

**Teaching Adult Literacy: Principles and Practice** edited by Nora Hughes and Irene Schwab. London: Open University Press, 2010. 364 pp. ISBN 978-0-33-5237364.

The 1970s saw the rapid rise of a new field in education, adult literacy, as a response to the increasingly visible economic gap between developing and developed countries. International humanitarian organizations such as UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) saw the need to stimulate economic growth in developing countries by increasing employment rates; for this to happen, literacy would necessarily have to be a required skill, especially in those countries where schooling was not mandatory. And so began adult literacy campaigns and projects on an international scale. It is true that origins of adult literacy programs can be found in religious institutions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a means to the emancipatory goals that literacy could provide, namely politically motivated goals, and yet, it is through international organizations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that adult literacy has become an established and recognized field that demands research and applied practice. In *Teaching Adult Literacy*, editors Hughes and Schwab briefly trace this development of literacy and bring its relevance to the present by putting together a number of articles which offer a comprehensive review of the changing definitions of adult literacy; an examination of the linguistic and grammatical systems which constitute the traditional understanding of language as a set of discrete units and how different varieties of these systems affect issues of identity and power; detailed discussions of how to work with adult learners on the four key skills of literacy, which include reading, writing, speaking, and listening; and finally, a discussion on the importance of inclusive learning, particularly for learners with dyslexia and adults with “global learning difficulties.”

Primarily aimed at teacher trainers and people studying for teacher training qualifications—and not beginner adult literacy teachers—*Teaching Adult Literacy* is full of case studies of real student (aged 17+ from around the world) experiences, samples of learners’ writing with commentary and analysis, application of linguistic theory to literacy teaching, practical suggestions for teaching, planning, and assessment, guidance on supporting learners with dyslexia and global learning difficulties, and reflective tasks encouraging readers to develop and apply their knowledge. Such features firmly position the seven contributors to this book, including the editors, in a heavily practice-oriented mindset which itself is founded in, and informed by, research and theory. This expository collection of experiences is a valuable resource for practicing adult English literacy teachers and teacher trainers who wish to connect more closely with their learners, by allowing instructors to approach their learners from a sociocultural, almost Freirian stance.

Beginning with a reference to Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) idea of a literacy event as "any occasion in which a written text is involved in a social interaction" (p. 9), the foundation of literacy, defined as extending beyond the spelling and grammar rules and into the social realm in which the language itself exists, is established, and the rest of the book builds upon this notion. The second chapter, "Who are the learners?" encourages teachers to unravel the complex nature of adult learners' bases of motivation by asking questions about what learners bring, what they want, and what they have to say about learning. Such questions put into words learners' local and immediate influences and their relations to the institutions in their lives, thus giving the teacher a clearer idea of what is important to the learners and an ability to work with them accordingly. The reflective exercises, which prompt the teacher/reader to think about his *own* social context in relation to his literacy, bring home the importance of the point that literacy cannot be thought of as a cognitively constructed system devoid of cultural and social context. This sociocultural approach to literacy, much like Freire's critical pedagogy, places an unparalleled importance on learners' social position—be it related to socio-economic status, health, or political climate—and this is the consideration that sets the adult literacy teacher's teaching agenda.

After a cursory review of how language works in terms of syntax, elements of a sentence, punctuation, phonology, semantics, and etymology in the second section, Hughes and Schwab consider the concepts of "Standard English" and varieties of English; this discussion serves to remind teachers that Standard English is not the only variety with rules and logic behind it. This mere acknowledgement greatly diminishes, if not completely removes, the assumption of Standard English's widely believed inherent superiority over other varieties. This is not to say that "Standard English," as defined by its own set of rules and logic, is not to be taught, but rather that it may be brought into the learner's picture as simply another language, another tool, which, combined with their other tools, will provide further opportunities of empowerment in whatever form the learner hopes to attain. Here, once again, teachers are encouraged to view any and all of the learner's experiences, knowledge, and resources as central to the teaching process. The importance of learners' understanding of their own literacy practices, whether or not learners themselves are aware of them, cannot be overlooked.

The third section of *Teaching Adult Literacy* is introduced with the following words: "Most adults, even those with limited experiences of reading, will have been exposed to innumerable texts during their lifetime. This [section] will show how literacy learners can build on this experience and extend their existing literacy practices" (p. 149). What is key here is the idea of using what students bring—their *schema*—and building upon it, thus making it even more relevant and useful to the learner. Case study examples of reading, writing,

listening, and speaking exercises provide teachers with real world demonstrations of how to integrate literacy learning into learners' everyday lives. A short section on curriculum and lesson planning, and assessment, encourages teachers to consider the value of summative assessment in the form of "discussion and portfolio building supported by tutor feedback and individual reflection" over tests and exams (p. 307). This ongoing process of learners' critical self-examination as it exists in conversation with the teacher will promote sustainable learning due to its *supported* learning attitude rather than its *measured* learning attitude (p. 308). The thesis of literacy in social context is clearly the driving force behind the section's discussion of learners' schema, and the role of critical thinking.

The existence of the fourth and final section of this book, which focuses on inclusive learning, particularly for learners with dyslexia and adults with global learning difficulties, is justified by the right that *all* people should be provided with education that will further their ambitions. It should not be surprising for teachers to be confronted with adult learners who have learning difficulties, and they should approach such learners with the same considerations of their (the learners') social positionality, and the role of power in their lives, in terms of it being imposed on them and perhaps robbing them of opportunities that would otherwise be more available to them. The editors' key concept of understanding learners in their social context, and approaching literacy as socially bound, continues to drive forward the book contributors' approach to teaching adult literacy.

Overall, *Teaching Adult Literacy* is a valuable resource for teacher trainers and teachers-in-training in the manner that it covers, albeit some might criticize somewhat superficially due to brevity, a large range of issues that adult literacy teachers *must* be reminded of, or at least be made aware of. It is an excellent "mid-career" resource which provides readers with plenty of additional resources to refer to, including policy briefs, ethnographic studies, longitudinal studies and assessment sources, to name a few. The strength of this book is precisely the breadth of content it covers and the opportunity it provides through references at the end of chapter for readers to learn more about understanding literacy and teaching it. With its straightforward language, consistent reference to theory arising from research in practice, placing—and rightly so—literacy in social context, it is accessible to practitioners and academics alike. This book may easily be used in a teacher training course or read through and discussed in a series of workshops that would allow practitioners to discuss and explore their own social contexts in relation to their own literacies.

### **References**

Brice-Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

### **Reviewer**

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