

*Local Literacies-Reading and Writing in One Community* by  
David Barton and Mary Hamilton.  
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The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others...have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said. (Geertz, p. 30)<sup>1</sup>

Through their meticulously researched ethnography of the literacy practices of a community in Lancaster, England, Barton and Hamilton have added to this “consultable record” and demystified Geertz’s (1973) often ambiguous reference to an anthropological account so rich in texture and detail that it situates the reader at the very heart of the field site itself.

Their six-year study of reading and writing in the Springside neighborhood of Lancaster, England, reads like a model ethnography for the graduate student in anthropology, education, or applied linguistics. Barton and Hamilton enumerate every step of the data gathering process and articulate their rationales clearly and unpretentiously while effectively analyzing and developing their own theoretical framework.

Nested in an emerging body of literature presenting literacy practices as social practices, the theoretical framework for this ethnography reflects current trends in the study of literacy. The authors’ view resembles that of sociolinguist James Gee, who considers literacy as something that is “not mastered by overt instruction that deals with the superficial aspects of grammar, style, and mechanics...but...learn[ed] by being enculturated into its social practices through scaffolding and social interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse”(Gee, as cited in Purcell-Gates, p. 182). With such a theory in mind, Barton and Hamilton set out to describe the neighborhood area of Springside in Lancaster.

The first part of the book begins by proposing the framework for the ethnography. Based on a view of literacy as social practice or “as the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives,” Barton and Hamilton denounce the reification of literacy in much the same way that Geertz does for culture. In the first of the several commentaries interspersed throughout the book, the theoretical framework for *Local Literacies* is summarized:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through the processes of informal learning and sense making. (p.7)

The first section also situates Lancaster in time and space by providing an historical account of its literacy practices as well as a description of the city in the present time. The authors portray Lancaster as a working-class city with a strong sense of history, which is reflected through its Victorian architecture and documented through the autobiography of local hero William Stout, written nearly two hundred years ago. In addition, Springside, a pseudonym for the neighborhood from which much of the data for the ethnography was gathered, is described as an ethnically diverse community in relation to the rest of England. Its white, working-class majority live alongside a minority of ten percent Gujarati and Polish speakers. From the description of the structural conditions of the homes in this neighborhood, the authors also portray Springside as being at a slightly lower socioeconomic level than greater Lancaster.

The fourth chapter in Part I begins with a description of and rationale for the data gathering process or as the authors call it, “an ethnography in practice.” Included in this section is an explanation of the various means for gathering data and a description of the project’s participants. Overall, Barton and Hamilton performed twenty interviews on community college adults, administered sixty-five door-to-door survey questionnaires to individual households, chose four adults from various ethnic and social groups for case studies, and approached ten individuals from the subject pool to collaborate on the analysis of the data. They also implemented numerous other techniques, such as observations, photographing and document collection. This section, which may serve as a guide to ethnographic methods, concludes with a step-by-step description of the data analysis process and is followed with a caveat about the need to make this study and any ethnographic study relevant by using its findings to develop an understanding of similar contexts at a global level.

In the second part of the book, Barton and Hamilton feature four case studies of individuals who differ according to age group, gender, and ethnicity, describing each person’s life history and literacy practices in terms of what they call a “ruling passion”; that is, the emotions and themes that seem prevalent throughout their experience.

The first case study features Harry, a veteran of World War II, who is con-

sumed by past memories of the war and by trying to sort out the unanswered questions he has about that time in his life. He primarily reads war books and engages in a great deal of writing about it. The war is Harry's "ruling passion," and in their depiction of him, the authors find strong support for their view that literacy is often used as a tool for sense making.

Barton and Hamilton also highlight Harry's perspective on literacy. In Harry's opinion, literacy divides the "educated" from the "uneducated." He defines "educated" as people who have a college education, and the "uneducated" as those who have had limited or no schooling. He sees himself, a drop-out at fourteen, as being somewhere in the middle, a fact which the authors imply affects his self-confidence with respect to his literacy skills.

The second case study features Shirley, who is considered a key figure in the community because of her expertise and involvement in formal organizations. Although the authors describe Shirley's "ruling passion" as working for justice and change, it also appears that she is motivated by a desire to positively cope with her son's dyslexia. Shirley embodies the authors' idea of literacy practices as purposeful and embedded in broader social goals. She habitually writes editorials for the local newsletter displaying her knowledge of dyslexia and raising the importance of other community issues.

In contrast to the first two case studies where subjects place high value on literacy in terms of books and extended writing, the third case study explores the life of a homemaker whose literacy practices reflect the authors' notion of literacy as a set of social practices that are mediated by written texts. June's literacy activities primarily consist of managing the household accounts, reading newspapers and magazines, and writing correspondence to friends and family. She uses literacy as a means to accomplish communicative tasks in her life. Various sources of media (i.e., computer, television, radio, etc.) play a more central role in June's life than actual books, a fact that does not necessarily diminish the role of literacy in her life.

Cliff is the subject of the final case study. After having lived in another town with his former wife and son for many years, he currently lives with his mother, half-sister and son. His "ruling passion" is "leisure and pleasure in life." (p.135) At the moment, he is unemployed but finds enjoyment in his life through music and comedy.

