

debate. His book offers a cold analysis of a troubling aspect of British industrialization and, as such, will convince few.

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John Willinsky. *The New Literacy: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools.* New York: Routledge, 1990.

What's new about the "New Literacy"? It is, says author John Willinsky, "a different form of education in reading and writing," an empowering literacy, "intended to engender expression and individual voice, to establish a sense of community and discourse," a literacy dedicated to the active, collaborative construction of meaning, a literacy that transforms the roles of teacher and student, and that offers new challenges to research. As if that were not enough, it is a literacy that, argues Willinsky, "has within it a potential for social change that extends far beyond the classroom" (p. xviii).

Lest this begin to sound suspiciously like a sales pitch for some cure-all educational snake oil ("Here are a series of programs that will prepare students for turning literacy to their own ends, whatever situation they find themselves in") the New Literacy (capitalized throughout) is also, as Michael Apple stresses, "inherently contradictory." A progressive peda-

gogy which struggles for acceptance in conservative times, the New Literacy attempts to chart a perilous course between providing the kind of "functional literacy," a "literacy as ability," which inclines invariably towards reproducing existing economic, socio-cultural, and political arrangements, and engendering what's been variously termed "empowering," "higher-order," or "critical" literacy—a literacy as social praxis driven by meaning, purpose, and agency.

Willinsky's project in this book is to grapple directly with these and other contradictory elements within the new literacy—to, in his words, "stop for a moment, amid the enthusiasm and support (for the new literacy), and grow far more cautious and critical...to raise questions about its shortcomings, in classroom practices, research findings and theory." Willinsky's stated intent is "on one level...to inform readers of the challenge and promise posed by the New Literacy. But on another level, it [is to] step into the fray, contributing to its cause by uncovering the venerable roots of its claim on literacy and then, too, challenging it with questions about the latent politics of this new power which advocates of the New Literacy have yet to ask" (p. 13).

Willinsky does a convincing job of drawing together the often seemingly diverse and disconnected practices which together comprise the New Literacy, illustrating concretely and explaining theoretically its educational appeal and he is impressive, if at times also rather dizzying, in the number, kind, and complexity of the references and citations deployed in his account. Which is all to say that this

work is hard going at times, but it is also richly rewarding—intelligent, insightful, informed, and informative. In its extensive bibliography alone, teachers and researchers can find a comprehensive course of study in the theory, research, policy, and practices of the New Literacy. One of those rare books which rewards re-reading, Willinsky's treatment of the emergence and formation of a new "paradigm" in contemporary language arts education endeavours to take seriously the moral and political challenges it presents to the technocratic, skills-based approaches it seeks to supersede.

The first half of the book elucidates the wide range of practices in the teaching of reading, writing, and literary study drawn together under the "umbrella" of the New Literacy. Practices are linked throughout with wide-ranging and informative discussions of the theory and research that support them, the history that informs and shapes them, and the contemporary theory and policy which challenge the New Literacy, and threaten its survival. The second half of the book is devoted to working out the implications of this constellation of theory, research, and practice in relation to the new literacy's fundamental assumptions. Cornerstones of the new literacy challenged in the remaining chapters include the idea of "meaning making" as central to literacy; "romantic enlightenment" as the new literacy's (self-) selected history; self-expression as its purest motive; and a politics of "voice and empowerment" for all students, addressing traditional educational inequalities which have

hitherto been created and sustained through literacy.

The discussion of writing, as "Writing in the Real," begins by juxtaposing as contradictory elements within the new literacy the social fact that composition has functioned and continues to function as "gatekeeper" of educational inequality, with the new literacy's preferred construal of writing as an emancipatory project, inherently democratic in its "empowerment" of each individual's "voice," a force enabling self-expression and self-formation.

