Outside Practices: Learning within the borderlands

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> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants (Anzaldua 1990:378).

Abstract

Social practice research can be seen to illuminate the practices of marginalised learners in 'borderlands', areas outside of formal educational frameworks. This paper examines the issues and challenges of social practice researchers as they explore borderlands logic set against a critique of the prevailing skills-based educational philosophies that dominate in the knowledge-based economies of the US and England. Social practice research highlights meaning-making through a wide-angled view of the learning contexts of marginalised groups. This paper introduces the themes and sets the scene in a series of papers in this volume from leading social practice researchers.

Introduction

Social practice research (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Lankshear and Knobel 2006, Street and Lefstein 2007, Purcell-Gates 2007) illuminates marginalised learners' practices in 'borderlands' *outside* of mainstream frameworks. These 'borderlands' are the spaces of learning *between* formal programs funded by government policies and marginalised people's transactions of educational, linguistic and cultural resources, in places such as community clinics and organisations, neighbourhood streets, bilingual households, and the back rows of classrooms. Social practice researchers take snapshots of these scenes and offer panoramic and in-depth views of borderlands, revealing the literacy hybridisations of *forbidden inhabitants.* By detailing the trajectories of these 'outsiders-within' — older persons, high school dropouts, undocumented domestic workers, and multilingual patients — social practice researchers with privileges to cross-disciplinary and geographic borders, mediate between policy worlds and borderlands (Pratt 2004).

The key issues and challenges: Undoing literacy

Social practice researchers *do* literacies by highlighting people's everyday practices and accenting their narratives (Bartlett 2007). But they also *undo* literacies by analysing counternarratives, so as to strike at the foundations of policies. Although discussing borders in insider/outsider terms may sound didactic, and reinforce the Great Divide theories that haunt the literacy field (Reder and Davila 2005), it is important for stressing unmistakable class, gender, and race disparities. A 'border', Anzaldua cautions, 'is a dividing line' (1987:3). As groups push against borders through critical learning and active citizenship, the borders are redrawn. Yet this redrawing is not without difficulties, as Rivera and Macias (2008:18) show of bi-literate communities who thrive in non-school environments, but whose practices are represented as 'problems' and 'curses' in educational policies, rather than as 'resources' and 'blessings'. By emphasising the demarcations and the double-vision of marginalised groups moving between borders, 'border pedagogy' is manifested through 'fragile identity... as it moves into borderlands crisscrossed within a variety of languages, experiences, and voices' (Giroux 1992:34, Hayes and Cuban 1997). Undocumented women nurses from Mexico cross physical borders and live in transitional homes (caravans) in 'unincorporated' areas, where they move to and from wealthy houses in cities for domestic work. They transport and perform multiliteracies and languages and, in so doing, change identities and relations in the borderlands (Cuban this issue).

Although adult literacy systems in Canada, Australia, the US and England are marginalised (known, as 'Cinderellas' or 'stepchildren' of education), they too have become constrictive. Those who are deemed students are included, while others, like these women, are cast to the periphery, because they cannot meet entry requirements. They come to community programs and receive marginalised services yet develop innovative survival routes to gaining power. They use borderland logics, that is, practices and strategies that form outside of institutionalised systems of learning, through networks, which can be incorporated, if seen and understood.

This paper sets the scene for how social practice theory assists in understanding borderland logics and practices against the backdrop of policies. First, I develop the key issues and challenges of the social practice theory within the discourses of marginalisation and globalisation through which the polarities of normative/exclusive education systems exist. Then, I reframe the issues through the textual mediation of disparate worlds to show its complexities, after which implications for literacy practices and engagement among marginalised groups are made explicit.

Setting the scene for the 'back to basics' drift in education: Two case studies

That globalisation has created demands, leading to changed systems for adult literacy policies and provision, is clear. Local cultures shape these forces too, hence 'glocalisation' occurs. The global forces are: 1) governmental and knowledge industry demands for evidence-based research and information; 2) re-regulation of public services (health, education, social services) through auditing regimes, and, 3) an infusion of business models into educational agencies emphasising productivity as a competitive advantage. Policymakers rarely mention these forces and instead focus on globalisation as part of human capital, which, when harnessed, can uplift national economies into wealth and prosperity. For this, they make fast and loose connections between globalisation and skills. For example, Wolf (2002:xi) cites the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment in England who links these together when he says:

> The powerhouses of the new global economy are innovation, ideas, creativity, skills, and knowledge. These are now the tools for success and prosperity, as much as natural resources and physical labour power were in the past century.

