

Fall 2010

Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language 2nd ed. by David Barton

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Recommended Citation

Kurtyka, Faith. "Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language 2nd Ed. by David Barton." Community Literacy Journal, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp. 181–84, doi:10.25148/clj.5.1.009433.

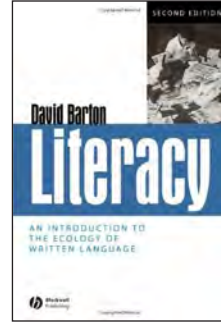
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Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language 2nd ed.

David Barton

Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007. 264 pp.

ISBN: 0631190910. \$43.95



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In November of last year, the CCCC executive committee released a position statement on “faculty work in community-based settings,” the opening line of which declares that “composing practices are always situated within particular contexts” and that all language practices “are integrally connected to issues of identity, authority, and agency.” That the executive committee would open with this statement as a matter of fact is testament to the way that Literacy Studies (sometimes called New Literacy Studies), which investigates the social contexts of literacy practices, has greatly influenced thinking in the field about literacy works. David Barton’s *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* is a clear introduction to the field of Literacy Studies for scholars new to the field or for those looking to flesh out their understanding of literacy theory. Though its bolded terms, headings, and neat organization make it appear to be a reference book, Barton’s work is easily digested in segments or as a whole, even in one sitting. First published in 1994, then republished in 2007 with updated references and an explanation of research methodology, *Literacy* contains the theoretical frameworks behind social models of literacy beginning in the 1960s through the present day, matching up some of the more abstract ideas with concrete ethnographic examples from both past and contemporary scholarship.

In chapter one, “An Integrated Approach to Literacy,” and chapter two, “Talking about Literacy,” Barton surveys the field of literacy studies by looking at how both scholarly and vernacular metaphors for literacy become theories about literacy. For example, discussing illiteracy as a disease that must be cured means that people who have low levels of literacy need “treatment” via “clinical intervention” (13). Talking about illiteracy as a kind of oppression means that people need to be empowered to critical consciousness (13). Barton recommends conceiving of literacy as “ecology” because this metaphor “aims to understand how literacy is embedded in other human activity . . . in social life and thought, and its position in

history, in language and in learning” (32). Based on this understanding, literacy practices become less isolated activities and more intertwined with social practices. Barton finds this metaphor useful because it is helpful for seeing some languages as endangered and consequently worthy of preservation, because it emphasizes the importance of maintaining the diversity of languages and because the influence of technology on literacy practices amounts to a kind of ecological shift. The metaphor of literacy as ecology is woven through most of the book, and the concluding chapter explores the implications of this view.

In chapter three, “The Social Basis of Literacy,” Barton outlines the central concepts of literacy as a social practice, many of which have become commonplace and will be familiar to scholars in community literacy. People draw upon literacy practices during literacy events; people use different literacies in different parts of their of life; literacy exists in a network of social relations and information; literacy practices are about people’s attitudes towards those practices as much as they are about the practices themselves; and literacy is historically rooted (34). Each concept is connected to concrete examples from ethnographies of literacy. For instance, Barton illustrates the concept that literacies are connected to “domains of life” by using data from his own research that shows how one research participant’s daily activities are linked to literacy practices, like reading books and newspapers at the library, or writing a letter of reference for an acquaintance from work (37-38). The articulation of research methods of social literacies in chapter four, “Researching Literacy Practices,” would be a helpful tool to community literacy researchers designing studies as well as those looking to understand the methodology and assumptions informing ethnographies of community literacies, like Barton and Hamilton’s *Local Literacies* or Ralph Cintron’s *Angels’ Town*.

Chapters five through seven address both oral and written language, as well as reading as a literacy practice. Barton takes a constructivist view of language, meaning that people use language to construct their worlds orally and textually, and that they actively make meaning while reading. The use of discourses in different social situations is one way language constructs social worlds. Language mediates experience in the way that people are able to understand experience using language and that people use texts to mediate a reading experience for others. Barton details the continuum between written and oral language, and shows how different writing systems suit different spoken languages.

In chapters eight, nine, ten, and twelve, Barton tackles what he calls “the archaeology of literacy,” focusing on key points in the history of literacy. He first discusses theories of the history of literacy, such as the “autonomous” theory, prevalent in the 1960s and still common in public debates on literacy. Autonomous theorists argued that literacy can be

isolated and described apart from social contexts and that contemporary Western literacy is a superior means of communication, having evolved from orality and more “primitive” forms of communication. Barton critiques this “evolutionary” view, arguing that literacy does not move in a linear progression and that instead of literacy determining people’s consciousness, people use literacies for certain purposes in specific social contexts to create meanings and convey meanings to others. Chapter eight, “Points in History,” helpfully details how printing and literate culture influenced literacy practices, though one wishes at this point that Barton might have spent more time on digital literacies, techno-literacies, or new media and their attendant shaping of literacy theory. Barton discusses how people, particularly children, learn literacy and offers several approaches to theorizing literacy pedagogy in chapters nine, ten, and twelve.

Chapter eleven, “Public Definitions of Literacy,” will be interesting to community literacy scholars because it addresses the circulation of literacy myths in the public sphere, again through an examination of metaphor. Barton finds that literacy is often discussed as a “set of skills” (160). This metaphor implies that literacy can be broken into discrete, decontextualized steps that can be assessed individually, marks schools as the unique terrain where literacy is learned, and upholds the autonomous view of literacy described earlier. Barton advocates for a broader view that conceives of literacy as embedded within a variety of everyday social practices. Chapter thirteen, “Adults and World Literacy,” will also be useful for community literacy scholars because Barton gives an overview of the functions of adult literacy programs, taking issue with the way that many literacy campaigns view literacy as a “set of skills thought to be universal and applicable everywhere” (190), and the way that literacy campaigns tend to ignore the way people termed “illiterate” are skilled in using social networks or other resources to get by in their everyday lives. In chapter fourteen, “Some Implications of the Ecological View,” Barton shows what an ecological view of literacy means for education. He argues that school literacies should be valued alongside other kinds of literacies, like consumer literacy, and that literacy should be acknowledged as part of the fabric of everyday life—not just in schools. Literacy should not be seen as a rote set of skills that everyone can learn the same way. On a global scale, metaphors for literacy need to be re-examined for what beliefs about literacy they are forwarding.

Though the book purports itself to be updated in the sense that it includes more contemporary citations, many sources are still from the 1980s and 1990s. These decades were certainly the crucial stages of development for the field of Literacy Studies, but including more recent sources in the book could have made it more informative on how advancements in technology have affected literacy practices. As a scholar of English education rather than rhetoric and composition, Barton focuses on children’s

literacy learning, which may frustrate those interested in adult literacy practices outside educational settings. None the less, Barton's compelling argument for the ecological approach to literacy studies will be useful to community literacy scholars because it provides a productive alternative to problematic views of literacy that circulate in the public sphere, like the privileging of certain literacies over others, or the rush to assessment of literacy. Barton's method of analyzing metaphor draws our attention to the power of metaphor to make sense of the world; in forwarding the ecological metaphor, Barton provides a means of thinking about literacy that encompasses contemporary scholarship on literacy studies and opens up new possibilities for theorizing literacy practices.

Works Cited

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