



Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power, and Identity. James Collins and Richard K. Blot. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 218 pp. ISBN 0521596610

KATE PAHL, *University of Sheffield, United Kingdom*

k.pahl@sheffield.ac.uk

This book is a much-needed review of the literature in the field of “New Literacy Studies” and opens up a space for scholarly research that addresses the question of literacies and power. In the first half of the book, Collins and Blot give a detailed account of widely read studies in the field of literacy. In their accounts, they address key issues to push their arguments further. They begin by discussing the question of the relationship between orality and literacy. Arguing against the accepted separation of the two, they expose the way in which orality is often mistakenly associated with underdeveloped, less sophisticated, and non-Western cultures. Moreover, Collins and Blot reveal how research on the “great divide” between orality and literacy is often carried out through a Western, alphabetically focused lens. Cultures that use oral methods of recording ideas cannot be equated with simplicity. This reasoned analysis occupies the first chapter in the book.

Collins and Blot argue that literacy practices are infused with power. This argument is picked up in each chapter and developed throughout the book. In an illuminating discussion of specific ethnographic studies of literacy practices by Finnegan, Heath, and Street, Collins and Blot argue that these studies offer no exploration of power relations. The book’s central argument, that literacies are embedded in a multiplicity of social practices imbued with power relations, continues in an account of the history of American schooled literacy and an analysis of how identities and literacy practices are intertwined. Finally, in a clear and in-depth discussion of colonialism and literacy, the authors show how by seeing the terrain of literacy practices as historical, the field can be developed and linked to an analysis of how power is inextricably linked to literacy practices.

There are many rich debates within this book. First, the book argues for the need to link an account of literacy practices with wider social theory, in particular, the social theory of French theorists of power, such as de Certeau, Bourdieu, and Foucault. Second, the book reveals how historical understandings of literacy practices are vital in illuminating taken-for-granted assumptions that identify the written and the schooled with literacy, and do not recognize the ephemeral traces that include oral or visual communicative practices outside that domain. Third, the book argues that identity and literacy are closely intertwined. The authors show by discussing



narratives and studies of texts by women and black writers, how their accounts are shaded by the relationship these groups have to dominant notions of literacy practices. These are all-important debates that make this book a key resource in the field of literacy studies in Masters and postgraduate courses.

However, the critiques in the book may concern some. Both Street and Heath see their studies as contributing to an analysis of literacy and power. Indeed, Street argues that the “autonomous” forms of literacy are often linked to government agendas, whereas the ideological account of literacy needs scholarly analysis to expose the workings of power relations, which is the point of this particular book. Heath’s clear analysis of how the middle-class community developed a match with “schooled” literacy owes a great deal, as Collins and Blot concede, to Bourdieu and Passeron’s work on cultural reproduction. However, the critiques presented in *Literacy and Literacies* are there for a purpose: they push this debate further. Students will have to decide for themselves how they view these particular studies. Heath and Street in particular are often treated as part of a “great tradition” of literacy studies. It is refreshing to read an informed critique of their work.

What this study should do in the wider field of New Literacy Studies is to encourage research in the field of literacy practices that is alive to questions of power and identity. This form of analysis is currently lacking in some forms of literacy research, which can privilege “schooled” accounts of literacy. However, increasing globalization, alongside migratory patterns, and continuing structural inequality make this an urgent task. What is deeply concerning is the continuing link between “schooled” literacy practices and a taken-for-granted set of assumptions by middle-class white parents that these practices are normative. By pushing against these taken-for-granted assumptions, Collins and Blot open up a space for scholars using ethnographic methods to examine communicative practices to offer nuanced and complex accounts of literacy and literacies, texts, power, and identity.

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