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Literacy in Times of Crisis: Practices and Perspectives

Patricia Burnes
University of Maine

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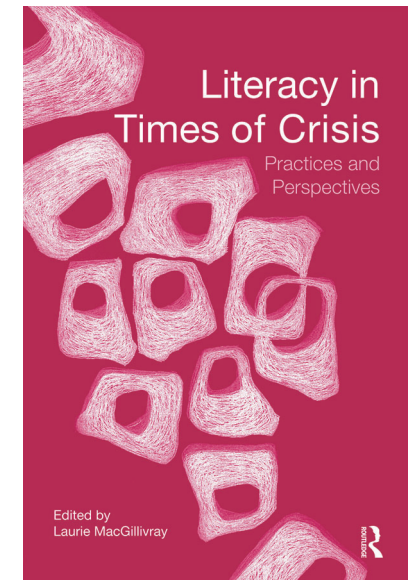
Literacy in Times of Crisis: Practices and Perspectives.

Laurie MacGillivray, Ed.

New York and London: Routledge, 2010. 216 pp.
ISBN 978-0415871648. \$44.95.Reviewed by Patricia Burnes
University of Maine

Literacy in Times of Crisis: Practices and Perspectives is an ambitious book. Each chapter in the major, middle section is a report from a research project into what happens to and through literacy in times of crisis. The range of crises being studied is impressive: natural disasters, homelessness, teenagers facing motherhood, immigrants caught between cultural assumptions about marriage, children enduring custody battles, and others. Despite the wide divergence in situations explored, all contributors share a belief in literacy as social action through which people shape and reshape their identities and create the structures through which life becomes comprehensible. This view of literacy is hardly new. But by asking what happens when crises or unexpected events “overwhelm the systems that make things work” (1), editor Laurie MacGillivray and her contributors challenge and expand previous understandings of the relationships between individual literacy and cultural identity. They also address the relationships between individual identities and the social structures that make purposeful action possible. Framing their accounts are statements by three teachers, who first anticipate and then reflect on the major chapters in terms of their teaching and, in one case, larger community concerns. These final reflections help readers make useful connections among at least some of the great range of perspectives presented earlier; they also point beyond the book by providing a glimpse of the research and theorizing still needed if dedicated professionals are to learn how to serve their communities through the practices of literacy in times of crisis.

Some of the book’s chapters testify very particularly to the role of literacy in individual circumstances; others work to help readers better understand literacy as a force central to the life of a community. April Whatley Bedford’s overture chapter does both. She describes having been evacuated from New Orleans in anticipation of Hurricane Katrina, something which left her separated from everyone she knew and



desperate for information. Although she had never used blogs and had only a vague idea of what they were, she went on-line, found several, and became an avid reader and contributor, relaying what she knew of the storm and learning from others. Significantly, she writes that immediately after being evacuated she had bought a journal, thinking that she would record her thoughts and feelings—as had been her habit for much of her life. This time, though, she found she had no desire to write anything that did not contain information about the storm. She retired the journal and turned to the blogs and emails that filled her days, entering and helping to sustain a virtual community by writing messages that friends later told her were among the most powerful texts she had ever composed.

Similar connections among literacy, identity, and community are obvious in Kara L. Lycke's chapter reporting research she had completed at a center for teenage mothers. Concentrating on two of the many cases she had studied and relying on vivid quotations to help us imagine those two young women, Lycke presents the substantial changes in lifestyle and long-range goals occasioned by motherhood and the literacy practices that enabled and expanded those changes. For a young woman from a highly supportive family, motherhood meant more serious reading and renewed concentration on school work with an ever tighter focus on the career that had always been her goal. For a young woman with a weaker family structure, motherhood meant putting aside reading practices she had once enjoyed (romance novels, mystery stories, love poetry) and turning instead to the online and print resources she was coming to know through a school program for unwed mothers. Lacking what Deborah Brandt calls "sponsors of literacy" in her immediate environment, the young woman found ways to create her own contexts for responsible motherhood. Like many of the book's chapters, Lycke's is valuable both for expanding research on its particular topic—the potential maturity of teenage, single mothers—and for expanding our understanding of the cultural power of literacy.

A similar if more complex account of shifts in reading practices in times of crisis comes in Gisele Ragusa's chapter on literacy strategies employed by families confronted with diagnoses of childhood disability. She reports on her study of seven families, each of whom had to cope with a disability diagnosis. In all the families, reading for pleasure declined significantly once the diagnosis had been made while reading for information, both on one's own and through computer-based networking, increased. The latter activity, Ragusa came to believe, served as a significant substitute for extended family support. In her closing advice to caregivers, she argues that disability-related information, whether electronic or print, needs to be current, accessible, and positive. Also testifying to literacy as creation of community is the research presented by editor Laurie MacGillivray, who reports on the Bible-reading practices of children and their mothers in homeless shelters. The quotations provided by MacGillivray provide emphatic evidence for her claim that young people come to know themselves in connection with the reading of Scripture. MacGillivray shows how such reading can provide security and a reliable sense of one's place in the world, all the while also helping to form and to support strong habits of reading.

