

Spring 2017

The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners

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Recommended Citation

Benson, Sally. "The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp. 93-97. doi:10.25148/clj.11.2.009140.

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The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners

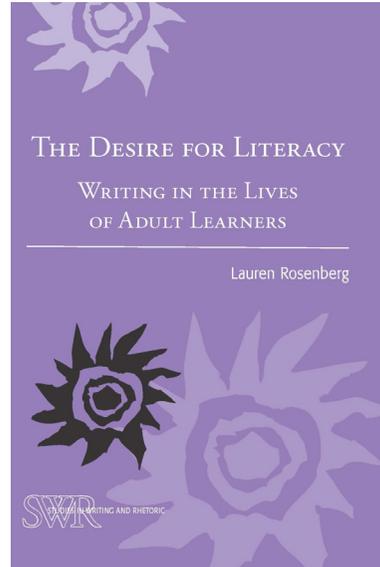
Lauren Rosenberg

Urbana: CCCC/NCTE Studies in Writing and Rhetoric (SWR) series, 2015. 185 pp.

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What does literacy mean, and why does it matter? Lauren Rosenberg posits that literacy, a term that remains contested, is not merely a set of skills but “a means of knowing and interacting in the world that can be shared” (154). Rosenberg’s book is the result of a qualitative study about adult literacy learners’ writing practices and their reasons for seeking literacy skills. Referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *subaltern class*, “that sector of the population whose experience counters the dominant and who are, therefore, shut out from dominant ideological concerns” (3), Rosenberg raises the question of whether those who have been positioned by dominant literate discourses as voiceless and without knowledge can gain the tools not only to be heard and to exercise their voices, but also to challenge the scripts that have been ascribed to them. Observing students at Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, Rosenberg focuses her study on four older adults, George, Violeta, Chief, and Lee Ann (pseudonyms), who are no longer in the workforce and who have voluntarily chosen to become literacy learners. She invites us to ask the important question: What are the motivations of these individuals, who have been rendered mute by societal values that equate literacy with intelligence, to become more literate?

Rosenberg offers intimate accounts of these older adults and places them in the role of being teachers, carefully attentive to her own role as researcher and as representative of dominant literate culture. Relating to her participants as a learner, Rosenberg aims to hear their stories without assumptions. While collaborating with her participants, Rosenberg successfully demonstrates a model of creating a space in which both researcher and subject are interchangeable roles. She also sets an example of how theories are formed and articulated, and of how we might reconsider where we place credit for such scholarship. Through careful listening, she seeks to hear



how the participants of her study theorize their roles as “nonliterates” and how they describe their experiences of and purposes for seeking literacy education. Rosenberg’s research gives voice to those traditionally ignored. Through this approach, these individuals become literacy theorists and help make a methodological contribution to literacy studies.

Rosenberg’s primary methodology is narrative inquiry. She uses interviews to explore the relationship between the written and spoken stories of her participants. As they reframe and retell their spoken narratives in their writing, Rosenberg observes how they restore or “restory” themselves in a dominant position of knowing. As these four participants talk about their experiences around literacy, all are aware that they have been positioned as being voiceless and unknowing people. Carefully avoiding power dynamics of researcher and subject, Rosenberg maintains casual relationships with her participants. “What started out as a research study ended up as an engaged conversation” for Rosenberg, who is invested in hearing their stories (21). By sharing their personal stories with her, and by restorying themselves through their writing, these participants place their reasons for becoming literate in direct opposition to a culture that has marginalized them. In spite of their lack of tradition literacy skills, they are adults who have led rich lives full of experiences and who are, in fact, knowledgeable.

In Chapter 1, “Resisting Nonliteracy: Adult Learners Restory Their Narratives,” we meet George, an African American man in his sixties learning literacy skills. Rosenberg echoes the Freirean belief that education should be designed by the people based on their own experiences as thinkers rather than imposed on them as a social weapon. She places George in a position of co-author, illustrating that the adult literacy learner participants of the study are ideally suited to teach those concerned with community literacy studies. George knows what it feels like to be embarrassed as nonliterate, and he reaches out to help a woman read a sign in a way that doesn’t inflict the same embarrassment on her. In telling his narrative, George empowers himself through the role of knower. As adult learners develop literacy skills, they both accept and resist dominant discourses of literacy, according to Rosenberg, as they straddle their roles of being subjected *to* this ideology as well as being subjects *of* it. They want acceptance in the literate mainstream, but they also resist the unjust practices that have been used to marginalize them.

