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Literacy as Conversation: Learning Networks in Urban and Rural Communities

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Literacy as Conversation: Learning Networks in Urban and Rural Communities

Eli Goldblatt and David A. Jolliffe

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In *Literacy as Conversation: Learning Networks in Urban and Rural Communities* Eli Goldblatt and David A. Jolliffe introduce their literacy-based, definition expanding, and conversational networking approach to giving marginalized urban and rural communities room to mold the literate practices that will improve their real conditions so there are greater possibilities for educational, economic, and political advancement. They purposely invite a wider audience to consider alternate forms of literacy learning outside school settings to stimulate the expansion of a network of supporters. Goldblatt and Jolliffe identify these supporters as potentially consisting of the individuals, non-profit organizations, and philanthropic extensions of for-profit corporations they have encountered when building literacy-based initiatives in the neighborhoods and regions surrounding Temple University and University of Arkansas. They also show that without networking done to connect these entities, the various programs, and projects they discuss will continue to fall short of extending the growth of literacies in these communities that improve access to educational, health and human services. What makes this book captivating and convincing is the sheer length and breadth of the combined experiences Goldblatt and Jolliffe draw on and the conversational style they use to expound upon and speculate about the types of literacy that can be practiced to make specific community needs visible and addressable. The work Goldblatt and Jolliffe do to illuminate and express the ignored experiences and enrich the lives of those whose literate learning must grow out of debris-strewn city medians or overly saturated farm soil—relegated now to growing economic prospects for industry—is indeed important and inspiring. As intended, *Literacy as Conversation* infused me, as it will other readers, with a new or renewed commitment to incorporating out-of-school literacy learning into my work as a teacher, researcher, and community member because it concretely serves those underserved by the academy thus far.

ELI GOLDBLATT and DAVID A. JOLLIFFE

LITERACY **as**
CONVERSATION
Learning Networks in Urban and Rural Communities



In “Part I: Introducing Our Terms,” Goldblatt and Jolliffe layout how their conversational approach rests on their conceptions of literacy and learning networks. They position themselves as working from a New Literacy Studies orientation and primarily rely on Deborah Brandt’s conceptions of literacy and sponsorship for their inter-relationally oriented definitions. They define literacy as continued conversations between disenfranchised people who are seeking to take action to improve their situations (7). They define learning networks as interconnected public, non-profit and private sponsors whose resources enable local plans for literacy-based actions to come to fruition (8). Goldblatt then introduces the framework of analysis he calls the Literacy Education Audit of Resources (LEARN) as the way audience members can contemplate the resources offered by sponsors in relation to the needs in areas surrounding universities so they can be connected to enrich material conditions and opportunities. As Goldblatt and Jolliffe begin to enact LEARN by assessing needs in their respective locales, they indicate they will be constantly pushing against school-based, public, and civic conceptions of literacy as basic acts of reading or writing externally motivated by pressures to meet educational grading or testing standards. Additionally, Goldblatt and Jolliffe establish they will demonstrate how intrinsically motivated literate acts in communities lead to tangible products or changes through exploring the way meaning, conversations, and utterances unfold *in situ*. Goldblatt and Jolliffe understand “live and unfolding meanings” as evolving understandings of real situational climates and exigencies that stem from speaking and working with the people who are experiencing them (15–17). They describe locations where shared language and literacies are formed, acquired, and learned to be practiced through joining others to take purposeful, collaborative actions within a local context that serve aesthetic or pragmatic needs as spaces for “multiple conversations” (15–18). For the authors, literate acts are anchored to both “oral and interior utterances” because they can be tied to externalized versions of thought influenced by understandings produced within and realized through texts that create social connections and galvanize reformation (15–21). Ultimately, Goldblatt and Jolliffe convey that they believe their LEARN framework will only bring funders together to support communal literate acts if understanding is built about how they serve a given community’s needs for social, political, and economic mobility.

It should be noted that Goldblatt and Jolliffe end the first part of the book by simulating an actual conversation between them that directly attends to the charged issue of their positionality as white, highly educated males writing about literacies in culturally and racially different communities. They articulate that their aim in the book and throughout their careers has been to use their power and privilege to assist communities in using literate acts to fulfill their own agendas. Nothing supports their claim more than their book’s privileging of oral conversation as a valid and valuable tool for literacy—especially for groups whose oral cultural practices have continually been discounted within and outside the academy as legitimate forms of literacy.

In the next two parts, Goldblatt and Jolliffe narrate their own experiences and share observations about how exactly these new literacy characteristics were used to actively respond to the specific educational, economic, political, and social constella-

tion of needs of communities within Philadelphia and Arkansas. Moreover, they give us a glimpse into the sources of tensions and connections between participants and learning networks of literacy sponsorship and how they impact outcomes. These portraits and conversations are intended to engage readers in thinking and talking about how these insights can be applied to build learning networks that fund and advance necessary literacy efforts of communities surrounding campuses.

