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Syncretic Approaches to Studying Movement and Hybridity in Literacy Practices

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HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

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This chapter discusses the logic of inquiry and affordances of syncretic approaches to the study of literacy. Syncretic approaches are defined here as the principled and strategic use of transdisciplinary perspectives for the theoretical and methodological treatment of the social practices of literacy learning (Gutiérrez & Stone, 2000). Of significance, a syncretic approach is contingent upon an expansive theoretical network that materializes from the goodness of fit between relevant theoretical constructs and the complexity of sociocultural phenomena. In our own work (Gutiérrez, 2008), it is the process of seeking a goodness of fit that allows the researcher to draw, in a principled way, from expansive theories of learning and development (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1987, 2001; Rogoff, 2003), critical social theories (Luke, 2003), sociocultural and social practices views of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), including New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996, 2005; Street, 1984, 2003), and multi-literacies approaches (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) to link the particular to the larger social context of development.

In this chapter, we advance the notion of using syncretic approaches to the study of literacy and build on the work of scholars who have engaged syncretic conceptions of language and literacy in their research. One salient example is found in the work of Duranti and Ochs (1997) who proposed a notion of syncretic literacy to describe how “an intermingling or merging of culturally diverse traditions informs and organizes literacy activities” (p. 2). Hill (2001) takes up a similar approach to describe what she terms as syncretic linguistic practices which are “active and strategic efforts by speakers” who “draw on their understandings of historical associations of linguistic materials to control meaning and to produce new histories” (p. 243). More recently, new conceptions of syncretic literacies involve melding together distinct literacy practices that are generally incompatible or in tension with one another and promote the development of powerful literacies that challenge current models of academic literacy (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Cultural-Historical Approaches to Syncretic Literacies

Our work on syncretic literacies is anchored in cultural-historical activity theoretical approaches to learning and development as the central explanatory theory (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leont’ev, 1981; Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009). Anchoring work in a central theoretical approach allows for the development of a coherent framework through the thoughtful integration of complementary theoretical and methodological tools. However, constructs are often under-theorized in literacy research, and theories, like the people who use them, have blind spots, making the need for approaches that extend, deepen, and sharpen our conceptions and methods more essential. A goodness of fit, then, is constituted by a complex, hybrid approach that opens up the possibility of illuminating these blind spots.

We argue that a syncretic perspective also can help account for the social and cultural organization of literacy practices, their histories, their complex and varied uses and meanings and, in this way, is consonant with a more powerful definition of literacy as a set of practices; where literacy is always situated in a sociocultural milieu mediated by proximal and distal influences. As we have previously noted, by focusing on the collective as well as on individual sense-making activity, we can document new forms of activity that can lead to rich cycles of learning—or what Engeström (1987, 2001) calls “expansive learning” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152).

For example, while remaining anchored in cultural historical activity theoretical approaches to learning and development, we strategically blend theoretical and methodological tools from literacy, social and anthropological theories, cultural studies, and Critical Race Theory, for example, to conceptualize approaches to syncretic literacies and to examine literacy learning for students from non-dominant communities.
In this work, we argue that a syncretic approach to understanding literacy brings to bear a range of theoretical lenses that yields a repertoire of methodological tools to examine the mutual and interdependent relationship between the individual and the social world. As Engeström (2001) has argued, these theories challenge the Cartesian divide that separates the individual and her cultural means, focusing rather on multiple layers of influence. From this perspective, individual cognition and practice is imbued with the social, the historical, and the biological (Cole, Cole, & Lightfoot, 2009).

One of the affordances of these multiple layers of analysis is that it can help make visible the complex and situated nature of learning and allows examination of the social and cognitive consequences of our working theories, methods, instructional practices, and interventions. At the same time, by attending to historicity, individual practices are connected to their cultural and historical context, thus, linking the local with the global. In this way, literacy practices are not discretely circumscribed phenomena but instead occur as part of laminated, overlapping, and interwoven social phenomena across time and space.

Like all methodologies, syncretic approaches also are organized around particular ideologies: particular ways of defining what counts as knowledge, how knowledge develops, and how knowledge counts (Apple, 1982, 1999; Green & Luke, 2006). Our own literacy research is oriented toward social problems and is animated by a commitment to do scholarly work that advances the field’s understanding of the literacy practices of non-dominant communities, and that extends theories and methods that better capture the complexity of literacy learning and more nuanced understandings of a community’s practices. One ideological tenet that has driven our work has been to push on prevailing conceptions of literacy that are narrow, monocultural, monolingual, and too often serve to fail students and place them at risk for school failure. The affordances of a syncretic approach are important even in cases where a robust theoretical approach to literacy learning is in place, as our most valued theories may not fully account for the additional developmental demands placed on youth from non-dominant communities. For instance, do our understandings of students’ literacy practices account for the role of race and ethnicity in literacy learning? Consider that a race- and equity-sensitive orientation would begin by acknowledging the complexity of literacy practices in which the enabling and constraining properties of literacy at work are made visible. As an example, this approach would make evident how race is “language” and language is “raced,” that is, it would theorize how race and racism are indexed in language (Alim, 2009).

