

Spring 2010

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Recommended Citation

Dayton-Wood, Amy E. "A Conversation with Victoria Purcell Gates." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2010, pp. 19–32, doi:10.25148/clj.4.2.009439.

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A Conversation with Victoria Purcell Gates

Amy E. Dayton-Wood

Like many people who follow her research, I became interested in Victoria Purcell Gates' work when I read her first book, *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy*. The book is an ethnography situated in the literacy center that Purcell-Gates directed for several years. It describes her work with a nonliterate woman named Jenny, who asked to learn to read alongside her second-grade son, Donny. Purcell-Gates agreed to tutor Jenny in exchange for permission to research Jenny and Donny's progress. Her account of this project is a thorough qualitative study that offers a nuanced analysis of the sociocultural factors that contributed to Jenny and Donny's nonliteracy as well as a description of the methods that Purcell-Gates used to teach them. It is also a compelling story. The readers care about the experiences of Jenny and Donny and want to know what happens to them after the research projects ends (In fact, Purcell-Gates still gets several inquiries each week from readers who want to know what became of Jenny and Donny). In terms of its broad appeal and compelling narrative, the book is unique among literacy ethnographies.

In her subsequent books and many articles, Purcell-Gates has continued to examine the factors that lead to success or failure for individuals learning to read and write, and to do so in compelling, accessible ways. In *Now We Read, We See, We Speak*, her book with Robin Waterman, the authors conduct an ethnographic study of a group of women in a literacy class in El Salvador. Waterman, the instructor of the class, used a Freirian approach to help the women—who were also almost completely nonliterate—learn to read and write. The book offers a portrait of Freirian pedagogy in perhaps its purest form—and it also shows how the students' socioeconomic status and marginalized position in their society had prevented them from obtaining full literacy. In a subsequent book, *Print Literacy Development: Uniting Cognitive and Social Practice Theories*, with Erik Jacobson and Sophie Degener, Purcell-Gates and her co-authors surveyed adult literacy programs around the country and followed up the survey research with interviews and ethnographic data collection. Ultimately, the study points to the value of using authentic texts (that is, real-world texts that students encounter in their lives outside of school) in adult literacy contexts, while also arguing that a social view of literacy is not incompatible with a focus on its cognitive dimensions. Her most recent book, *The Cultural Practices of Literacy* (CPLS), is an edited collection that brings together studies of literacy practices in a diverse range of settings both inside and outside the classroom. The website for the project presents some of the highlights of the research findings as well as discussion of the practical applications for teachers and sample lesson plans.¹ The data from the CPLS study has been assembled into a digital database that has become a unique corpus of literacy data. Purcell-Gates has also produced a

handbook for practitioners seeking to incorporate an authentic literacy approach in adult learning contexts.

In the conversation that follows, Purcell-Gates describes her current work and talks about what constitutes a rigorous approach to qualitative research. She emphasizes the need for balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches. She also discusses the larger context of literacy research and teaching, responding to some of the current challenges facing those in the field. In the afterword, I will discuss some of the insights that come out of this interviews and from Purcell-Gates' unique approaches to literacy research. Her work provides compelling insights for both researchers and teachers concerned with providing broader access to literacy, for all who seek it.

The Interview

Question: It's interesting that your work has ranged from research into child literacy learning to adult literacy learning. I was wondering if you could talk about what you think we can learn about adults' literacy acquisition from studying children, and vice versa?

VPG: That's a big question, and I think there's a lot of disagreement about that. I am operating under the assumption, based on different research projects I've done in clinical settings, that the actual learning to read and write process, the sorts of things people need to learn in order to go from not really understanding what to do with those marks on the page to actually being able to create meaning, that process is the same, whether it's a child or an adult who's just beginning to learn to read. Now I understand that adults and children are different, and they bring different ways of doing that, different strategies, and certainly, different backgrounds of experience to that task, which is going to change how they do that. But I think what they have to do at that early stage is the same. I sat once in a little village, very primitive, in El Salvador, and watched a group of women who had been totally nonliterate before my co-worker had started working with them, and saw adults who were trying to learn to leave spaces between words when they wrote, and that of course involves trying to understand that there are words and that you can break language up into words, and [figuring out] the boundaries, psychologically—all of the stuff that kids have to learn, too, so did these women. Learning how to shape the letters, even to hold a pencil, learning how to encode their own language. They did a lot of writing as part of this literacy project, and it was actually one of the new techniques that my co-worker was bringing to this program, emergent writing. Whereas in most Latino countries, it's very rote, you learn the syllables and you memorize and you copy. So, everything I saw, what those women were going through, young children go through those learning stages. And it's not just a stage, it's things you have to learn how to do. So I actually think that the process, in terms of what they need to learn, is the same. And it's true that you can work

with adults differently than you do with children, to an extent, but I don't fall into the group of adult literacy people who want to consider adult literacy students in a completely different category, with different theories and models of how they're learning to read and write. But it is a very controversial question.

