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Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of Practice

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Pahl, Kate, and Jennifer Roswell, eds. *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of Practice*. Clevedon, U.K.: Multilingual Matters, 2006. ISBN: 1853598615. \$49.95.

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In *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of Practice*, co-editors Kate Pahl and Jennifer Roswell compile eleven essays that combine two recently developed fields of study: new literacy studies and multimodality (1). Pahl and Roswell want to bring together literacy as a social practice and multimodality—that is, they are concerned with other forms of meaning-making beyond the linguistic and including the visual and gestural, among others—because they believe “it is time to merge a social practice account of literacy *with* a description of communicative systems” (1). To do so, the eleven essays offer case studies as instances of practice and use ethnography to trace the study of meanings in contexts over time and in different places as well as suss out the ways that global and local literacy practices merge and shape both meanings and meaning-makers. Proffering new research for a newly claimed field, *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies* prods literacy workers and educators to collaborate and synthesize different fields of study to achieve a richer understanding of literacy events and practices.

The book opens with a foreword by Gunther Kress and Brian Street and an introduction by co-editors Kate Pahl and Jennifer Roswell and then concludes with an afterward by Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton. In their section, Kress and Street—both of whom are cited throughout the eleven essays (Kress for his work in multimodality, Street for his in new literacy studies)—consider effects and results of bringing together the two seemingly disparate fields of new literacy studies and multimodality. While new literacy studies traditionally has tried “to understand what people acting together are doing,” multimodality has tried to understand “the tools with which these same people do what they are doing” (ix). Rather than conceive of these fields as incompatible or as always competing to become the “more effective” means of examining literacy events and practices (vii), Kress and Street stress that the two should be regarded as complementary for “developing a language of description for addressing literacy in all its social variety” (ix). Likewise, Brandt and Clinton celebrate this yoking together of the two fields as a means of advancing “fruitful discussions” (254). As Brandt and Clinton have argued elsewhere in “Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as Social Practice” (*Journal of Literacy Research*), social practice theory is often too human-centered and thus benefits from ethnographic inquiry that brings “attention to the role that non-human actors play in meaning-making” (254). Whereas the autonomous model of literacy purports that literacy technologies shape human ways of thinking and reasoning, the social practice model “shifted the equation, showing that the consequences of literacy arise from

the human uses of literacy” (255). Brandt and Clinton prefer, as do most of the contributors to this book, to advocate a mediation theory of action, one that “avoids defining what is acting on what” (255) in order to examine the multifaceted ways that meaning-making and meanings result from mediations and negotiations among human agents and literacy technologies.

The book’s organization reflects its concern with locating intersections between local and global literacy events and practices. The first section, “Identity in Multimodal Communication Practices,” which explores “how identities are evoked in multimodal spaces” (11), offers three essays that examine digital literacy interactions of children and youth and one study that attends to the effectiveness of weblog writing. The second section, “Multimodal Literacy Practices in Local and Global Spaces,” provides three essays that note the way literacy practices shape and are shaped by local and global crossings. For example, the first of the three in this section, Hilary Janks and Barbara Comber’s “Critical Literacy Across Continents,” details a collaborative literacy exchange between underprivileged school children in South Africa and in Australia: each group of students produced an alphabet-book titled after the city in which they reside—*A is for Atteridgeville* and *A is for Arndale*, respectively—which their teachers then brought with them as they travelled to the other school site to present and exchange. Through engaging in this literacy practice and exchange, the youth gained some semblance of agency as they decided what in their communities should be recorded and represented in text and in image. In the process, the youth not only became more aware of differences of power and privilege in the local but also across global sites.

In the third section, “Crossings in Literacy Practices,” two essays consider the effects of corporate literacy practices as they cross over into educational sites, and the final section, “Multimodal Communicative Practices in Pedagogical Settings,” includes two essays that are situated specifically in educational sites. The collection’s penultimate essay—Brian Street and Dave Baker’s “So, What About Multimodal Numeracies?”—argues that numeracy also is a social practice (220) and concludes by suggesting that there is opportunity “for further research in the new field of multimodal numeracies” (231). Finally, Brandt and Clinton’s afterword concludes by summing up what new the book points to, observing an ideological transformation presently in process: given its role in “economic and social production,” “[w]riting is moving from an ability to persuade an audience to an ability to attract an audience, to an ability, at its most ‘powerful[,]’ to attract a market” (257-58). Altogether, the essays in *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies* travel across much familiar and unfamiliar terrain, and just as travel narratives tend, they faithfully report to readers what was observed, discovered, and learned in the process.

All of the authors collected here, Pahl and Roswell point out, “are at the forefront of research in literacy education” (1). At that, nearly half of the essays are jointly authored, collaborative efforts, which is consistent with the book’s goal of collaboratively combining the two fields of new literacy studies and multimodality. Moreover, the book provides an international perspective;

its 19 contributors represent six different countries (in order of most to least frequency): United Kingdom, United States, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Mexico. Hence, the collection will find a ready audience among both literacy workers and literacy educators of all levels, in any place or site where literacy matters, locally and globally. Though these may comprise its primary audience, Pahl and Roswell insist that the book is “committed to giving power to the learners”: “Meaning makers are at the heart of this volume of studies” (13). Indeed, this book not only illuminates myriad ways young meaning-makers interact with and negotiate various old and new literacy technologies; by collaboratively and creatively combining two fields, *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies* is itself making new meanings.