Clearly, there is a need for a fuller theoretical explanation of the ways race, language, and literacy constitute capital in schooling environments. Such an explanation would be organized around a political economy that challenges approaches to literacy that rely on an essentializing monocultural and monolingual lens to define students’ linguistic repertoires and to design their educational futures (Gutiérrez, Ali, & Henriquez, 2010; Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003). Rupturing reductive notions of literacy, however, entails developing new conceptions of communities and their practices. For example, understanding students’ literacy practices as static and bounded belies the stable and improvisational character of cultural practices and ignores the inherent hybridity in human activity. Such reductive views of students’ literacy practices contribute to the limited capital their toolkit has in formal schooling environments, notably in reform pedagogies organized around autonomous forms of literacy (Street, 1984).

Following a syncretic approach, sociohistorical understandings of the language practices of dual language learners can provide more accurate and useful descriptions of people’s social linguistic practices, including their genesis and the sources of their mediation. Thus, rather than focusing on students’ linguistic deficiencies, a cultural-historical approach would seek to know more about students’ history of involvement with language and literacy practices (Gutiérrez, 2008). Further, consider the conceptual and methodological shifts required when a dynamic view of a community’s literacies is employed: here the starting assumption is that literacy practices are both culturally-informed and culture-producing.

A dynamic and instrumental notion of culture is fundamental to accounting for the shifts in students’ literacy practices over the past decade. Today’s students are much more adroit in reading and talking about multimodal texts than conventional written texts, especially those valued in schooling environments, and their repertoires reflect engagement with a variety of media across time and space (Gee, 2004; Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010). Their movement as border-crossers (Tuomi-Gröhn, Engeström, & Young, 2003) across virtual and geographical boundaries—a range of activity settings—helps ensure that their language and literacy practices are the product of the intercultural and hybrid practices of which they are a part. Thus, understanding this hybridity is key to cultivating new learning and expanding students’ literacy practices.

This more complex view is particularly consequential as the essentialism at work in literacy policies and practices belies the hybridity of students’ everyday lives, including their linguistic practices. The emergence of new diasporic communities, the result of increased transnational migration have resulted in a variety of intercultural activities in which a wide range of linguistic practices become available to members of non-dominant communities. Life for 21st-century youth involves border-crossing and this movement is mediated by an array of hybrid artifacts, practices, and increasingly new technologies. Understanding the resulting “linguistic bricolage” (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 32) requires more nuanced conceptions and historical understandings of cultural communities and tools to account for what takes hold as youth, their tools, and practices travel across activity settings. Conceiving of learning as movement (Engeström, 2005; Gutiérrez, 2008) should invite the use...
of multi-sited ethnographies (Marcus, 1998) and expansive theories of learning and development to understand 21st-century literacies and the processes of identity formation involved with this movement. It should also motivate us to examine the consequences of intercultural exchange that could be leveraged to engage students in literacy activities that build upon difference rather than deficit.

To elaborate, a syncretic approach begins with recognition of a particular social problem as part of people’s everyday experiences; acknowledgment of their complexity, historical location, and embeddedness in multiple levels of context; and the incorporation of research as part of a program for addressing the social problem. For example, with regard to literacy education, a syncretic approach pushes on extant theories of literacy that have not led to robust literacy instruction for all students or to the development of powerful literacies (Hamilton, 1997; Hamilton, Macrae, & Tett, 2009) that students could leverage in school settings and beyond, sociopolitical issues not withstanding. Acknowledging and foregrounding the sociocultural nature and complexity of language and literacy development go hand in glove with a principled and transdisciplinary logic-of-inquiry that more fully accounts for the multimodality of communication, especially pertinent in an age of expanding digital new media. In other words, fundamental to syncretic approaches, like other methodologies, are inherent connections between how the social phenomena under study is conceptualized (in this case, young people’s literacy practices), the logic-of-inquiry framing the study, and the methodological tools employed.

Although a syncretic approach draws on different methods, it is distinct from approaches described as mixed methods and mixed methodologies. The term “mixed methods” refers to the use of multiple methods such as incorporating interviews, natural observations, and controlled experiments within a single study or program of research. These methods may derive from different traditions (e.g., qualitative research and quantitative research). Although thoughtful discussions are a part of mixed methods approaches (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), a syncretic approach is not only about what tools to employ. Rather, it is about how to conceptualize and frame the phenomenon to be studied and then designing a logic-of-inquiry that is organized around a principled connection between the conceptualization and frame and the inquiry itself.