Skills-based education is promoted as the elixir for the knowledge-based economy and for growth. Learning is a tool for economic survival with generic skills that can be transferred from one environment to the next. The argument is handy for policymakers who discuss hard skills (like literacy) and blame a deficient workforce even as employers seek out workers with soft skills or dispositions (Wolf 2002, Jackson 2005). This skills discourse appeals to a broad segment of society because it symbolically joins education with economic growth *and* social justice, giving it the gloss of progressive politics (Hursh 2006). For example, in a recent report Leitch (2006) states:

> In the 21st century, our natural resource is our people—and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prise of our country will be enormous—higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice.

Since these 'skills' are elusive, educational levels easily become proxies for employers, who use credentials as a screening and sorting devices for employment (Wolf 2002). Corporations and policymakers in countries such as England have been turning literacy skills into profit for the knowledge-based economy: 'If we are to face the challenge of creating a high-tech, high-added value and high-wage economy,' according to the Labour party publicity some years ago, 'we can only do so by skilling our people' (Wolf 2002:13). '*Education, education, education*' was the mantra, with little consideration for new entitlement systems. Names and policy rationales became clear as more

countries formed national skills-based systems for adults and children, such as *Skills for Life* in England or *Equipped for Future*, in the US. It is not surprising policies sounded alike – *No Child Left Behind* in the US and *Every Child Matters* in England – as policymakers actively branded these ideas and adopted similar legislation. The sentiment of these policies is predicated on public services being earned. For example, England's Ministry of Culture, Education and Science, said: 'All people, young and old, are firstly and naturally responsible for themselves. You have to learn how to take care of yourself and therefore you must want to acquire the knowledge and skills to do that' (in Field 2006:131). Literacy becomes a tool for individual social mobility with little concern about who and what is left behind, as a recent UNESCO based report (Hill et al 2008) concluded about the US adult literacy system.

The adoption of this self-seeking discourse, referred to as 'personalisation', has a historical base. Both US and English adult literacy systems evolved from fragmented, volunteer sectors in the 1960s and 1970s into ones that are highly centralised and professionalised. This shift was reflected in the Reagan (US president)/Thatcher (UK Prime Minister) eras, with the weakening of social safety nets and their replacement with a contract culture (Hamilton and Merrifield 1999). Adult basic education agencies, funded by the state, were turned into socially responsible corporations charged with being shock absorbers of these neo-liberal reforms and economic launching pads for the new service-based economy and privatised public services. Henceforth, educational programs had to achieve employability or vocational outcomes if they were to survive conservative times.

Mind the gaps in the new educational order: Evidence-branded research and programs

These consolidated systems reflect the new educational order, focused on individualistic learning for economic purposes over active citizenship and the common good (Field 2006). The system needed to embody these values through new research regimes. Since 2001, the evidence-based agenda in the US has promoted and exported throughout the world, a skills orientation, focusing on narrow, pragmatic issues (what works) which can be studied with a select few designs and methodologies: 'All evidence is NOT created equal' the revamped US Department of Education Sciences exclaimed (Whitehurst 2002). Branding their choice of research methods as evidence-based, they endorsed randomised trials and quasi-experiments over qualitative approaches such as case studies, excluding ethnography altogether. Since then, there have been repeated calls from the US administration under President George Bush to re-organise adult literacy programs to align better with reporting systems, and use evidence-based research to increase the

performance of learners: 'Adults will have opportunities to improve their basic and literacy skills with high-quality research-based programs that will equip them to succeed in the next step of their education and employment' (D'Amico 2003:1). By setting the stage, the assumption was that other countries would adopt this agenda too.

Although England's system has not created methodological restrictions to the same degree as the US, it has endorsed evidence-based research and the pressure mounts to implement it. There has been increasing concern about 'the wide dissemination of flawed, untested educational initiatives that can be detrimental' (Boruch and Mosteller 2002:1 in Gorard and Torgerson 2006) and there has been a call for a new social contract for research (Hammersley 2006:3). The underlying message is that if these initiatives do not undergo rigorous testing, they can be wasteful or at worst, damaging. The assumption is that 'hard science is the royal road to improvement' (Erickson and Gutierrez 2002:22), and that scientific culture can cure educational ills in most advanced economic countries.