Q: I wanted to ask you about the *Cultural Practices of Literacy* study. In the preface to that book, you give an anecdote about how you got your graduate students involved in this project, and you say that it was partly because a lack of funding at that time for qualitative studies of literacy. Could you talk about the state of qualitative research, generally? Do you think that this trend, the move away from a desire to fund qualitative studies, is going to continue? How do you think that qualitative researchers should respond to this larger trend?

VGP: I don't know how to predict the future on that. One hopes that over the next year or two enough changes will happen in Washington that we'll get a more balanced look at literacy research from the funders, because it's the government that has the money that is needed to fund these programs. What can qualitative researchers do? What they've been doing for the last eight years—try to limp along on internal funds, apply to Spencer or the different professional organizations—or leave the country, which is what I did. I didn't move completely because of the lack of funds, but that played a big role. I was in the last half of my career, and I predicted that I would not be able to be funded for qualitative research for at least eight years, after the first Bush election, and I thought, I don't have that kind of time to wait. I knew it would swing back, but for me, it was that kind of decision. So, along with all of that, I'm hoping for another era of research where qualitative researchers can produce good, qualitative research, but also understand its limitations—or, what you can and cannot do with the results, and the same for what you would call quantitative research, in terms of the large, experimental studies, and that we can find a way, which we still haven't done yet, to really work together in a principled way so neither of the presuppositions of either type of research is violated, and that we can come up with better insights into these difficulties that we face, in terms of the schools, and people falling behind, not learning to read and write.

Q: In the last chapter of the *Cultural Practices* book, you talk about the corpus of literacy data that you're assembling. What is contained within this data, and what might be its usefulness in the future to other researchers? Is anyone else amassing this kind of literacy data, or is this really unique?

VGP: I don't think they are, probably because they say, who would ever want to do this? It's become one of these giant projects. We actually presented on this at the National Reading Conference. It was a purely methodological presentation.²

What we're trying to do, and the idea has sort of solidified over time, is either do, sponsor, or affiliate with a series of case studies/ethnographies

that involves a collection of data on literacy practices of whatever population that the studies focus on, and from that create literacy practice data, a large database that we can then use to answer other questions, through cross-case analyses. So I have been spending virtually all of my time with this concept, how to do this in a good and principled way.

So our first issue is: this is qualitative data, so it's interpretive data, and so, how does one do cross-case analyses with interpretive studies? The other thing is, we need to have collected the same kind of literacy practice data. In other words, we need to have the same definitions for literacy events, for what is a text, and so on.

So, the way we've been doing this, we have created what's called a flat database. It's actually a term that's used in other qualitative books—I was surprised. It doesn't have these layers of interpretation and context that you get out of a report on a qualitative study. But what it does is it takes from coding that we've done for each study—so each researcher has to use the same coding process, and we use Atlas. ti (a qualitative data analysis program). And when we're analyzing data for each project, we do this literacy practice coding. And we go through all the field notes, and the interviews, which have to be part of each study in order to contribute to this, and so we have a semi-structured interview protocol on literacy practice, [as well as] one that collects demographic data in the same way.

And so we do individual interviews with people, hopefully in their homes, or in their own environment. It takes about an hour, hour and a half. It's very open-ended, but what it does is prompt them as much as possible for reports of everything they read in their lives and everything they write in their lives. So for example, I might ask someone, each day, do you go through a certain series of typical chores, and they say, yes, I do this, I get the kids up, I make breakfast, I wash clothes, I go to the store, and so on. And so I'll say, while you're doing that, while you're getting the kids up, is there anything you would read as part of that, or write as part of that? And we go through everything: spiritual life, work life, relaxation time, entertainment time. And we code each of those reported literacy events with the same string of codes. Is this current literacy practice, or when they were children? Is it reading, is it writing, is it listening, is it copying? What language is it in? The conceptual [codes] are, what *texts* are they reading and writing?