Goldblatt's chapters in "Part II: Learning Networks in Philadelphia" masterfully blend narrative-based and theoretical reflection to provide illustrative lessons about how the nuanced dialogues that do or do not occur between learning networks and the members of the community steered the directions or conclusions of out-of-school, community arts, and urban farm-based literacy programs and projects. Since Goldblatt's experiences with possessing or seeking funding vary, he attends to the choices leaders make to accrue necessary funding that can cause intentions to serve the actual needs and concerns of neighborhoods through community organizing to fall to the wayside. In other words, the costs of not attending to "live and unfolding meanings" revealed through "multiple conversations" within organizations whose literacy objectives fall into traditional and untraditional categories are cogently portrayed. Goldblatt's story about an endeavor focused on providing avenues for emotional release and beautification through cultivating artistic literacies in North Philadelphia sponsored by the Village of Arts and Humanities are memorable and enlightening in this way. What Goldblatt communicates is how the Village became misguided in their mission to artistically represent and address African American urban trauma when they hired an African artist and a counselor who pushed their own visions of what trauma looked like and healing meant. He hints that if the Village asked for community members' input about the project's design, message and creation, their collective creative literacies could have been used to form exquisite expressions of the neighborhood's sources of pain and reduced poverty-related trauma by providing steady employment. Goldblatt also notably recommends in the city where competition for funding is fierce due to the vast array of organizations serving individual neighborhoods, forming learning networks is critical so funding and experienced volunteers can be shared or developed to increase the possibilities for literacies to thrive throughout the city.

Jolliffe's chapters in "Part III: Learning Networks in Arkansas" stress how learning networks provided the human capital for his projects that concentrate on using performative literacy practices with local residents, prisoners, and students to improve the health and outlook for educational access, activism, and the economy of inhabitants throughout the state. Since Jolliffe's projects were funded at least in part by his endowed Brown Chair of Literacy position, he emphasizes how conversations between individuals within university and resident organizational sponsors can uncover the talents, mutual commitments, and connections that make select goals attainable. Moreover, he highlights how individuals can coalesce to change how populaces are seen and see themselves as literate creators whose output garners movements that resist institutional political agendas. What I find compelling is Jolliffe's notion that dramatic texts—including poems—embody a person's "oral" and usually hidden "interior

utterances” so that reading, writing responses to, and performing them invites empathetic identification with and fosters novel understandings of the author’s contextual experiences. For the networks of students, prisoners, writers, actors, and educators in Jolliffe’s accounts who elicit, create, and perform dramatic texts and audiences who witness these performances, both these identifications and understandings cement communal bonds as well as stimulate literate growth and political activism. Jolliffe’s sharing of the mostly African American death row inmates’ representative responses to Prison Story Project prompts that inspired the creation of the play *On the Row* best shows how “oral and interior utterances” are literate acts that can spark reformation of public identities and political decisions through performance. Initially, as one of the prisoners, Brandon, observes in the play’s epilogue, these responses challenged prisoners’ assumptions about the monstrousness of their fellow inmates and showed them, “our humanity; our worth. That we have something to offer too. We too matter, no matter what horrible things we did (or didn’t do) in the past to land us on death row” (178–179). After Governor Asa Hutchinson announced that eight death row inmates would be executed in eleven days, four of whom contributed to the project, these poignant responses fueled public efforts to stop the executions and do away with the death penalty as the play was performed in venues across and outside the state. Jolliffe and his Prison Story Project team decided to continue to perform *On the Row* in defiance of Arkansas Department of Corrections efforts to suppress these prisoner’s voices by withdrawing their permission for its public performance. In the end, two of these four inmate participants received stays of execution.

In their conclusion, Goldblatt and Jolliffe return to their LEARN framework and model how it can be used to generate literacy initiatives through learning networks of support. They more fully assess needs within Philadelphia and Arkansas by examining and comparing population, diversity, economic, educational climate, and financial resources and determine these factors converge to limit access to college or vocational training in the city and the country. Due to this assessment, they conclude that there is an overall need for degrees and training so individuals in both places have the knowledge, credentials, and skills necessary to accrue economic rewards in the United States and, therefore, the status to effectively band together to gain political traction on issues that impact how they live. In light of these needs, Goldblatt and Jolliffe providing practical advice and insight about how to connect these communities with learning networks that amass both money and human resources to address these needs. What becomes clear is that Goldblatt and Jolliffe’s efforts to redefine literacy as conversations that lead to actions through learning network financing can bolster community and economic growth for black, brown, ethnic, and poor people. They provide hope that these possibilities for better living conditions will still be made available despite school district, policy maker, and academic institutional neglect.

As a researcher and educator, I find this ending markedly fitting as Asao Inoue and others have brought to the fore questions about how we leverage our power in the academy as composition and rhetoric professionals to make the culture and language of people of color a central part of the conversation so we can begin to understand and change our white habits of practicing and judging writing in the academy. Gold-

blatt and Jolliffe show us one way to leverage white academic power and privilege by proffering an approach that assesses literate practices according to how much power is accorded to communities of color—or communities with limited financial means—to ensure whatever needs for health, food, shelter, intellectual/creative fulfillment, and life are met.

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