Allan Luke (2005), in Australia, refers to these evidence-based scenarios as part of globalised economies of education, consisting of regressive strategies, focusing on accountability, outcomes-based education and management. The discourses consist of *New Basics* (futures-oriented curriculum reforms that can be measured through standardised testing), *Productive Pedagogies* (system-wide focus on pedagogy as the core work of teaching), and *Literate Futures* (a Queensland state strategy for achievement and skill gains). These reforms 'steer from a distance' (Luke 2005:665) with the emphasis on surveillance and centralised control. All of these efforts shift the focus to the individual and distract from real problems in the labour market and in society, including growing poverty, underemployment, and casualised working conditions that do not supply a living wage.

The discourses also mask the ways formal provision has not moved in expected ways, including less money per student, causing participants and programs to evaporate (Sticht 2007a, 2007b).

Jackson (2005) shows that these accountability systems are not as evidence-based as they are touted to be, especially if protocols are circumvented to comply with performance pressures.

St. Clair and Belzer (2007) classify England and the US as market models. The US Workforce Investment Act (WIA), for example, has production at its core with the focus on individual choice, streamlining public services, and matching training with educational services, symbolising a shift from human potential to human capital. While the national reporting system acts as a monitor, little attention is paid to the lack of inputs and threatening conditions. In England, the *Skills for Life* policy is heavily prescriptive and performance-based with a national curriculum and set targets that are measured through systematic methods. Both the US and English systems

become numbers games, with students 'creamed' to ensure progress and participation scores. Yet, diverse learners and their complex needs, interests and practices are not incorporated and there has been a failure to capture myriad forms of learning, aspirations and successes.

A wide angle lens for seeing textually-mediated disparate worlds

Social practice theory offers a lens to view globalising trends, not only in education, but in the social world, as it becomes textualised and disparate, creating opportunities for some while marginalising others. Literacy is used as a means for managing social class divisions and controlling educational capital (e.g. lotteries, school vouchers and tracking systems), managing and controlling social and commercial phenomena such as large-scale migration (e.g. new citizenship tests tied to literacy), and managing and controlling widespread use of communication technologies (e.g. mobile phone texting). Taken together, these forces fashion an 'Information Age' that connects profits to literacy, wherein writing becomes 'hot property' and a: 'mass practice, [as it] thoroughly participates now in the trading of things and ideals' (Brandt 2007:567).

Literacies, however, are used for much more than social control, and social practice research incorporates local domains, where they are used by workers, families and community members for autonomy, outside of dominant structures. These local practices, while influenced by global forces, operate according to borderland, rather than policy logic, and encompass diverse social actors. In so doing, the social practice viewpoint creates a picture of the complexities of social life that cannot be captured through randomised control trials alone but which are essential to all policy and practice in education. Often called the New Literacy Studies (NLS), social practice research sees literacies as embedded within cultural, socio-historical, technological, economic, raced and gendered sets of relations in society and communities. It is concerned with what people do with texts, how they think about them, and use them through their relations. These processes are developed through communities of people who engage in similar practices. They are also sponsored through institutions, networks, and power relations through technologies, texts and artifacts that are fluid and permutate as they travel (Brandt and Clinton 2002).

Yet policies tend to immobilise, single out, and cement these practices making some more visible, normalised, and high-ranking, such as school-based literacies (the 3 R's), while text messaging, gaming, or blogging are often learned informally within a community, outside of classrooms and are hidden. Some policies make texts 'toxic' to use, as in social services, where 'there is an official form to deal with every life situation' (Taylor 1996:14). One study (Cuban 2008) found that the paperwork in England's social care

system had exploded, to the point where it could be considered a fourth shift of work. These administrative texts pervade institutions, from hospitals to employment agencies to schools and colleges, in a phenomenon known as the 'textually-mediated social world' (Brandt and Clinton 2002, Barton and Hamilton 2005). Social practice theory highlights these institutional texts as well as the strategies people use to live with and negotiate these 'powerful literacies' (Crowther, Hamilton, and Tett 2001). Social practice researchers show how people's institutional literacy practices (like filling in a form in a local neighbourhood health clinic) link to national levels (government funding requirements to create standards and track use of the clinic) and to international mechanisms (tracking health care in the nation) to reveal transcontextual meanings. Policies play an important role in these processes and it is important for research to analyse and challenge the ways in which different forms of provision respond (or fail to respond) to people's textual practices. Yet in as much as these texts are 'done', they can also be undone as they are living documents (created and maintained by people) (Hunter 2008).

