is a concept that can be defined in broad or narrow terms, yet none of the authors of this volume provide an explicit definition for readers. This seems problematic since the title of the book leads readers to believe that literacy is one of its central themes. This may or may not be the case, depending on how one conceptualizes literacy, since the authors neglect to make a case of their own as to how literacy should be defined. However, this omission is probably intentional since the term seems to be conceptualized differently by the various authors throughout the book. Sometimes the term is referred to as “reading and writing” (p. 3) but usually left undefined and

elusive, seeming to take on a meaning of literacy in a very broad sense—as ways of thinking, knowing, being, experiencing, or learning.

The book is influenced by the writings of a wide number of authors (Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Engeström, Fairclough, Foucault, Gee, Lave, Volosinov, Vygotsky, and Wertsch, to name only a few) who represent a wide number of disciplines (literacy education, social and cultural psychology, educational anthropology, sociology, and applied linguistics among others). From these influences, the book adopts, adapts, and pieces together, in a complementary manner, various conceptual and analytical frameworks. It advocates attempting to provide more sensitive analyses to sociocultural research through a multidisciplinary approach to exploring the literacy practices of individuals within highly contextualized research settings.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each chapter written by one or more different authors. Chapter 1 provides a rationale for the volume as the editors attempt to justify the need for reframing sociocultural research on literacy. Chapters 2–4 make up Part I of the volume and specifically address the authors' perceptions of the shortcomings of sociocultural research regarding concepts such as “activity,” “history,” and “communities of practice” (p. 9). Chapters 5–7 make up Part II of the volume and call attention to the authors' perceived need for a reflexive focus on research relationships, specifically examining issues of power, identity, and agency in sociocultural research and how these “elements shape the production of knowledge in literacy research” (p. 9). Most of these chapters present a sample analysis from a larger research project that the authors have conducted in an attempt to illustrate how innovative multidisciplinary methodological frameworks can address shortcomings that exist in sociocultural investigation.

In chapter 1, “Introduction: Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy,” the editors establish the participating authors of the entire book as advocates of sociocultural theory, whose work is based mostly on Vygotsky (1978), but quickly move to point out the “gaps” in sociocultural research that investigators need to address and the “new directions” (p. 5) that researchers might take in order to accomplish this. The authors effectively create a niche for the following chapters to fill as they construct a convincing intellectual argument for sociocultural research to adopt a more critical lens and incorporate methodological techniques that better account for issues such as identity, agency, and power.

In chapter 2, “Examining Opportunities to Learn: The Role of Critical Sociocultural Literacy Research,” Elizabeth Birr Moje and Cynthia Lewis argue that both teachers' and students' opportunities to learn are supported and constrained by the systems and structures within the institution of schooling. They provide a description of an innovative methodological framework that combines analytical principles from distinct perspectives including *activity theory* (based on Engeström, 1999), *cultural studies* (based on Radway, 1984; Fiske, 1994), and *critical discourse theories* (based on Fairclough, 1992). This framework is partially illustrated through an example from classroom data. The authors use this example to demonstrate how to examine the subjectivities of teachers and learners, identity enactments and recognitions, and moments of (non)agency that are embedded within classroom activities. In this chapter, the authors provide the kind of copious description of contexts, methodological principles, and evidence for their conclusions that permit readers to perceive the investigation as rigorous science. Furthermore,

the constant integration of the participants' voices within the research allows their human qualities to remain visible, providing a strong rationale for engaging in this type of research practice.

In chapter 3, "Reframing History in Sociocultural Theories: Toward an Expansive Vision," Patricia E. Enciso argues that "too often in sociocultural research and practice, the language and imagery associated with meanings of history create the illusion of a unified, equitable, and accessible past" (p. 50), which she views as problematic since sociocultural theory "is rooted in the understanding that histories of objects, ideas, and practices are produced and remade for particular purposes in the present" (p. 50). This becomes particularly problematic when one accepts the inevitable truth that racism and discrimination are historical resources widely available in society. Drawing on various critical theories such as poststructural feminist, literary, cultural, queer, and critical race, Enciso advocates the consideration of paradoxes, absences, and incommensurable meaning in history "that are not normally accounted for in sociocultural models of teaching and learning" (p. 51). While Enciso draws on data from a research project conducted with pre-service teachers and certainly provides an intellectually stimulating argument that is well supported by academic literature, she fails to provide the appropriate amount of research context and integration of participants' voices that would allow readers to feel confident in the conclusions that are drawn. This is probably the result of trying to do too much in too little space, resulting in a stimulating and critical review of literature, yet an unconvincing illustration of data analysis to complement it.

