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The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change

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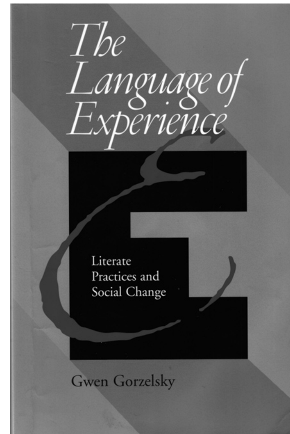
The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change. Gwen Gorzelsky. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 2005. 264pp. ISBN: 978-0822958741. $22.95.



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In *The Language of Experience: Literate Practice and Social Change,* Gwen Gorzelsky asks this central question: "how [do] literate practices [...] foster social change, from self-revisions to collective social movements[?]" (1). In order to answer this question, Gorzelsky must employ a methodological frame pliant enough to make connections between the local literacy practices she investigates and to account for how change might occur across these contexts. To perform this task, Gorzelsky turns to Gestalt theory, which "postulates that humans perceive both material and psychological phenomena in wholes or patterns rather than fragmented units" (8). From a Gestaltian point of view, perceptual changes are always "holistic in that they include cognitive interpretations, physiological responses, and emotional sensations" (10). Indeed, Gestalt offers powerful transformative possibilities generally, but it also provides a fresh perspective for thinking about the relationship between language-in-use and change.

Through the lens of Gestalt, Gorzelsky analyzes three discrete collectivities/communities: "Struggle," a contemporary praxis-centered community literacy project whose mission is to help urban at-risk teens articulate life goals through an adult-teen mentoring partnership; the Diggers and Levellers, seventeenth century English religious and political groups; and the Aliquippa Union Press, a 1930s union newspaper. These communities span historical periods, political aims, social/cultural context, and literacy practices. Despite such a disparate montage of case studies, Gorzelsky argues that rhetorical forms, cognition, and sensory perception all work together to spark change in individuals and societies; from this claim she designs a lengthy "heuristic for growth" for community workers, teachers, and scholars based on the

premise that change—both personal and social—results from self-reflexive awareness of rhetorical habits through a "contact style" of dialogic and sensory experiences.

In addition, Gestalt provides an alternative to the way critical theorists and critical pedagogy scholars explain the relationship between literacy and social change, which, according to Gorzelsky, may hinder rather than foster social change because they favor abstract levels of discourse and content-based pedagogies. Though Gorzelsky recognizes how critical theory research and pedagogy can advance social justice, she questions whether those traditions can help people overcome obstacles and build positive futures. When literacy scholars and activists work too exclusively from a critical theory/pedagogy perspective, people's lived experience gets lost and the formative powers of everyday literacy get ignored because sensory affect is ignored.

Gestalt theories of language offer a connection between language and lived experience that links ideological content with its rhetorical and semantic forms. For as Gorzelsky continually reminds the reader, it is potentially more productive to "see individual and social change not as struggles with ideology, uncritical thinking, discursive rules, or language structures but as problems of connecting language use with experience to revise awareness and perception" (7). Using Gestalt theory forces a complete shift in how language scholars are accustomed to thinking about the relationship between literacy practices and their social derivations and consequences. From a Gestaltian point of view, when we explore and enact alternative rhetorical moves, we may have affective experiences that transform our cognitive relations with ourselves and others. In the case of "Struggle," we see how certain rhetorical moves and rhetorical tropes influenced the youth participants to look differently at their lives and begin to reflect, through prompt-driven dialogue between mentor and mentee, on the way their own language use constructs their world and their interactions with others in terms of possibilities or obstacles. In other words, participants were encouraged and guided, through dialogue, prompts, and multi-media tools, to observe and reflect on their own discursive "contact styles," the mostly unconscious, rhetorical techniques they used when communicating. Through her analysis of "Struggle," Gorzelsky pushes the reader to consider how literacy practices can combat oppression and alienation on the individual and social level. She encourages literacy workers to focus on the habits of language-in-use at the level of form and structure in order to connect these practices with sensory perceptions and self-world awareness.

For those interested in community literacy work, the chapters that follow Gorzelsky's research into "Struggle's" literacy practices may seem tangential. In these middle chapters Gorzelsky offers a Gestaltian rhetorical analysis of the Diggers movement and the Aliquippa Union Press in order to examine the effects of context on literacy practices and social change. Although this attempt to theorize literacy practices across such disparate cultural and historical periods is methodologically troubling, it does support the spirit of possibility at the heart of Gorzelsky's project. For Gorzelsky everyday literacy

practices have the potential to hinder or encourage personal, community, and social change. In addition, Gorzelsky's close work with these three unlike communities lets her create a more nuanced "heuristic for growth" capable of responding to a wide range of communities by placing attention on rhetorical habits in an effort to "expand our awareness to initiate the kinds the experimental interactions that revise our selves and social relations" (27).

Community literacy workers, scholars, and teachers will find this heuristic useful for inspiring and enacting change. Because it attends to individual communities; acknowledges that literacy practices are dynamic, evolving, and culturally and historically situated; and invites a wide range of users, this model,

> provides an approach both systematic enough and flexible enough to generate rich, multiplex data. That is, its systemic design grounds further observations in questions generated by previously documented patterns in how literate practices promote change. Its flexible structure ensures it can accommodate data generated from a range of theoretical models, empirical focuses, and experiential knowledge (224).

Gorzelsky ends by explaining how composition instructors and literacy works might use this approach to bring about a change in their own contact style with students. But her conclusion is brief, and Gorzelsky admits she has not tested her heuristic extensively or consistently. Instead, she leaves us with more suggestions than results and the promise to try out her heuristic in future courses. Despite these missing pieces, Gorzelsky supplies community literacy workers and writing teachers with a scaffolded approach to personal and community change.