Thus, social practice research has evolved from an initial focus on school versus home-based literacies, to a local practice approach and later, to an examination of all social activities of which literacy is a part through many contemporary institutions, cultures, and networks, taking into account both local and global dimensions as two sides of the same coin (Street and Lefstein 2007).

Critiques of the social practice theory: Apertures or blind spots?

Three critiques that circulate in the literature allege that social practice theory is neither critical nor cosmopolitan. The first charge is that the theory lacks salience for analysing social issues, and it merely describes what researchers see in front of them, ending in descriptive, blinkered and relativistic conclusions (Brandt and Clinton 2002). In part, this is a legitimate claim, because social practice researchers, in being open-minded to all social phenomena, have not wanted to criticise marginalised groups' literacy practices. Yet it is also true that social practice researchers do indeed evaluate practices by factoring spatial and temporal dimensions of literacies through 'text-reader conversations', which reveal character and actions of people, as they become institutionally accountable (Smith 2005:101, 113). Social practice researchers do this by connecting levels of social systems — including global states, nation-states, and regional districts, to individuals and communities through multi-sited methodologies, and then appraising them (Buroway et al 2000). Social practice researchers examine how actors are situated within and between institutions, which is especially important for bridging the tensions between theorists, teachers, and policymakers (Crowther, Hamilton, and Tett 2001). Social practice researchers recognise

that the points fit together in idiosyncratic ways due to literacy's historical 'tensions, continuities, and contradictions' (Graff and Duffy 2008: 43).

The second criticism is that by focusing on communities (of practice), there is neglect of who community members are, where they come from and their unequal opportunities to use literacies (Gee 2005). This is a valid point especially when the labour of some members is exploited in maintaining community practices. This point needs to be clarified by social practice researchers who focus on how learning and literacies are linked to communities through particular socio-historical phenomena, networks, cultures and people. They acknowledge that people's practices may transform social relations, but not without the possibility of becoming trapped and powerless too. Stromquist (2001, 2007) shows that mediator relationships are not as reciprocal in theory as they are in practice, and that they are fraught with power relations, making them highly problematic. Distributed literacies, for example, can become a rationale for policymakers to withhold provision to groups of women who have been found to help one another in the absence of institutional supports. Holland and Skinner (2008) show that social movements may profile the 'educated' and promote literacy practices that are unequal.

The third critique is related to the first two claims. This critique is that social practice theory assumes a passive role for literacies; that is, it reflects people's fixed social arrangements and social patterns and is not an active agent of social change (Brandt and Clinton 2002). This assertion also needs some explanation. In the social practice view, objects and humans exist in a network of transactions with their social resources moving locally and globally to solve problems, relate and learn. Community-based educators for example, steeped in popular education, have wedded informal and formal learning to social change for decades (Hamilton and Hillier 2006). Social practice theory can be a politically productive tool for critiquing policies and making change rather than a research device, or a reaction to hegemonic policies. Social practice researchers unpack assumptions that literacy and formal education are powerful in and of themselves, and they support learning that is linked to social justice.

Marginal groups and resources

Although social practice studies often focus on groups of people (such as those mentioned above) who are shown as living on the margins and experiencing the effects of 'globalisation and its discontents', their situation has not necessarily arisen because of their literacy or language skills, even though these are what most policy makers see as the cause of their social problems. Moreover, these groups are not marginalised when it comes to their actual participation in the new economy, as they are growing demographic groups and important labourers and consumers of services.

CBOs (community-based organizations) surface as unexpected innovators of education to support these groups, in spite of, or because they are under-resourced. CBOs' economic and social marginalisation can even have inverse effects on learners' community participation wherein resilient strategies are devised to distribute literacies. These critical resources are used ingeniously, though not without difficulty.