In chapter 4, "'As if You Heard it From Your Mamma': Redesigning Histories of Participation With Literacy Education in an Adult Education Class," Rebecca Rogers and Carolyn Fuller engage with Wenger's (1998) notion of *community of practice*, defining it as "a unit where people share mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (or actions, stories, and artifacts)" (p. 79). They argue that most sociocultural accounts of communities of practice fail to recognize that these units "consist of ideologically laden sets of beliefs, actions, and assumptions" (p. 79). The researcher-teachers shared data from a 1-year, collaborative, critical ethnographic research project that took place in an all-African-American General Education Development (GED) classroom. The authors claim that within this context the students' unsuccessful past experiences with school evoke expectations of what schooling, instruction, and learning might or might not consist of. When an innovative pedagogy in the classroom conflicts with learners' expectations, "their vision of what education is supposed to look like is challenged" (p. 95) and in many cases redesigned, providing a significant impact on the learners' lives. This chapter provides ample description of the research process as well as intellectually stimulating argumentation for the development of the authors' theoretical framework, while incorporating the participants' voices throughout the sample analysis. The authors provide a convincing argument for engaging in this kind of critical, sociocultural, ethnographic research and demonstrate its relevance in society.

In chapter 5, "Moving Words and Worlds: Reflections From 'the Middle,'" Marjorie Faulstich Orellana examines the notion of "cultural mismatch" or "how children from nondominant backgrounds negotiate the discontinuities and tensions between their home and school lives" (p. 124). She argues that sociocultural research has traditionally focused on how individuals move across contexts, implying that separability of individuals from their context is possible. She

challenges this notion and argues that individuals and contexts are mutually constituted, and “when people move between discourse communities they bring their contexts with them, fundamentally altering the nature of the new spaces” (p. 126). While this is certainly not a new idea within the circles of critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 1992), Orellana goes on to suggest that, occasionally, social worlds “move in on people” (p. 128). Drawing on data gathered with immigrant youth translators and interpreters, she provides a reasonably convincing illustration of how social worlds can impose themselves on individuals—in this case, children given the unfortunate role of translator. However, the author provides very little information to readers about the research process, making it difficult to evaluate the scientific rigor of the investigation.

In chapter 6, “Out of the Valley: Transcultural Repositioning as a Rhetorical Practice in Ethnographic Research and Other Aspects of Everyday Life,” Juan C. Guerra presents a discussion of “transcultural repositioning” (p. 138), which refers to the way that individuals navigate complex rhetorical situations by performing multiple or hybrid identities in shifting sociocultural contexts. He rather questionably argues that disenfranchised peoples are more likely to cultivate this ability than representatives of dominant cultures, and he reflects upon his own ability to engage in the rhetorical practice of transcultural repositioning by providing autobiographical accounts of the shifting sociocultural contexts in which he has participated over the course of his life. While the narratives are interesting, the chapter seems to lack focus as Guerra concludes by reflecting on the rhetorical challenges he faces as he prepares to undertake an auto-ethnographic study. Guerra mentions that in sharing the story of his life, he is concerned that it may seem “gratuitous” and “self-indulgent” (p. 157); and by the end of the chapter, he comes close to realizing this concern. While he raises some reasonable concerns throughout the chapter, it falls short of a convincing, coherent argument for readers.

In chapter 7, “Learning to Play and Playing to Learn: Research Sites as Transactional Spaces,” Bob Fecho and Shuaib Meacham, influenced mostly by Vygotsky (1978), Rosenblatt (1994), and Bakhtin (1981), argue that “communities within which research is conducted are transactional sites where the academic and local communities mutually shape new texts” (p. 165), and this viewpoint opens researchers to learning that is “multidimensional, polyphonic, and mutually transformative” (p. 165). The authors provide a thorough description of their theoretical framework and demonstrate its relevance through an illustrative data analysis. By providing readers with a thick description of the research context and by faithfully incorporating the voices of their research participants as well as the voices of the researchers, these authors construct a strong argument for their belief that educational research is an interpretative activity, “done by humans, with humans, for humans . . . and therefore should be both humane and social” (p. 185), allowing both the research community and the researchers to construct new purpose and meaning through the transaction.

The volume is well organized and contains few typographical errors. It provides two useful indexes: an author index and a subject index. The volume is clearly intended for critical scholars and researchers in the social sciences. Most of the chapters provide an intellectually stimulating yet quite challenging read, due to the sophisticated nature of the subject matter. I would recommend this book to investigators and graduate students who are interested in performing sociocultural research.

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