Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community

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David Barton and Mary Hamilton.
London: Routledge, 2012. Print. Routledge Linguistics Classics. 265 pp. plus appendices. $49.95

Reviewed by Charlotte Brammer

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"Literacy is primarily something people do." This clause is no less profound today than when David Barton and Mary Hamilton used it to open *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* in 1998. Routledge re-published the text in 2012 as part of the Routledge Linguistics Classics, and rightly so. As Deborah Brandt notes in the new foreword for the text, *Local Literacies* "changed the direction of literacy research, providing overwhelming material evidence of how local contexts matter to the achievement of literacy and how cultural practices give literacy its point and meaning" (xiii). Barton and Hamilton were clear in their purpose "of challenging discourses of literacy that are dominant and simplifying" (xiv) and in explicating their ethnographic methods. Barton and Hamilton had three goals in this research project: to describe literacy practices in a particular community, explore literacy as a method of sense-making, and examine literacy's relationship to quality of life. The intentional ethnographic methods they employed allowed them to achieve each of these goals.

The text contains fourteen chapters plus an afterword, divided among three sections. Part I, which holds chapters one through four, establishes the parameters and underlying theory that guides this foray into literacy. Chapter One: Understanding Literacy as Social Practice has become something of a mainstay in literacy research for the six propositions that Barton and Hamilton aver as foundational to their approach to literacy. First, literacy means social practices: "Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives" (6). Second, literacy is context dependent, meaning that different contexts or "domains" require or hold or perhaps generate different literacies and literacy expectations. Power is key to literacies, which ones are practiced, privileged, visible, and dominant. Fourth, literacy practices are richly layered in that they are "purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices" (6). History is part of the layering of literacy practice. Traditions, ideology, and culture feed the literacy practices of any community, and such practices "are as fluid, dynamic and changing as the lives of the societies of which they are a part" (12). Finally because societies are not static, literacy
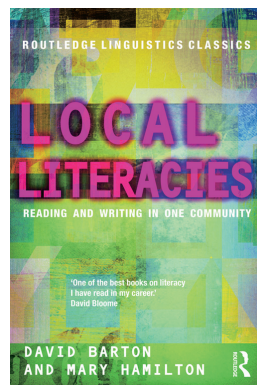
practices must be dynamic. New literacy practices must be learned "through processes of informal learning and sense making as well as formal education and training" (12). These six propositions guide Barton and Hamilton's framework for exploring and interpreting the literacy practices of a particular community in Lancaster, England, in 1990.

Chapters two and three are devoted exclusively to preparing the reader to understand and appreciate the literacy practices of the Lancaster community. In adhering to the carefully defined propositions of literacy, Barton and Hamilton devote considerable effort to explaining how literacy has developed in Lancaster, the kinds of influences that have shaped literacy practices since the Romans ruled the area (Chapter 2) and the state of literacy practices, to the extent there is moment of stasis, in Lancaster, 1990 (Chapter 3). The descriptions, photos, and maps from Lancaster, 1990, document a time prior to mass use of computers and portable computing devices, but the lessons learned continue to resonate. Information in these two chapters is frequently referenced in subsequent chapters.

In addition to detailing a rich description of literacy, Barton and Hamilton's *Local Literacies* is known for its exemplary ethnographic methods, which are carefully outlined in Chapter 4. This particular chapter is a must read for any student or researcher interested in learning ethnography. Ethnographies take place in "real-world settings" and offer authentic and "holistic" descriptions of the events and practices found in those settings. Ethnographers employ various methods; in this study, Barton and Hamilton interviewed adults at a local college, surveyed the "Springside" (pseudonym) community in Lancaster, used case studies of a number of individuals, and collaborated with community members to review interview data, observations, and interpretations. Interpretation is central to ethnographic research, and Barton and Hamilton were very careful in describing their process of analysis and interpretation, including the training and reconciliation of data coding. They intended and succeeded in "mak[ing] these examples of everyday literacy intelligible within the framework of cultural practices and social theory which [they] adopted, producing classifications, conceptual tools and theoretical explanations which can be used to extend understandings of literacy in other contexts" (72-73). One need look no further than Google Scholar to see that this text has been cited at least 1,620 times and to understand that Barton and Hamilton were successful in this goal.

Part II, which contains chapters five through eight, feature rich descriptions of four individuals from Springside and reveal the depth and joy of qualitative research. The lives of Harry, Shirley, June, and Cliff (all pseudonyms) reveal the everyday literacies of average folks in a working-class community, literacies that are as varied as the individuals and yet share some commonalities. These descriptions of individual struggles and successes are similar to those written by Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* in terms of making more literacy practices visible, practices that might otherwise remain hidden.

In Part III, Barton and Hamilton dig deeper into the literacy practices of Harry, Shirley, June, and Cliff within the context of the larger community, to identify a range

of literacy practices, from reading habits to notions of morality and values embedded in literacy practices (Chapter 9), and patterns of practices, in terms of gendered practices as well as multilingual literacies (Chapter 10). They also interrogate the intersections and borderlands as well as the power structures that complicate those spaces where literacy practices happen (Chapters 11-13). Perhaps vernacular literacies are the most complicated spaces of literacy practices, and Barton and Hamilton discuss some of these complications in Chapter 14. According them, "vernacular literacies are in fact hybrid practices which draw on a range of practices from different domains" (247). In other words, the lines between literacy practices are permeable in that practices from one may, and frequently do, affect those in another area. For example, literacy practices and knowledge learned from participating in a hobby may influence and be influenced by literacy practices from work or school.

In brief, Barton and Hamilton's *Local Literacies* is a classic text on literacy and ethnography. It provides a solid framework that continues to move literacy studies forward.

Works Cited

Barton, David, and Mary Hamilton. *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community.* 1998. London: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983. Print.

Literacy in the Digital Age, 2nd ed.

Burniske, Richard W.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008. $29.95.

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In the digital age of computer technologies, writing teachers must often choose to either refurbish their classes and pedagogies with new technologies or risk losing their students' attention and interest. Teachers are required now more than ever before to make decisions to move away from the functional literacy that governed the education system in the U.S. and many countries for decades. Such changes create space for new forms of literacy our students desperately need to live and prosper in such a digitized world.

The title of Burniske's book can be quite misleading because it connotes that the book is about digital and computer literacy. In reality, this book makes its central argument that literacy in the digital age is not limited to computer or technical literacy; literacy is an umbrella concept that embraces a wide spectrum of literacies that emerged and became integral over time. This book presents these literacies and a computer-based approach to bringing each literacy to the writing class. The essence of the book is the literacies introduced, rather than computers or other technologies.

The book has two fundamental features: definitions and literacy challenges. This book provides working definitions of each type of literacy presented. These definitions establish a common ground for readers of varying experience with literacy theory. Burniske's definitions break down each literacy into a set of complementary passive and active skills and practices. For example, civil literacy is defined as "the ability to read, interpret, and respect the moral and ethical beliefs embraced by a particular social group and apply them in a responsible manner" (19). This definition does not stop at the passive skills of reading and understanding the beliefs of a given social group, but it enacts these skills in active application.

Literacy in the Digital Age also "serves as a philosophical guide while providing practical ideas for classroom practitioners" (2). These practical ideas come in the form of literacy challenges, or detailed activities that can be adopted and adapted to different classes, students, and contexts. One good example of these literacy challenges is in chapter 4 on personal literacy. The "Why List" literacy challenge (64 – 65) is an interesting and thought provoking activity that helps readers think critically about