Learning, participating, and persisting

Learners may learn informally through self-study and computers; these are used in an embodied way for bonding, caring, self-understanding and collective action. These inconspicuous practices, learning processes and intrinsic outcomes cannot be captured in terms of short-term quantifiable gains, and are subsequently invisible to policymakers. Nor do short-term programs yield short-term proficiency gains amongst learners, as Reder (this volume) shows. Although programs could tap proficiencies and practices by altering systems, this adaptation may suit funding structures rather than learners, especially if programs offer technology simply because it is cheaper than trained tutors. Simply put, shallow interventions cannot reverse deeper inequalities.

Participation in formal programs is unequal (Desjardins, Rubenson and Milana 2006). Do technologies, by virtue of their stand-alone qualities, reduce inequalities for marginalised groups? How can they operate as a way in to formalised participation, (see Reder this volume where programs influence learners' practices), or, are they a way out as discussed previously? Bringing computers to programs may involve, 'bringing people to literacy and bringing literacy to people' (Reder 2007). But it depends on access, usage, resource levels and support features.

With little data on informal learning, especially of the elderly who rarely participate in formalised environments (Desjardins, Rubenson and Milana 2006), as well as undocumented immigrants who take a risk to enter them, the value of social practice theory is in spotlighting people's hidden learning practices and communities. People move in and out of formal sites because of the myriad issues they contend with and because of program failure to compensate for structural disparities (e.g. transport, childcare) (Merriam, Cafferella and Baumgartner 2007).

All literacy and speech events are counted and made visible under social practice research rules, and hence a comprehensive view of learning emerges. These snapshots however, are not made merely for the sake of representation, but to bring in a social justice norm to adult basic education and broaden what it means to learn in multiple settings. Spanish, for example, can be a pedagogical tool that is not a conventional ESOL learning mode in colleges, but it is in community-based sites (Rivera and Huerta-Macias 2008). Reder (this volume) shows that mixed methods and carefully developed

measures are needed to understand these complex issues and establish rigorous explanations about learning processes and practices.

Meaning-making, power, and language

Social practice research highlights the meaning-making in learning through power and language. Participants may report, in real terms, the value of their literacy practices for learning in certain situations, like being bullied in school (Barton this volume). These understandings are gleaned through biographical and cultural analysis. Descriptive information is amassed, then filtered through the interpretative lens of researchers who incorporate what participants say about their actions, and ally themselves with their stories. In one study (Hamilton this volume), an elderly man was asked about his dentures by a social worker, who 'was sitting in his home with a clipboard.' The literacy paraphernalia (the clipboard) underscores the power the social worker claims in his home because she knows he needs free services and he understands that his compliance with her procedures is needed to get support. Social practice researchers pinpoint these situations, describe the events in detail, and then analytically locate them amongst participants, the networks used to interact, and the powerful national and international forces and institutions of influence. The power relations, however, are not fixed and people's identities, roles and relations do shift; for example, a cleaner may turn into a counsellor at work for teenagers but not in her own home with her daughter (Cuban this volume). These scenarios depict major socio-cultural factors at play in individuals' current situations, which link to past events and future aspirations. Standard concepts and language change under a lens that depicts learning as embedded into people's shifting routines and interests. Causal explanations for practices are illuminated.

Conclusion: A tradition with no name

Social practice research can be used to design learning sites that incorporate the interests of marginalised groups. They can be places to develop new practices and be a part of community-building activities and knowledge (Kalman 2008). Similarly, pedagogies need not just imitate people's practices in their communities and workplaces but expand on their resources and repertoires for their greater individual and collective autonomy. While these ideas thrive amongst social practice researchers, educators and participants, they are considered revolutionary by policymakers who are wedded to skills-based systems. Without more funding across learning sites, or advocacy for the mainly part-time teaching force in advanced countries' Cinderella systems, and finally, without greater policy interventions to ensure wider access, support structures, and opportunities, institutional change is stifled. Marginalised groups will continue to be on the periphery, with little access to educational services, or inadequate ones at

best. Yet, learning in communities will continue in the borderlands. Social practice research unearths these learnings and makes visible and validates the 'tradition that has no name' (Belenky, Bond and Weinstock 1996).

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