Review - Print Literacy Development

Uniting Cognitive and Social Practice Theories by Victoria Purcell-Gates, Erik Jacobson, and Sophie Degener
Harvard University Press, 2006
Review by R.A. Goodrich, PhD

Based upon an extensive study of the literacy practices of adult learners across the United States at the beginning of the decade, Victoria Purcell-Gates and her co-authors, Erik Jacobson and Sophie Degener, have in effect provided their readers not so much with another empirical research report as a "theoretical statement" (vii). As revealed by its sub-title, this book has an unswerving aim. It argues for construing literacy as a developmental set of cognitive skills anchored within socio-cultural contexts of actual literacy practices, especially those outside pedagogic institutions. Print Literacy Development confronts those theorists and practitioners who would maintain a division between the cognitive and the socio-cultural approach to the acquisition of both reading and writing.

Let us begin by concentrating upon the central portions of the book where practical applications and policy recommendations are postponed in favor of theoretical considerations. From the third chapter, the central aim of the book is foregrounded explicitly. The division between the cognitive and the socio-cultural perspectives (by which results of the study of adult learners' literacy were interpreted) left Purcell-Gates and her co-authors determined to "explore how to reframe the theoretical claims of these two lenses on literacy into one..." (23).

The authors then provide their readers with their joint "syntheses as filtered through [their] own theoretical lens" (25) of what is meant by print literacy development. Here, a dual conception of literacy is upheld. Literacy more generally--and print literacy in particular--is jointly depicted as a virtually decontextualized individual acquiring skills for encoding and decoding written symbols as well as a socially situated practice dependent upon communication and meaning. The latter communal conception of literacy is derived from the 1981 work of Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole amongst others (cf. 28 & 64), but without any acknowledgement of their pre-occupation with the cognitive processes of abstraction as we shall discuss at the conclusion of this review. Consequently, print literacy development is defined as:

the acquisition, improvement, elaboration, and extension of the ability and strategies
necessary to comprehend and produce written language for communicative purposes within sociocultural contexts. This includes understanding the social meanings of literate activity and mastering its pragmatics and semiotics (26).

Cognition is therefore always seen "within cultural contexts" which are further defined as "settings for human activity shaped by social structures, languages, conventions, history, and goals" (26-27). Similarly, development is construed not so much as "an additive, or linear, process"—first learning, then practicing—as it is a "mutually constitutive process, with development occurring at all stages within and outside of instruction" (27).

The implications of the unified stance adopted by Purcell-Gates and her co-authors are gradually sifted through a sequence of four central chapters totaling three-fifths of the volume. Amongst the more notable working assumptions and commitments are the following:

(i) that language, and hence literacy, is, in the Bakhtinian sense, "essentially dialogic" (29) and "necessarily contextual" (30);

(ii) that, "given the multiplicity of literacies" arising from "different domains of life," those holding "social and political power...determine what types of literacy are considered valid" (31 & 32);

(iii) that the practice of literacy is not only imbued with "values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings...relationships," but is made manifest by those "observable" events definable as "any instance of interaction with print, either writing or reading, or its interpretation" (32); events which, in turn, can be inferred from the type of texts involved;

(iv) that cognitive skills operate in stages, phases, or "specific developmental milestones"(43) which appear to be "discrete and invariant" (44) in the process of shifting from "learning to read" towards "reading to learn" (56);

(v) that the foregoing shift towards reading comprehension often continues to require "modeling" and "instruction" (57) of reading strategies or "schemata (...)networks of related concepts") (56) for dealing with textual vocabulary, grammar, structure, and genre--but without the learner necessarily attaining mastery of inferential and evaluative levels of reading comprehension.

To accommodate such a diverse array of commitments is the task Print Literacy Development sets itself when arguing for the connection between the cognitive and the sociocultural as a "nested" or imbricated one (81). Here, the authors implicitly apply two framing devices adapted from Sylvia Scribner and Jean Lave. The former upholds the psycholinguistic significance of tools and symbols underpinning "activity theory"; the latter upholds the process of learning by becoming apprentices within "communities of practitioners" (83). Both apparently converge upon the notion of learners as initially peripheral agents or participants whose activities are invariably goal-directed and communally mediated. As Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener subsequently claim, learners are those whose cognitive processes operate within "congruent" contexts, the effects of which are "almost...deterministic" (85). Purcell-Gates and colleagues contend that the congruent contexts operating at all linguistic levels--semantic, syntactic, lexical, morphological, and grapho-phonological--are determined by one's experiences with language and texts--oral and written--which are constructed and comprehended according to specific, sociocultural rules and conventions (86).

Or, in terms of the extended metaphor of the entire book, the authors assure their readers that, within their "camera analogy, we could say that we are widening the lens and deepening the depth of field..." (87).

By now, we have sampled enough of the main thrust of the central portions of Print Literacy Development to begin a closer appraisal of its argument. Although Purcell-Gates and colleagues portray the relationship between the cognitive and the socio-cultural as imbricative, they constantly seem to slide towards terms suggestive of a causal connection. Indeed, even the above-mentioned notion of "almost deterministic" congruent contexts operating at all levels of written language is ambiguous. Are we to understand congruence here as that which is consistent or enabling? Or is it something more akin to the geometrical relationship of something being superposed or above something else? Or does it conjure the idea of something which fits or suits something adjacent to it? If we were accused of taking this metaphor too literally, then what kind of work is the metaphor of the lens meant to be doing? What camera is it that can simultaneously widen the aperture without foreshortening the depth of field?