"Reading Lessons" identifies reader response theory as coming "closest to representing the educational ideals of the new literacy," and the discussion begins by distinguishing two basic types of reading: "The reading that goes on outside of literature is the enormity of the real world, the traffic-jam of texts—notes, forms, accounts, reports, proposals, contracts, directions, manuals...[then] there is the reading that reaches intensely within us, and the reading that we turn to, like the road sign before the highway exit ramp, to guide us to our destination." This dichotomy, assuredly a false one in many respects, Willinsky notes, nonetheless "has a history in the schools, one which the new literacy proposes significantly to reform. The new literacy presents a conception of learning to read as finding meaningfulness in print that is rooted in students' experience and grows through students' engagement in texts that are ends in themselves rather than exercises in improved performance" (p. 68).

Reading lessons are social processes, Willinsky stresses, and the fact "[that] these cultural factors fall outside the dominant models of reading seems increasingly irresponsible" (p. 82). He cites approvingly work such as Cazden's and McDermott's, which critically addresses the social dynamics of reading lessons for minority students. He discusses the work of Vygotsky on social engagement and dialogue, and, centrally, the work of Freire on literacy for social change, on reading the word as reading one's world. Then turning a critical eye on the new literacy in turn, Willinsky finds a "certain simplemindedness over how power and social structure are brought to the classroom" (p. 86) and he points out the vast difference between Freire's radical projects, and the essentially literary, "culturally crazy" positioning of an essentially "bourgeois" (Walkerline) approach. But despite peppering his discussion with asides about the new literacy's entrepreneurial spirit, its executive-class edge and so on, Willinsky ends up characterizing the new literacy as a "radical act of challenge against the established authorities" (p. 84), "a substantial attack on the foundations of schooling" (p. 85) where school can become a "place to share wonders" (p. 85). The discussion concludes by acknowledging that "to what ends these students will turn a literacy that is made there remains an open question."

Yet it is not a question that finally seems terribly troubling, and this despite the fact that no convincing attempt has really been made to deal with the objections to which the dis-

ussion has drawn our attention, criticisms that this "new literacy," no less than its forebears, is an essentially elitist enterprise which functions, as language education has always functioned, to advantage the already advantaged and to disadvantage those who, not having been born into the mainstream, have far more often to be explicitly taught its "ways with words." (Instructive on this point are Shirley Brice-Heath, and, especially, Lisa Delpit on the disabling consequences of an essentially bourgeois innovation on the non-mainstream students whom Delpit evocatively refers to as "other people's children.")

Willinsky then turns to a consideration of the new literacy's approach to literary studies, explicating the foundational work of Rosenblatt on reader-response, Bleich on subjective criticism and feminist work on the importance of bringing together the personal and the political, the subjective and the social, and on reading as gendered practice. It is probably worth remarking on the contradictory character of the discussion of gender and "voice" in this work, and again the only barely concealed speciousness of its resolution: Willinsky challenges the prediscursive self and, presupposing a constructionist conception of gender, points out that children's actual written "expression" may express a gendered subjectivity which—and it may well not be the one teachers hope to see there (p. 94)—is in fact a set of socially and materially constructed "subject-effects" which educators might, and defensibly, actively seek to try to influence and to reshape (p. 132). Yet first, it seems, children have to be

allowed to express these constructed gendered selves as if they were "real."

But hold on just a moment...why this pedagogical "waiting game," if indeed literacy is itself generative of the self? And at whose expense, this still-romantic "liberality" in the service of the development of "voice" in the classroom? To what extent does such a practice reflect and reveal, beneath a superficial endorsing of post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity, the tenaciousness of essentialist conceptions of gender? Willinsky reports at one point that "the girls are finding their own voice, and writing their own stories." And he goes on to suggest that "the school would celebrate the quiet passivity of the girls' work" (as if it might not have been created by schooling, not pre-existing and subsequently "recognized" by it) "playing up its tidy expression of the efforts at connection, and at breaking the domestic hold of dinner dishes on their lives" (p. 130). Even if—and this is surely arguable—it is not already an ideologically-coded ghettoization to construe these girls' stories as "efforts at connection"—a manifestation of "women's ways" of writing, why already, at this early age, the presumption of a "domestic hold of dinner dishes?" Is this perhaps the residue of a persistent privileging of the masculinist perspective that earlier enabled Willinsky to produce a surprisingly sexist rendition of one familiar "codification" from a Freirean literacy programme (p. 83), notwithstanding his explicit sensitivity to the traditionally discriminatory consequences of gendered textual practices?