One instantiation of this approach is the social design experiment (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010) akin to Engeström’s “change laboratory” (2004). In contrast to some design models, the social design experiment resists ahistorical approaches that do not account for a situated understanding of the social phenomenon or target community; social design experiments are open and dynamic systems that are subject to revision, disruptions, and contradictions and are co-designed (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010, p. 102); moreover, social design experiments in our work are concerned with social consequences and transformative potential (Engeström, 2004). In designing research that addresses social inequities in ways that “propel the potential for change in the participants, their practices, and their social context of development” (p. 102), the theoretical frameworks driving social design experiments must be as complex as the problems they attempt to address. Thus, the social design experiment is a hybrid environment organized around expansive conceptions of learning, literacy, and communities and seeks to answer questions such as: What new conceptions of literacy and methodological tools, for example, would best help us understand the complex and hybrid repertoires non-dominant students bring to schooling and learning experiences? What new arrangements would foster learning? What kind of learning ecology, tools, forms of participation and assistance, and ways of organizing learning will ratchet up development, as well as promote equity and transformative outcomes?

**Studying Literacy Learning as Movement**

Connecting individual practices to their cultural and historical context and connecting the local with the global is based on the premise that literacy practices are not discretely circumscribed phenomena but instead occur as a part of laminated, overlapping and interwoven social phenomena across time and space. Students exist and engage in literacy practices that are influenced by the historical and present-moment contexts unique to their experience. Thus, it is often more productive to study students’ “movements across their daily routines” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 151) in order to understand how the tools and resources available to them—historically, culturally, and in the design of learning environments—are then taken up to constitute the practiced literacy.

One such social design experiment involved a study of the migrant program at UCLA—a program that brought high school students from migrant farmworker backgrounds to the university for an intensive 4-week summer residential program. This was a hybrid ecology that reframed the relation between home and school, between everyday and scientific knowledge and practices, and the local and the historical. Within this approach, individual and community literacies come in contact and work in tandem with institutional genres and conventions in the production of syncretic texts and a resulting sociocritical literacy (Gutiérrez, 2008). Enabled by its design and conceptions of literacy and learning as movement, syncretic literacy practices, characterized by a merger of familiar cultural forms and the conventions of academic literacy privileged in a university setting, leveraged both students’ horizontal expertise and the vertical expertise valued in school settings (Engeström, 2003). Accounting for the relation between the horizontal and vertical, the everyday and the scientific, is not the norm in studies of the literacies of youth, particularly those from non-dominant communities.

Thus, a persistent limitation of previous literacy research involves the ways non-dominant communities have been studied, where communities have been examined as bounded...
entities, without accounting for the ongoing movement and flow occurring, especially in communities experiencing migration and transmigration (Gutiérrez, 2008; Hage, 2005; Marcus, 1998). However, studying people’s movement and what takes hold requires new sensibilities, new tools, and a new imagination about communities and their practices as unbounded. Here the multi-sited ethnography would help us attend to the multiple influences on literacy practices and the ways those practices shape and are shaped by cultural mediators, both proximally and distally. Attending to the flow and diffusion of youth across settings makes visible the hybrid character of the practices of which they are a part, including the hybrid nature of literacy practices. The power of following youth in their daily rounds, across time and space, and across borders, for example, and the importance of developing compelling, evidence-based narratives about their literacies should involve what Marcus (2005) calls “methodological bricolage” (p. 2), the kind of bricolage invoked in the multi-sited ethnography or cultural-historical activity theoretical approaches in which a minimum of two activity settings is valued (Engeström, 2005). The methodological bricolage characteristic of activity theoretical approaches in particular is inherently transdisciplinary, as third-generation activity theory anticipates the need for attending to complexity, border-crossing, and hybridity (Engeström, 1999; Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez, 2009). Of significance in the syncretic approach elaborated here, activity theory complements the fundamental principles of the multi-sited ethnographic approach and may help us better theorize and document new immigrant and diasporic communities by examining how cultural activity is influenced by local and distal sociohistorical and sociopolitical demands.

From this perspective, the production of principled, respectful, and nuanced understandings of 21st-century literacies is best served by syncretic approaches that draw on the most illuminating theories and productive methods to document youth and their literacy practices as dynamically constituted rather than essentialized products of bounded communities, and to study “cultural flows” (Hall, 2004, p. 9) and the mutual constitution of local, national, and transnational practices (Hall, 2004). If not, we are likely to reproduce narrow and essentialized accounts of youth and their literacy practices—accounts that are neither accurate nor useful in mediating the development of powerful literacies (Hamilton, 1997) for all youth.

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