

BOOK REVIEW:***The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners* by Lauren Rosenberg**

Review by Marcea K. Seible

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In *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*, Lauren Rosenberg presents an in-depth look at how adult learners view literacy and its ability to transform their lives. In her qualitative study of four adults at a community learning center, Rosenberg's objective is to "find out why participants sought literacy as adults" (18). In the end, their stories reveal a keen understanding of the power of literacy in society. Through observation and interviews, Rosenberg learned that the participants' choices to become literate often challenged conventional reasons for why people seek literacy and revealed a much deeper understanding of how literacy operates in society.

Rosenberg uses the term "nonliterate" to describe adults who cannot read and write and, in chapter one, discusses this group in relation to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's definition of the "subaltern class." She explains how these adults, "whose experience counters the dominant and who are, therefore, shut out from dominant ideological concerns," have been positioned into a subaltern class of "Others" (3). By sharing their stories of marginalization and desire for literacy, Rosenberg seeks to give voice to this subaltern class.

Rosenberg's four-year study observing and interviewing adult learners utilizes narrative inquiry, but in the process of reporting her research, she recognizes the difficulty of representing their voices accurately. This is one of the challenges she faces and one she returns to many times

In chapters two and three, Rosenberg introduces readers to the voices of Violetta, Lee Ann, George and Chief, the four adults whose literacy paths she followed at the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center located in an urban part of Springfield, Massachusetts. She discovered that these adults sought literacy for many reasons, from the desire to prove to others they could learn (Lee Ann), to being able to write a letter to a son in prison (Violetta), to reading a label in the grocery store (Chief), to using literacy to share their wisdom and help others (George). Each of the participants' experiences is unique, yet each reveals a similar theme, in effect all becoming "narratives of resistance in which they become able to revise their own lives and influence the ways they are gazed upon by others" (22).

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may have vastly different experiences from our students, but we can use their stories to better understand the relationship between literacy and power and what it means for them as learners.

In chapters five and six, Rosenberg concludes her research noting that for two of the participants (Violetta and Chief) acquisition of reading and writing literacies provided a stronger sense of self that allowed them to “recast the terms of their lives and to make changes outside of themselves” (113). She argues convincingly that, by becoming literate, they gained agency in telling their own stories, and in the process they challenged dominant discourses.

Both participants learned how writing for an audience can evolve into a form of community activism. For example, by writing to both real (her son) and imagined (other single mothers) audiences, Violetta's purpose for writing underwent a dramatic shift, and she witnessed how her story could effect change in others. Likewise, Chief's decision to write and serve as the editor for the Read/Write/Now newsletter allowed him to address controversial topics that he felt would get readers' attention and encourage them to take action (132).

Rosenberg's study shows compassion for the adult learners at Read/Write/Now and reminds readers how common literacy skills are often taken for granted by those privileged enough to have acquired them early in life. She encourages readers to consider how pedagogical strategies used at Read/Write/Now might be integrated into university writing programs, in particular by adopting more flexible teaching and learning models that correspond to the academic and career goals of students. Additionally, she believes those of us who work with marginalized populations can become more invested in what our students say in their writing. By helping them to find spaces of "contradiction and resistance" in what they read and write, we can learn more about the power of literacy to transform lives (164).

The stories of Violetta, Lee Ann, Chief and George show how each one, in his or her own way, painstakingly worked through personal challenges to integrate themselves more fully in a society they had long felt isolated from. In the end, Rosenberg encourages educators to pay attention to the voices of adult literacy learners and recognize that “their path to literacy is sometimes fraught with social and personal obstacles” (151). By listening to their experiences, we can better understand how literacy is important to them and how that should be equally important to us.

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