The authors explain that, "Just as Harry expresses in his interviews a central dichotomy of educated and uneducated, Cliff has a dichotomy of pleasure versus constraint and commitment." (p. 136) On the one hand, Cliff associates literacy with pleasurable activities such as writing to his favorite entertainer and composing letters up to twenty pages long to his friend. On the other hand, it represents part of his more serious commitment as a parent to help his son with schoolwork and also reminds him of his limitations as a sufferer of tinnitus, a hearing problem which causes a ringing of the ears and interferes with his ability to read and watch television. As a result, traditional literacy cannot stand at the center of Cliff's life.

Like June in the earlier case study, he must also rely on the conveniences of media such as calculators and telephones in his day to day affairs.

Through these four case studies, Barton and Hamilton examine a variety of ways in which people rely upon literacy. The authors demonstrate that literacy plays a central role in all of their subjects' lives—the nature of that role, however, varies for each individual according to his or her particular circumstance and motivation.

The final part of the book looks at the data in terms of themes and patterns, for which each section draws its title. Topics include: the range of literacy practices; the patterning of literacy practices; home, learning and education; the web of literacies in local organizations; literacy and sensemaking; and vernacular literacies. In their brief afterword, the authors summarize their findings, and challenge the reader to use this ethnography as a basis for expanding the traditional view of literacy. The data alone show that writing is related to the broader social practices of organizing and documenting one's life, leisure, sense-making and social participation.

In this study, the nature of literacy practices appears to have been influenced by age, gender, employment status, and whether there were children in the household. Interestingly enough, educational background did not seem to play a very important role in the number or quality of materials read. Such a finding helps to challenge lay assumptions that associate educational level with reading habits.

Another interesting pattern emerging from this ethnography is the relationship between literacy practices and gender. The authors found that there were indeed patterns in the types of activities performed by male and female subjects and how they were each perceived. For example, women were more likely to read novels while men were usually the purveyors of household bills. Women also tended to associate reading with relaxation while men thought of it as a means of accessing information. Nevertheless, there were enough exceptions as in June's handling of the household bills, to challenge stereotypical views of male and female roles with respect to home literacy.

The section on the patterning of practices also includes discussions about numeracy practices as literacy practices. The authors' implicit argument for their inclusion of numeracy is that numbers are part of a semiotic system in much the same way that words are. As with the written word, the use of numbers also involves a great deal of sense-making and problem-solving. In addition, bi-numeracy skills, such as the use of conversions in currency and measurement, are analogous to bilingual skills in that they require a type of conversion between different systems of representation.

Bi-numeracy is followed by a discussion of the multilingual literacy practices that are common to ten percent of the homes in Springside, primarily Gujarati-speaking Indians. These individuals generally use Arabic, English, and Urdu for specific purposes to assert different kinds of identities. For example, Mumtaz, a mother, full-time machinist and occasional translator at a local factory, uses Ara-

bic when reading the Kuran, Gujarati to write to family in India, and Urdu for religious instruction. She uses English when dealing with her children's schooling and the general community. However, the consistencies in languages used and literacy activities do not reflect narrowly defined identities. The authors assert that, "[different literacies]. . . partly represent tensions and a mixing of values in forging new identities and reconciling conflicts about changing values" (p. 186).

In the subsequent two chapters, the authors deal with "borderlands," a term coined by James Gee to challenge the assumption that literacy is confined to discrete domains. Although Gee's original use of the term refers to home and school relationships, Barton and Hamilton expand it to include literacy in the community. According to Barton and Hamilton's definition, literacy activities originating in the community and continuing in the home are also part of this borderland. These activities include writing letters back and forth between home and school, as well as the process of filling out forms that are used in the community.

One particularly salient assertion made by Barton and Hamilton in this section is that home activities, such as assistance with homework from parents or the interpretation of letters from school by children, count as literacy. Additionally, activities outside the home in local community groups and organizations, such as the keeping of minutes, the discussion of written agendas, and the maintenance of group finances count as literacy events. In essence, according to this view, any activity that supports learning, either formally or informally, belongs under what appears to be the enormous, all-encompassing umbrella of literacy.

Part of the rationale for such a liberal perspective might reside in the notion that literacy is not optional in most people's lives, and that for many individuals, it is a viable resource needed to make sense of the world. Thus, literacy practices cannot be confined to the reading of "canonical" texts such as classical novels or science articles, which often have little bearing on the day-to-day needs of individuals. Instead, they must be comprised of activities that allow people to solve everyday problems, to structure the course of events, to deal with personal change, to access different kinds of information, and to pursue areas of leisure and interest.

In the process of pursuing such inherently literate activities, people gain different kinds of expertise and may themselves become resources for others, forming networks of mutually dependent relationships and connections with other individuals. Instead of the traditionally academic type of literacy, they gain a "vernacular literacy," one which uses everyday written materials such as telephone books, diaries, and newsletters. These are the texts of a literacy that is grounded in the social practices of "everyday life."

Through their clear and accessible account, Barton and Hamilton have defined and validated the oftentimes ignored literacies of the working class. Instead of recommending that greater use of traditional literacy practices be imposed for the 'good' of the people of Lancaster, the authors successfully demonstrate the complexity and practicality of everyday literacies and challenge their readers to expand their views of literacy. As Barton and Hamilton have shown, literacy prac-

tices are intrinsically shaped by people and the demands of their daily lives. It is this dynamic interaction that affords literacy such centrality and permanence in our lives.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Geertz, C. (1973) "Thick Description" in *The Interpretations of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, p. 30.

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