We've got a whole background on how we're defining text, based on genre theory.³ And then [for] the *social domain*, it would be, work, spirituality, community. We have a series of those. If you filled out a form to get into graduate school—we'd say, in order to apply to graduate school, and then we have a section called *function*. When you're reading that form, that's a *reading event*. And then you do another one for *writing event*, when they fill it out. But when you're reading that form, what are you reading for? So, you're actually reading to find out what information they want you to put on there. That would be *function*. So we have *social*

domain, social activity domain, text, function, purpose. Those are our big conceptual categories. And we have spent years developing a coding manual for that, and we have a seventy-three page coding manual. So it's gotten to be [huge].

When we start to do cross-case analysis, we would also upload all of the reports of that study, the field notes, interview transcripts, so that when people are looking at, for example, what types of texts do people read across these different cultural contexts, they would not only have that flat database where we've entered the codes for those different things, but then they could also go back to the field notes, and go back to the way the researchers interpreted the data, to give that much more meaning. Because what we learned early on in some pilots was that without knowledge, full deep knowledge of each case, you couldn't really make total sense of what's in the flat database. It's just a list of codes. So, that's what we've been doing with that data.

There have been a lot of write-ups of CPLS studies. On the website if you go to working papers, you'll see some things that look familiar because they became chapters in that book. I just did a write-up on the Latino concept of *educacion*, as compared to what we think of as education, and how it played out in the Costa Rica schools, which is where I've done a case study. We're taking all this work and trying to now apply what we can to instruction. This falls under what I've termed before authentic literacy instruction. We've done several large studies on that, one with adults and one with children, with Nell Duke in the US.

What I've done here, while I've been in Vancouver, is to create a teacher handbook. We're going to use that as a curriculum and do a very large impact study, which means an experimental design, on including this type of activity in the early grade curriculum. And that's just starting. Six researchers are on board from the US, and they're all people that have worked either with me, on one of those other studies, or around it, and now they're all professors. And in March, they're coming up to northern Washington to meet at my cabin for a three-day retreat to try to get this done. It's a huge project. We don't know how it's going to play out. It needs a lot of money.

Q: That will be experimental?

VGP: Yes, it will be. It's all on the authentic literacy instruction, which I'm re-naming, if I can get away with it, *culturally responsive literacy instruction*. It reflects the fact that it involves people doing real reading and real writing. It's what's real in their lives, not somebody's else's life. So it involves research on the part of the teacher to learn [about] their families and their communities. What are the texts in those communities that the kids would have become familiar with? [From that, we're] developing these real-life reading and writing activities for the kids to engage in the classroom, along with the regular instruction, which one would hope would include skill instruction. So, that's in order to find out, does that

raise their achievement, over and above what they would have gotten from just a regular instruction? We're going to do an experimental design. That's really the only type of design to do in order to answer that question. Nell Duke and I did [this], but it was in science instruction. And I thought if I'm going to do this again, I want to do it big enough that I have enough power that the results will hold more status. [It will] be a better test if it's scattered around in different locations with different kinds of kids and different teachers, and so on. So, that's in the works, but, there's a long way to go.

Q: That's very interesting. So your hope is that this will be something that will really have enough impact to change the way children are being taught in schools?

VPG: Yes, and to help, especially because CPLS's program of research is particularly interested in the achievement levels of marginalized children. Most of our studies deal with that. It doesn't have to be only marginalized [children], just because I think it's important to get a full range of things, but so far they have been. When I did my study in Costa Rica, I was studying the Nicaraguan immigrants who are really marginalized. They're extremely poor, they fight to get access to education and medical care, they live in these shanty towns, and there's a lot hostility and negative stereotyping toward them by the general public. So, so that's an example.

Q: This is not so much a question as a comment. One of the reasons I wanted to talk with you is because I'm a researcher in composition-rhetoric, and I think that researchers in my field can learn a lot from your methodology and your insistence on putting on theory into practice, which is what your website does. It's interesting to think about how we can all be more rigorous and less anecdotal, regardless of the particular setting in which we're working.