Chapter 2, “Speaking from ‘the Silent, Silenced Center’: ‘Just Because You Can’t Read Doesn’t Mean That You Don’t Know’” describes the participants’ experiences of nonliteracy. Rosenberg points to Krista Ratcliffe’s insistence on researchers not just listening closely to participants but listening differently to them. Ratcliffe upends the word “understanding” to become “standing under” and suggests standing under the discourses of people talking about themselves as a means of becoming informed by them (26). Rosenberg chooses to *stand under* the words of her participants’ stories, listening without judgment and allowing their words to wash over her and over us as readers.

In Chapter 2, we meet Rosenberg’s four participants, all of whom share a common experience of not having had consistent access to school. We are first introduced to Violeta, who grew up in Puerto Rico and New York City. Violeta’s

parents, resistant to her being in school, moved back and forth between Puerto Rico and New York, challenging Violeta as a learner. We then learn about Chief, who was raised on a sharecropper's farm in the pre-Civil Rights South, and Chief's access to schooling revolved around seasons, weather, and fighting between whites and blacks. Despite his lack of formal education, Chief led a reasonably mainstream life as a welder and forklift operator. Next, we meet Lee Ann, raised by a nonliterate mother who refused to buy her the books she desired as a child and who moved the family frequently to avoid rent collectors. We also discover that George, like Chief, was raised on a sharecropper's farm and did not attend school regularly. He had a career as a metal forger and later as a machine operator and successfully hid his nonliteracy behind competent job performance.

Rosenberg ends Chapter 2 by calling into question her role as a listener. Lee Ann shares an experience of being kicked out of her church choir for not being able to read music or lyrics. She tells her story of being belittled by the choir director, "he crushed me like a bug . . ." (47), and she places responsibility on the listener, and now on us as readers, to acknowledge the ways mainstream literacy can be used as a weapon to marginalize alternative forms of literacy.

Chapter 3, "Contemplating Literacy: 'A Door Now Open'" takes us inside Read/Write/Now, which places student writing at the center of its curriculum. Instructors at R/W/N observe that adult learners, unlike most children, voluntarily invest in their own learning. Rosenberg's participants contemplate literacy as a process of *becoming*, and Rosenberg describes them as literacy researchers (57). Both Violeta and Lee Ann experience literacy skills as a means to become more independent, less reliant upon others. As a form of self-reflection, Chief writes letters to himself acknowledging his progress and expressing his pride in that growth. He nurtures himself in ways he did not receive nurturing as a child. He wants to circulate his writing for others to be inspired to pursue learning. George is protective of his status as learner. He places pride in working and in the self-sufficiency it afforded him. He chooses to learn to read and write because of the freedom it allows him. Through reading, for example, he can learn about China, a location that would have remained a mystery without literacy.

In Chapter 4, "Literacy and Nonliteracy: Reflective Knowledge and Critical Consciousness," the participants describe literacy as a form of power in contrast to their experience of nonliteracy. By learning to write, Lee Ann is discovering herself and is able to empathize with other struggling students at Read/Write/Now, which leads to her self-validation. George understands power relationships because of his metal work at the drop forge, and he is able to theorize about those who use their literacy as a means to subjugate and control others. George's earlier narrative about helping a woman who cannot read illustrates his experience as both nonliterate/Other and as literate mentor. He recognizes ways in which literacy can be used to demean or denigrate people, and he intervenes to help a woman read a sign in a store. Violeta uses her literacy to move away from a position of being oppressed to a position of control and independence. Chief sees literacy skills as educational skills, and he likes to share his knowledge to inspire others to study. All have used their access to literacy as a tool for empowerment and liberation. By theorizing about literacy through

the telling of their own experiences, and through their criticism of the conditions of their nonliteracy, these four participants teach us that literacy and educational access are tools of social violence and segregation. Their accounts of writing as a form of resistance illustrate Freire's perspective on becoming literate as a means of decolonization or of countering their subjugation.