If the foregoing smacks of a stylistic quibble, several other substantive issues remain unquestioned. As teachers and researchers, the authors uphold the persistent tendency in educational circles to regard Michael Halliday's seven functions of language not only as "exhaustive" but as directly applicable to adult learners (141; cf. 95-97). Yet Halliday, whose systemic-functional taxonomy emerges from a fundamentally sociological view of language and learning, would not agree on either count. On the one hand, he allows for other functions such as the ritual use of language. Purcell-Gates and colleagues half-concede the possibility of other functions in their contestable judgment that, if "the purpose of reading, or writing, does not fall into one of Halliday's [seven] language functions," then it is being used "for a nonlanguage purpose" and hence "is not communicative" (141; cf. 184, n. 8). On the other hand, Halliday
assigns these functions themselves to toddlers—a set of imbricated, but not strictly hierarchical, uses of language separately attributable to one utterance at a time during the holophrastic, two-word, and early telegraphic phases of an infant’s speech (phases misleadingly characterized elsewhere (48)). However, this initial set of differentiated functions, whether fully operational or not, merge for the older child into two broader, transitional functions, the pragmatic (or “doing” function) and the mathetic (or “learning” function), before becoming the three macrofunctions said to characterize all adolescent and adult usage, namely, the ideational (focused on the “what”), the interpersonal (the “who”), and the textual (the “how”).

Secondly, also shadowing Print Literacy Development is its handling of different kinds of reading. This partly stems from the authors’ concern to clarify the nature of authenticity of purpose and authenticity of texts which, as cited above, is tied to their self-declared Hallidayan preoccupation with the communicative (139–143 & 151–154). When so doing, we find them dividing examples of texts between those said simply to aid the process of learning to read—“worksheets...comprehension questions, reading tests, spelling lists”—from those considered genuinely or extramurally communicative—“signs, coupons, newspapers, magazines, novels...leases, bibles, song lyrics” (141; cf. 39–40). The difficulty, however, is that the purposes for reading can be equally construed in terms of the stance taken by the reader. Just as speakers can switch between the roles of participants in or spectators of events and experiences, so, too, can readers switch between the role of gathering information from texts in order to act immediately or eventually and that of immersing themselves in the very experience of reading the text itself for its own sake. The contrast, as influentially depicted by Louise Rosenblatt three decades ago, is between readers taking an efferent stance and those taking an aesthetic one respectively even towards the same text. Should Purcell-Gates, Jacobson and Degener be implying that literacy be confined to the efferent alone, it seems a marked truncation of what it is to read.

From a sociological perspective, there is nothing particularly objectionable to “the thesis that people continue to learn different genres as they encounter new or different communicative needs...as participating members of shifting communities of practice” (108). However, Purcell-Gates and her colleagues leave unnoticed Etienne Wenger’s 1998 examination of how the purpose of language in such communities acts as a key to participation, not a substitution for it. It is not unusual, therefore, for the shared repertoires and routines of speech or writing to take place as if they were part of a continuing conversation stripped of preliminaries marking the genre of the moment. From a linguistic perspective, the authors’ recognition of the influential Wallace Chafe hypothesis about distinctions between written and oral media (100–104) is well taken. Nonetheless, even when pursuing the effects of reading to children amongst middle-class families (155–156), Purcell-Gates and co-authors still ignore counter-examples. For instance, in debates with Chafe, Deborah Tannen and others have highlighted how narrative genres ride roughshod over neat binary demarcations between oral and written—between, for example, the immediately contextualized and the spatio-temporally recontextualized, between the syntactically embedded and nominalized and the syntactically additive and verbalized, between the lexically diversified and the lexically repetitive. From a cognitive perspective, Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener appropriately endorse those who would link reading comprehension to “concept development and knowledge of word meanings” (134). Yet, despite references to Lev Vygotsky’s 1934 Thought and Language, they are prone to ignore the systemic transformations wrought by hierarchies of concepts upon children’s initially ad hoc, experiential acquisition of words and their meanings. To that extent, adult learners can never return to a conceptually pristine world of the child before entering the communal practices of institutionalized living. By contrast, Purcell-Gates and colleagues revert to regarding lexical knowledge in terms of “choice and variety” or being “rare” and “sophisticated” (101 & 102), its advancement “differentiating between literal and figurative meanings” alongside “the etymology of words” (60).

To conclude, for all its breadth and detail, has too much has been left unsaid by Print Literacy Development? In part, it may well be a result of the authors’ footnoted desire not “to provide a thorough and exhaustive critique of cognitive and social practice epistemologies” (p. 177, n. 1). By avoiding any critique, alternative explanations for the complex relationship between cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives appear to be overlooked. Adult learners wresting with reading and writing face, in Vygotsky’s phrase, “a double abstraction”: the referential abstraction between self and subject-matter simultaneously with the rhetorical abstraction between self and other. In the first, the process, involving varying degrees of abstracting from experience, seems more cognitive; in the second, involving varying degrees of abstracting for persons, the process seems more social. Furthermore, does the shift in accommodating different degrees of abstraction between self and experience, self and others, accompany if not cause shifts in textual types or genres as James Moffett hypothesized four decades ago? If Vygotsky and Moffett are correct, two questions remain unresolved. Is Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, and Degener’s argument for the cognitive being nested or imbricated within the social beyond challenge? Is their assumption that different kinds of reading stem from social practices alone beyond question?
R.A. Goodrich teaches in the School of Communication & Creative Arts, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia and is a co-editor of the online refereed arts-practice journal, *Double Dialogues*. 