“WHAT I FEEL IN MY HEART”: LITERACY PRACTICES OF AND FOR THE SELF AMONG ADULTS WITH LIMITED OR NO SCHOOLING

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American Educational Research Association
2013 – San Francisco
Theoretical Framework

Literacy as a Social Practice

- Literacy is always situated within...
  - Social & cultural contexts
  - Relationships of power & ideology

Literacy Events & Practices

- Literacy events (Heath, 1983)
  - Visible, involving written text
  - Reading, writing, speaking, listening, etc

- Literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1999)
  - Not visible, but inferrable
  - Includes beliefs, values, attitudes
  - Situated within context
Model of a Literacy Practice

Areas in grey represent observable literacy events.

Unshaded areas represent inferred aspects of larger literacy practice that contextualize & shape the event.

The problem

• Early research explored literacy within communities that were traditionally thought to be uneducated, low-literate, or even illiterate
  • Adults practiced literacy in meaningful ways to accomplish important social goals (e.g. Street, 1984)

• National and international discourses still characterize entire groups as low-literate or illiterate
  • Often call upon the concept of *functional literacy* to describe the perceived abilities of certain groups
Functional Literacy

**U.S. Definition**

- “Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential”
  - Baer, Kutner & Sabatini, 2009

**UNESCO Definition**

- A person is literate if she can engage in “all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community’s development”
  - UNESCO, 2005
Initial Research Question

- In what social activity domains, and for which purposes, do adults with limited or no schooling read or write?
Methodology

CPLS Project
- Ethnographic data on literacy practices
- 26 case studies
- CPLS database
  - Literacy practices data
    - Observations
    - Semi-structured interviews
    - Photographs & artifacts
  - Contextual data
  - Demographic data

Cross-Case Analysis
- Limited to participants with limited or no formal schooling
  - 98 participants
  - 12 case studies
- Analysis
  - Queried database by domain and purpose
  - Identified “unexpected” practices
  - Returned to original data
  - Developed participant portraits
  - Coded portraits for themes
Revised Research Questions

• In what literacy practices do adults with limited or no schooling engage for personal fulfillment?

• What do these practices reveal about the nature of literacy for individuals who are often characterized as illiterate or low-literate?
Literacy for Personal Fulfillment

**Literacy Practices**
- Religion/spirituality/faith
- Coping with life
  - Literacy as escape
  - Facing one’s problems
- Enjoyment
  - Humor
  - Relaxation

**Contextual Themes**
- Oral traditions
- Self-teaching
- Literacy perceptions
- Practical considerations
Nina: *Wisdom to Discover God’s Writing*
Raúl: “My Mind Goes Far Away”
Raúl: “My Mind Goes Far Away”

“When I write, I do not feel I am in prison anymore. I think about nicer things regardless of who is next to me, who is looking or who criticizes me, who teases me or who mocks me or talks about me. I don’t care about that because my mind is not there anymore.”
Claire: “Trying to Get a Book Together”
Claire: “Trying to Get a Book Together”

“In our tradition, like things are not supposed to be written down... so if some other person like you, if you need to know about our spirituality, you’ll have to go there and experience it for yourself.”
Claire: “Trying to Get a Book Together”

“I’m trying to get a book together…of all my poems…I’m going to try and get this published.”
Catalina: “Because They are Funny”
Queridas oyentes, tengo el sentimiento de comunicarles que esta será mi última charla sobre los defectos femeninos.
Implications

• Literacy practices of and for the self
  • Go beyond day-to-day “functional” survival
  • Are often hidden
  • Are about the survival, functioning & development of the self

• Theories & concepts
  • Need to rethink/redefine “functional literacy”
    • Which literacy practice(s)?
    • In which context
    • For whom?
    • For what purpose?

• Literacy instruction
  • Individual goals
  • Development of individual selves
  • Increasing literacy repertoires beyond “basic needs”