In Chapter 5, "What Writing Enables," Rosenberg describes the relationship to writing that Violeta and Chief have as form of textual agency. Their increased confidence in writing allows them to voice their opinions and to reach out to others as a form of social transformation. Violeta, hoping to inspire others to take control over their lives, positions herself as a voice against poverty and nonliteracy and eventually participates in educating the Latino community about HIV. For Chief, literacy is a form of self-validation. Chief positions himself in the role of educator by distributing his stories of being nonliterate and of being racially discriminated against at school in his church's newsletter. Writing validates his opinions by documenting his words, making them permanent. In other words, Chief writes to *be* himself. Both Violeta and Chief use writing as a tool for personal realization and as a form of social action. As they demonstrate their success to others, Violeta and Chief reposition themselves as advocates against social, political, and economic Othering. They "consciously subvert the culture that has oppressed them when they write" (144).

The final chapter, "The Transgressive Power of Writing," begins with a quote from Chief, "[A] lot of stuff down there was kept hush-mouth" (146). Chief's experience of growing up in the segregated South taught him that not being able to read or write meant not having a voice. The dominant culture of mainstream literacy casts a societal muzzle on nonliterate, rendering them "hush-mouth" or silenced. Rosenberg's four authors reject their position as nonliterate subjects through their desire for literacy, and this desire to undo their subjugation is a resistance to being Othered. Their desire and success to be literate directly challenges identities society has imposed upon them and which they had previously absorbed. In fact, they labor to reposition themselves as liberated. Through these stories, Rosenberg shows that in order to disrupt the label of Other, one must first become self-aware and aware of the *desire* for literacy.

Desire for literacy, writes Rosenberg, is not the same as need for literacy. According to Rosenberg, the fields of writing studies and of adult basic education (ABE) do not focus enough on why people desire literacy, nor do they focus exclusively on adult learners. Research in writing studies most often fixates on college students, and scholarship in ABE emphasizes reading practices and the functional uses of writing (155). Writing, as textual agency, is at the core of Rosenberg's study on adult literacy. As the four participants shift from nonliterate to literate, their purposes for writing evolve. Writing moves beyond being a form of self-discovery and of restorying their own identities to a tool for social action and for leveraging others. Their writing becomes an act of resistance against oppression, and their interaction with it is constantly changing.

Lauren Rosenberg addresses an important and overlooked population of learners of literacy—older adults who seek literacy skills later in life. Specifically, she

explores the *why*. The reasons people remain nonliterate and don't get the schooling needed to be literate adults remain understudied, and Rosenberg addresses these essential points. She shows us the power of writing as an act of transgression by her participants and acknowledges these authors as teachers, reminding us that marginalized individuals have much to teach us about perspectives of subordination and, in this context, of the violence of literacy. Her participants' narratives emerge as multi-dimensional theories about literacy and extend beyond flatter theories of nonliterate as merely learners. As Rosenberg gets to know George, Violeta, Chief, and Lee Ann and follows their respective journeys to becoming literate, she re-thinks what literacy means as she tries to understand how these four adults define it. As we readers *stand under* her co-authors' words and stories, we enter spaces where literacy reaches beyond academic purposes.

Rosenberg leaves us with a sense that literacy means faith, knowledge, decolonization, independence, pleasure, social action, validation, representation, empowerment, and much more. Literacy learning, writes Rosenberg, "takes a person, the learners along with their teachers—to remote parts of the mind and soul that we might not know exist, those places of wandering and rumination that involve the reliving aspects of reading and writing, taking it in and traveling there again" (155). Anyone who is invested in adult literacy for communities outside of traditional education, and in shifting the imbalance of cultural capital that literacy often represents, should read Rosenberg's book. Her participants, whose perspectives extend beyond those representative of a dominant discourse, have much to teach us about the multifaceted role that literacy has in our lives. Voices of these historically silenced individuals surface as voices of knowledgeable theorists thanks to Rosenberg's important research.