VGP: That is very much an interest of mine. We have really focused on that in the CPLS project. But I'd like to comment on the anecdotal aspect of that. I think that if a qualitative study is simply anecdotal, without any deep analysis, then it is anecdotal. There's nothing wrong with anecdotes, but it's not research. And so, I think qualitative research, whether it's a case study, a deep ethnography, is, if you do it right, much more difficult to do it, to collect the right kind of data, in the right kind of way, to have the right kind of relationship with participants, to do the analysis. It takes much longer than it does for a more hard-science model, like experimental or quasi-experimental, correlational, anything like that where you just collect a bunch of scores. It takes much longer to do well, and it's as rigorous as any other kind of research, if it's done well. If it's just anecdotal, which doesn't imply any sort of sampling, any tying it to theory, then I think that doesn't help, except for maybe the start of the idea of a study.

- Q:** I want to ask you also about your writing style, in the write-up of your studies. I'm thinking mainly of your book, *Other People's Words* and the *Now We Read, We See, We Speak*.
- VGP:** You have that one? Probably hardly anyone ever reads that book!
- Q:** It's very readable. And I think your books are marked by that sense that anybody could pick them up and read them even if they're not particularly a scholar in this field. And I was just wondering, is that a deliberate commitment you make to write in a way that vividly represents the lives of the people that you write about? It would seem to reflect your pedagogical beliefs.
- VGP:** I think so. It is a deliberate decision, but one that I easily forget. I was trying to show my students my very first published article, which was on my dissertation, and it was—the title itself, you couldn't understand what I meant. So, yeah, it is. But it also came about because when I started *Other People's Words*, my first book, I was a brand new assistant professor. And working with Jenny for so long, I—this is a very strange, spooky thing, but I almost adopted her voice in my head. When I actually went to write the book after years of analysis, they were my ideas, they were tied to other research and to theory, and stuff that Jenny would have had no clue about, but somehow the way to explain them, it was like I was channeling her voice. And that turned out to be so successful. I got a lot of feedback on that. Partly I didn't know what to think at first, because somebody would say, "oh I read it in two hours," and I'm thinking, "oh... good?" You know, it could be a good bathroom book or something! But, then, the next thing I tried to write was coming out really thick, and someone reminded me to get back to this other thing. So that's what's happened. It is a deliberate thing, and now it's much more natural. So thank you.
- Q:** I was thinking about whether, if people who do literacy research can frame their work in such a way that it could be more broadly readable, we would have more of an impact. It leads me to the next question I wanted to ask you, which is: do you think that the public at large is really hearing what it needs to hear from emerging research in literacy? What does the public need to know?
- VGP:** Well, no, I don't think they are. And this has been going on for a long time. It's happening here in Canada. I went to a meeting two days ago where a research organization here on language and literacy is trying to put out something called a national strategy, and it's based on phonemic awareness, and stuff like that. Somehow, the public and people who are trying to gain access to things like cabinet positions and grants, and so on—come out with very clear, assertive, didactic statements, like "we know, from research, that kids who learn this brand of phonics do better than those kids who don't." "We know that Spanish speaking kids when they come to school, have very little experience with literacy, compared to other minority groups." But the point is, they don't know. And if you're actually there and feel like picking a fight, and you know what the

studies are, you can easily pick that apart. But the public doesn't want to deal with that sort of uncertainty. And even Obama recently apparently said something like, when he picked the new secretary of education [Arne Duncan], he said, "He's for testing, but he's also for helping teachers. And he doesn't get caught up in these tiresome arguments or wars in the field." So he doesn't want to hear about another point of view. So I think the ability of the public to understand research is almost nil. Even people who should, like superintendents of schools. They totally misinterpret norm reference test results. And they absolutely misinterpret research results. Many times because researchers themselves have misrepresented them.

The thing that they really don't know, tied to the kind of work I do, is that they don't know they have a different definition of literacy. Usually they won't use that word but *reading*. What is *reading*? And they will think about it only through the school lens, and that includes achievement level. What they don't get is that reading is so multi-layered and so complex and so variable. When you're out of the school or classroom, there's a whole world of reading and writing going on. That is what real reading and writing is. [Even people who] got out of school and don't do school reading anymore, they do a bunch of other stuff. [The public doesn't] get that. They don't get how neat that is, and how you can actually go into another culture and if all you do is pay attention to what people are reading and writing, you can learn an incredible amount about that culture. They don't have that complex, layered view of what reading is. They only think about it as school achievement.

