

The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy edited by David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, xxi+601 pp.

Reviewed by Anna Dina L. Joaquin
University of California, Los Angeles

Traditionally, *literacy* has been defined as having the competence to read and write. However, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*, edited by Olson and Torrance, to be literate is argued to include not only having the basic skills of reading and writing, but also possessing competence with more specialized intellectual or academic language in different social contexts. Through compiling the work of leading scholars in literacy from various disciplines, including education, psychology, international development, history, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and neuroscience, this volume also explores psychological, cognitive, and sociocultural aspects of literacy and transforms the definition from a narrowly defined competence to a complex ability.

The *Handbook* is structured into five parts. Part I reflects on *Literacy as a Scientific Subject*. It serves as an introduction to the volume as it specifically deals with the “literacy episteme,” or the perspective that it is only within such a larger cultural-historical context that one can understand the activities and issues subsumed under the notion of literacy. Brockmeier and Olson propose that only within the literacy episteme can the social, intellectual, and cultural implications of writing appear as an area of theory and investigation.

In Part II, *Literacy and Language*, the contributors deal with the complex relationship of reading and writing to more primary modes of communication – speaking and listening. They explore how the world’s major writing systems can be traced back to just three language systems, the evidence for the coevolution of written signs for language and numbers, and the similarities, unique properties, and advantages of each mode of communication. In addition, the contribution of Usha Goswami presents a review of studies in neuroscience that shows the relationship of reading to phonological processes in the brain, while Karl Magnus Petersson, Martin Ingvar, and Alexandra Reis demonstrate that literate adults process language in a different way than non-literates.

Part III, *Literacy and Literature*, is concerned with the relationship of literacy to social conventions. Reading groups, reading and writing in school and specific subject areas, making lists, searching for information, writing recipes, reading a prayer book and other skills, are embedded in larger social and institutional contexts. Thus, learning to read and write also requires one to learn the appropriate social conventions within these contexts. Furthermore, reading and writing are not viewed as a private or solitary activity but as one that is social. For example, Elizabeth

Long uses two of her own autobiographical reflections to demonstrate that reading is a social activity. She demonstrates that her “reading experiences were both shaped and cradled by a complex web of social relationships and cultural beliefs” (p. 185). Other contributors share how the self is not only shaped by experience but by learning to read and write in such a way that complies to the social conventions of literate institutions, and to gender perceptions and expectations. Finally, this part includes two papers on how information technology is shifting not only our literacy practices (i.e. digital literacy), but also what constitutes literacy.

Part IV explores the relationships between *Literacy and Society*. Brian Street uses ethnographic evidence from Iran, Philadelphia, South Africa, Ghana, Nepal, and the United Kingdom to demonstrate that what defines one as literate or illiterate in societies may be different from that which is observed through an ethnographic or “literacy-sensitive” lens. For example, some villagers in Iran are considered to be illiterate by outsiders, and yet many examples of literacy activity are found within the village, such as those occurring in Quranic schools. Thus, diverse societies define literacy differently, appropriate to their society. Rosalind Thomas and Nicholas Everett provide historical accounts of how elites used and misused writing for intellectual and social purposes. Frits van Holthoorn explores the role of literacy in the development of a “civil society” in the early modern period.

Finally, part V, *Literacy in Education*, reflects on the processes involved in the acquisition of literacy in both children and adults. First, the history of pedagogical processes is explored by A.-M. Chartier. Then, Liliana Tolchinsky provides evidence that aspects of the visual forms of writing are learned by children both before and as they work out the complex relationship between speech and writing. Alison Garton and Chris Pratt examine literacy from a sociocultural perspective to show how literacy development is dependent on one becoming more competent in various social practices in the home. Joseph Farrell and Thomas Sticht both deal with issues relating to low literacy levels around the world and propose ways to address such problems. Daniel Wagner then examines the role of new technology in literacy programs and how they have begun to play a role in international literacy development. Lastly, David Olson considers the implications of recent research and advances for literacy policy.

This volume provides valuable research and practical applications relevant to understanding the process of literacy. Though the research presented is more relevant to literacy development in one’s first language, the research can provide insight into the process for a learner striving to be literate in a second language. For example, Catherine Snow and Paolo Uccelli argue for the importance of instructional approaches that will help students develop the “academic language” needed, while various contributors in the *Handbook* explore the relationship between reading and writing. In addition, contributors also demonstrate how literacy is not an isolated practice, but is done within a social context and thus requires the learner to be socialized into the conventions appropriate to such contexts. Thus, the research and

theoretical implications within this volume from various disciplines emphasize all that second language learners and teachers also have to be aware of, consider, and be enculturated into when striving to be literate in another language.

In *The Handbook of Literacy*, Olson and Torrance achieve the goal of combining the work from various disciplines and leading scholars including education, anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, history, and others. The reader of the *Handbook* will not only have a valuable interdisciplinary resource on literacy, but will also gain a profound appreciation for the competence he/she demonstrated in order to read such a text.