Not all the chapters show literacy as a way to transcend crisis; literacy practices are also presented as ways to understand and cope with difficult circumstances. In

her second contribution, chapter 5, Ragusa reports her study of what happened when children from various ages kept dialogue journals with their mothers to cope with the trauma of divorce. Both the substantial quotations Ragusa provides as well as her description of changes over the six-month duration of the project provide compelling support for her claim that keeping the journals offered the means to both enriched literacy and emotional maturity in difficult times. Further evidence of the therapeutic possibilities of literacy in times of crisis comes in chapter seven as researcher Mary K. Thompson reports on the desperate case of a teenage victim of numerous crises, one participant in a study she was doing of the writing of Asian-American teenagers. The chapter reveals the teenager's success in using fanfiction and extremely personal poetry (shared only with the researcher) as ways to create new social worlds for herself and to achieve some degree of emotional balance in her traumatic life.

In contrast to the narrow foci of these first six chapters, MacGillivray closes the major part of the book with three chapters presenting society-wide literacy practices that throw into crisis the lives of those affected by them. Loukia K. Sarroub begins by reporting her research on the contradictory relationships between marriage and literacy in the immigrant communities she had studied. Although necessary for the rights of citizenship, she reports that the achievement of print literacy for her subjects could be an impediment for marriage in terms of their home cultures. For each, print literacy was a situated social practice, but situated in only one of the two cultures through which they achieved identity. Caught between two cultures, the women struggled to find ways to use the new rules to their own advantage rather than being defined by them.

A similar story of official pronouncements disserving individual needs comes in Rebecca Rogers and Kathryn Pole's account of a struggle between city and state leadership to take over the St. Louis Public School system in 2007. Through meticulous critical discourse analysis, the co-authors show how those parties interested in a state takeover were able to turn what had been a longstanding series of problems with public education into what the public was led to perceive as a crisis. State takeover advocates used decontextualized pronouncements that finally claimed more attention than the statements coming from those immediately affected by the proposed action. Rather than providing a way to cope with crisis (as the literate practices detailed in the earlier chapters did), the literacy at work here created a crisis that those parties with the most money and the most to gain could use to their advantage. In the last of the major chapters, Susan Florio-Ruane provides an overview of ways in which government officials have used crisis narratives to change teachers' practices and at the way teachers have both accepted and resisted those attempts. Drawing her examples from a plea for a return to first principles from the Educational Policies Commission in 1937—from the Sputnik-related creation of the National Defense Education Act and of the various programs enacted through the National Science Foundation, and from what she terms the failed crisis narrative of No Child Left Behind Act—Florio-Ruane demonstrates that the language of crisis can be used to prompt unthinking obedience to harmful practices and that educators must exercise their best professional judgment to resist such attempts. She concludes with a plea that educators follow only those mandates that accord with their professional knowledge, experience, and judgment.

The book ends with reflections by three teachers, each of whom writes about how her work already reflects some of the book's concerns and what larger adjustments she might make. Tracy Sweeney, an early career teacher, writes of the repeated importance the chapters give to new, ever-changing literacy practices and of her determination to introduce those to her students as well as to find ways to make her classroom more responsive to their out-of-school needs. Jane Ching Fung, a veteran teacher, sounds similar themes, stressing the importance of getting to know the students she teaches and of finding ways to balance community-based literacy activities with the more typical test-preparation work that can consume so much of a teacher's time. The final commentator, Elizabeth Moje, a teacher-educator and researcher, stresses the importance of writing for expressive and problem-solving purposes, emphasized in many of the chapters, but goes on to note the challenges and conflicts that teachers will face in attempting to enact many of the practices presented in the book. Those under pressure to teach large numbers of students and to meet district-wide guidelines and deadlines, she points out, may not be able to devote the kind of time to individual students that some of the chapters suggest, nor can they always do that without being tempted to pathologize the students and unwittingly withhold the level of rigorous attention they are giving the students' classmates. She goes on to raise the crucially important question of power, pointing out that none of the literacy practices described in the preceding chapters will bestow by themselves the kind of agency that people in desperate situations need. Such agency, Moje points out, is finally the business of all adults in a society to promote.

Moje's statement provides an ideal way to help readers make the implications of this book their own and find ways to act on them. Once literacy is recognized as embedded in social practice—and all the chapters in this book present literacy that way—then the crucial question of agency becomes the business of teachers and community workers alike. Teachers can indeed, as Sweeney points out, give students practice in many kinds of literacy and perhaps help them reflect on when and how particular practices are useful; and teachers can also, as Fung insists, be mindful of students' lives within and outside of schools and work to help students make connections. But Moje is surely right to say that the central question of how victims are restored to agency requires more than the learning of particular literate practices. Other recent accounts of connections between literacy in school and the larger society raise similar questions. In her exhaustive *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt shows connections between individual literate practice and the needs of the larger society as crucial to personal success and failure and ends by asking how schools can possibly decide between serving the larger needs of the society that supports them or the individual needs of students. James Gee forwards a similar question in his chapter "New People in New Worlds," in Cope and Kalantzis's *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* by pointing out that "All language is meaningful only in and through the contexts in which it is used" (63) and then explaining the great need schools have to immerse students in the languages they will use to create their lives.

Although MacGillivray and her contributors do not raise directly the question of community/school relations, many of their chapters point indirectly to those connections. Some of the most successful of the cases show victims able to align

themselves with the language of a surrounding community and to come thereby to renewed agency. And at least one of the chapter's—Sarroub's, on the conflicts endured by immigrant women newly literate in the language of their second country—points to the opposite situation. We have much to learn about how schools and community agencies can work together to restore victims of crisis to agency and, for that matter, how schools and community agencies can work together to support literate citizenry during even normal times. Laurie MacGillivray and her collaborators are to be thanked for focusing our attention on moments when needs are most sharply defined and action must be taken. We all stand to profit from their work and from the future research and practice this book will certainly inspire.

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