If they understood that, you would get fewer misinterpretations, say, of the adult literacy survey. That will come out and say, four out of ten people in Vancouver—this is what happened here—can't read or write well enough to get on with their daily life. That sort of thing would be ridiculous. No one would think to say something like that, based on just a test, where people drew criterion lines, and it was in English. You know, in a city where you have twenty-five different languages and scripts represented in newspapers. That is definitely an area where the type of research we do is not reflected in the public view.

Q: Are you saying that you're skeptical of these reports that say that broad numbers of people are illiterate, like you mentioned in Vancouver? Because we just heard a report in my state, Alabama, that says, 25% of the population is functionally illiterate. But obviously, based on your work, you know that illiteracy is a real problem.

VGP: Oh, I hate those reports. What you have to do [with these surveys] is to try to get access to, what is this based on, how did they get that number, what was on the test, and so on? When we looked at the adult test—and other people have done this, too—it's a series of five criterion levels, or four, depending on who's doing it. And, they've done what a lot of other testmakers do. They've basically taken a normal referencing, like a bell curve, and just turned it on its side, and drawn criterion levels. So, the

first two, forty percent of the people who take it fall into the first two levels. But if they fall into level 1, instead of asking what can't they do, you look at what can they do, and it's an incredible amount of stuff. And the problem with the adult [test] is that most of the people who fall into that level are second language speakers, and the test is only in English. Anybody who knows anything about parametrics would have thrown that group out. But they don't. And then you go into the second level, what can they do, and what can't they do, and you see the kinds of things they can't do are things that would never have come up in their lives, like reading across three or four different kinds of texts and writing up a report. So you can't make this statement that they're not literate enough to function in their daily lives. You have to ask the question, what's their daily life, what are the literacies that are required in that daily life, and how effective are different people who live that kind of life. I don't have a lot of time, but these kinds of reports drive me crazy, so every once in the while I'll write a letter to the editor or I'll give talks, and I don't know how much people believe me. Even really smart researchers who aren't in literacy, when I come out with data and just show how those statistics can't be, they just gasp. But it's easier to hang on to what's put out and given to them.

Q: I wanted to ask you a really practical question for people who are practitioners of adult literacy. When re-reading some of your work in advance of this interview, I was thinking about my experience years ago, as a tutor at a GED program, helping students who are working toward and trying to pass this test. Thinking about your work on authentic literacy, it seemed hard in that context to do things that were connected to students' real lives because they were working toward this really inauthentic test. I just wondered what suggestions you would give to practitioners who are limited by bureaucratic or test structures that are beyond the teacher alone.

VGP: That's probably the one area that's really difficult to think about within this frame of authentic literacy. But if you think about it, taking the GED is a real-life literacy test for these students. It is very circumscribed, but it is real-life. Also, along with that, I always feel that the teacher needs to follow the intentions of the students, especially when they're adults. So I think that you do have to focus on the test, but what I'd rather do ethically is focus on the content of the stuff they're supposed to know. Because the test is supposed to test their knowledge of these different areas that they didn't get when they were in school. Working on the content, like biology, or whatever it is, is really important, and that can be accomplished through more real-life texts, too. Did you work with textbooks?

Q: I was the reading and writing tutor. We had skill books. And then we would do practice writings, but they were on more or less prescribed topics that might be similar to the ones that would appear on the test. But it was a lot of drill and skill work although the teachers were so committed and really wanted to meet students' needs. A lot of the students were

nonnative speakers. So it was really interesting to think about how this test was a test of more their English speaking ability.

VGP: You know, one can work those [skills] in. You can use the drill and skill, but if you're studying biology, you can bring in newspapers that have to do with that. You can try to think of real-life things that they'd like to write, or other things that they could practice reading on, and stuff that comes from the community. Then you're going to have to talk about, "ok, this is how it's presented in school, and these are the things they want you to know." But what you've done is open that out a little for them so that they have a context to put the school-type reading into. It's hard to memorize disconnected facts. [They have to learn] how you take a test. So that kind of thing is what I've come up with for those types of programs. The other ones, that aren't focused on a test, are much easier.

Q: Well, my next question has to do with *Other People's Words*. I don't know if people ask you this frequently, but I think that people who have read the book got so invested in the stories of this family that you worked with, Jenny and Donny. I was wondering, can you tell me whether you've followed them since that book and whether they're still readers and writers?