Subsequent chapters return to questions about classroom practice, the importance of research which "puts the New Literacy to the test," and with ways in which the new literacy can be seen to be historically grounded in popular literacy no less than in romanticism, with all of its attendant difficulties. Willinsky provides an excellent chapter on the conceptual problems new literacy theory must grapple with in its redefinition of literacy, showing how, in its rooting of meaning in the individual, it needs to contend with the sociality of both meaning and subjectivity. "It no longer makes sense for new literacy programs to strive toward a literate community in the classroom while continuing to speak of literacy principally in personal and individual terms of self-realization" (p. 206).

Willinsky's concluding chapter about the future of the new literacy, its likely prospects, and its imminent dangers returns our attention to practice. The road ahead involves, says Willinsky, a broadening of literacy's scope to include non-textual as well as textual practices, a more explicit engagement with the politics of literacy, one which deals openly with the ongoing relations of power and privilege which pre-structure any attempts at literacy reform. It involves, too, an elaboration of the new literacy's research programme "specifically to provide support to teachers drawn to its work" (p. 234).

Willinsky's *New Literacy* provides a superbly synoptic view of new directions in the teaching of language and literacy. But there is always a danger accompanying any such at-

tempt to represent the "state of an art," particularly so when it is to be accomplished by providing the history of a "tradition." Historiography is, after all, a future-oriented project—an activity of definition, as indeed the subtitle of this book reflects. In this sense, then, to recount a history as a coherent story of origins and development is always inevitably also to constitute (to "forge," that is to say) a *tradition*. Hence it is always, at the same time, to impose a kind of closure on the object of study. The particular danger in an educational history such as this is that the practices being "grounded" historically are contemporary ones, ones whose originators in current contexts may themselves be unaware of any necessary connection with practices in the past, and who themselves may not be coming from or going to the same places those purportedly similar practices in the past had as their motive and their direction. In this sense, to offer a "history" may be to constrain the future of such practices within the confines of a tradition which they otherwise might succeed in transforming. Does Willinsky's particular account of "the New Literacy" function to impose a premature closure on that history before its development is complete, before its directions—including the particularly profound contradictions that it presently faces—can yet be properly understood?

Willinsky himself warns against the new literacy's becoming a "new orthodoxy," and of a "hardening of categories and stages" which seems to typify the fate of even the brightest and best educational ideas, once these have been legitimated and widely institu-

tionalized—a project which he nevertheless recommends. Indeed, for all of its talk about radical politics of literacy, does this work seriously contend with the criticisms that have been made of the new literacy's continuing privileging of the privileged, and its failure to provide for those whose socio-linguistic background is outside the mainstream?

In the end, we think, it has not done this, although it has masterfully raised all of the important questions. But, when pressed, argumentation has retreated behind a wall of critical pedagogy's optimistic but increasingly unconvincing talk of "possibilities," the question of "possibilities for whom" remaining a moot point. What seems clear, though, is that despite the rhetoric about "radical acts of challenge against established authorities" (p. 84), the New Literacy has with this book been constituted as a phenomenon both more comprehensible and, in the process, more civilized, more continuous with canonical literary traditions, in short, more respectable than it otherwise might have become. Whether this is a contribution to the development of an innovative, radical, and empowering practice of literacy, or indeed its short-circuiting, remains to be seen. What is not in contention, however, is that this is a book which deserves to be widely read.

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