VGP: Well, I can't speak for recently, because I haven't been following them for the last eight years, but I did for a while. And yeah, people ask me that question all the time. Each week I get about three or four e-mails. And I actually started to just write out something that I could just pass on, but I never finished it. So what happened is that Jenny continued taking adult ed courses, and she ended up doing really well, and so over time she actually won several awards, as the adult literacy student of the year. When the book was published in '95 and in '96 it won the Grawemeyer award, which was given in Louisville, so I went down there to get it, I came back to visit them on the way back, and I gave her several copies of the book. Now I just learned this week that she apparently blew the confidentiality right out of the water and went to one of her teachers [to say] "look I've got a book about me!" And I don't know if they knew it or read it. But she was doing well in those very skills-based kinds of programs. And Donny, when I saw him in '96 he was in junior high, and he had repeated fourth grade, and he was still struggling, but he was a reader, less so a writer. He had more problems with writing. Timmy [Jenny's younger son] had been put into a learning disability class and was learning, slower but learning, doing well. Later I learned that Donny had graduated from high school, being the first person in his family to graduate from high school, and joined the Navy, and was assigned to Hawaii—thank god, not Iraq. It was just about that time when the Iraq thing was blowing up. And that's the last I've heard. I don't know if he's still in the Navy. I do know that when he got assigned to the Navy, Jenny had left Big Donny, way back, and had moved her kids to a different area of the city and had met a guy in adult ed classes, and was living with him,

and he seemed like a really nice guy, and anyway the whole family was going to go to Donny's swearing in—and then they were going to visit him in Hawaii. That kind of thing just blows my mind, because they had never been in an airplane, they had never been outside of the Kentucky-Ohio area. So that's the last I know. But they were doing pretty good.

Q: Well, I'll make this my last question. It's a really broad question. Based on all the work you've done over the years, not just this project with Jenny and Donny but your other projects as well, do you feel optimistic or pessimistic that people who have been denied access or haven't acquired literacy can still learn?

VGP: I don't know the answer to that. I don't feel optimistic in the sense that now we're on it, and now we're going to devote the right kind of resources to the right kind of response to a lot of the issues around marginalization and educational achievement, because I think that those issues go way beyond teaching techniques and schools. On the other hand I don't feel really pessimistic because there are a lot of good people paying attention to this, and I think over time there are fewer and fewer people who are not succeeding in school and developing better lives because of that. So, I guess it's somewhere in the middle. It is a very large, almost intractable problem.

Afterword

As I reflect on this conversation with Purcell-Gates, a few themes emerge that may be of particular interest to the readers of the *Community Literacy Journal*. As a researcher in rhetoric-composition, I came to this interview with an interest in how scholars in my field can learn from the kind of work that Purcell-Gates is doing. In this brief epilogue, I will reflect on how her work might help us to think more about literacy theory and the uses of empirical research; the need to generate knowledge about “best practices” in writing instruction; and the importance of engaging with the larger public to share and discuss the results of emerging research on reading and writing.

As the interview and her body of work makes clear, Purcell-Gates draws from a range of research approaches and does so with careful attention to rigorous methodology. One of the most interesting aspects of her work has been her decision to draw from various models of literacy, both cognitive and socio-cultural, instead of placing herself in one camp or the other. In contrast to the tendency of New Literacy scholars such as James Gee to equate literacy broadly with all kinds of discourse, including oral language, Purcell-Gates has made the case for the importance of maintaining the distinction between *print literacy* and other kinds of language uses. This move toward defining literacy so broadly as to include a range oral, technological, and visual practices that do not involve reading and writing is in fact a strong theme in current research.⁴ In her book with Erik Jacobson and Sophie Degener, Purcell-Gates and her co-authors have

argued that a focus on print literacy is important because of the unique skills involved in coding and decoding written language.

While it is interesting to think about our students' and research participants' many ways of "reading" the larger culture and responding to it, maintaining a focus on *print literacy* requires us to be precise about our research questions and our choice of methods in investigating those questions. This emphasis on choosing the most appropriate research method emerged as an important point in my conversation with Purcell-Gates. Her interview commentary as well as some of her published work emphasizes the high stakes involved in our choice of methodology. Although she may be best known for her qualitative work, Purcell-Gates has chosen a large-scale experimental approach for her most recent study because she knows that this kind of study will have the most impact on a national level. She has argued elsewhere (with Jacobson and Degener) that the tendency of New Literacy scholars to reject empirical research has led to a backlash against approaches such as whole language teaching in K-12 settings (*Print Literacy* 72). Indeed, as Davida Charney has noted, many of the foundational theorists in composition studies, including James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell, and Robert Connors, have criticized cognitive models and expressed uneasiness by the "positivist approaches" represented by empirical research models. A look at recent years' issues of some of the most widely circulated journals in composition studies – such as *College Composition and Communication* and *College English*—shows that that emerging research on community literacy has tended to be almost entirely ethnographic and/or qualitative in nature. Purcell-Gates' willingness to bridge the gap between various models of literacy and kinds of methodologies serves as a compelling example for researchers in other areas to consider. For scholars engaged in community-based teaching, outreach, or service-learning, how might we measure the impact of that work? Are some models producing better results than other? Which research methods might help us best make the case and garner support for our work?

One of the ways in which composition studies has legitimized itself as a field has been to embrace cultural studies and critical literary theory.⁵ Political and theoretical analyses have all helped us to advance our knowledge of the history and practice of writing and of its extracurricular contexts. But perhaps it is time for a return to the classroom as well, a new era in which composition scholars will look more closely at classroom practices. These kinds of studies could help us generate more discussion of best practices in first-year composition and in community contexts. What are students learning, and how are they learning? What does "authentic" literacy instruction look like in a variety of settings?

The new interest in community literacy work, evidenced by the birth of new journals and publication of many new monographs in this area, shows that today's writing researchers are more eager than ever before to engage with the public and make an impact beyond the walls of formal institutions. However, Purcell-Gates' comments echo what many literacy researchers already know:

there is a large gap between public beliefs about what literacy is and how it should be taught, versus what researchers' have discovered about learners' needs and best practices for meeting them. As she put it, the public does not have a complex view of what literacy is, or of what people deemed insufficiently literate can do with reading and writing in their everyday lives. And yet public perceptions of these issues have an important impact on the availability of support for qualitative research and authentic literacy instruction. If researchers and teachers wish to garner the most possible support for our work, continued engagement with the public is essential.⁶

If we were to engage more with these public issues, what would that engagement look like, and how would that dialogue happen? A full answer to that question is broader than the scope of this short interview. But one small but powerful way for literacy scholars to engage more with the public would be the simple act of writing clear, accessible prose that non-academics could read and appreciate. When I first encountered *Other People's Words*, I was just as compelled by Jenny and Donny's story as I was by the book's research findings (Purcell Gates might object to hear her work described as "a good story," since she asserts the importance of qualitative researchers going beyond the anecdotal—however, I mean this in the most positive possible way). A professor once told me that academics need to read books that the public actually wants to read, and speculated about how much more effective we would be if we managed to engage successfully with the public about issues. There are a few "public" scholars in our field who have done that (Mike Rose, for example) and Purcell-Gates would certainly fit in that category. But with a willingness to examine our methodologies, stylistic choices, and means of sharing research results, scholars in many branches of literacy studies could have more success in engaging a broader audience and shaping the public views of what constitutes literacy, and how it can best be taught and learned.

Endnotes

1. The website can be accessed at <http://cpls.educ.ubc.ca/index.html>.
2. Readers can find information on the methodology behind the literacy corpus collection on Purcell Gates' *Cultural Practices of Literacy* website, <http://cpls.educ.ubc.ca/>. The site includes materials from Purcell Gates' recent conference presentations on the topic.
3. For more information on the study's uses of genre theory to classify texts, see Purcell-Gates' recent conference presentation from NRC on the CPLS website.
4. See, for example, a recent *CLJ* piece by Jacqueline Preston, who describes her ethnographic participant's use of "common sense," a means of approaching and solving real world problems, as a kind of literacy
5. For a critique of the reliance on critical literary theory, for instance, see Maxine Hairston's piece, "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing".

6. The *Cultural Practices* website provides a good model for those who are interested in using research results to foster pedagogical innovation and to share knowledge about best practices in teaching. The site includes working papers and research results from the various projects as well as model lessons for teachers. A few composition journals such as *Composition Studies*, have also continued to emphasize the connection between theory and practice by publishing sample syllabi, curricula, and lesson plans.

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