**CHANGING LITERACIES—PEOPLE, PLACE AND OBJECTS: A REVIEW ESSAY**

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**Abstract**

In this review essay, I refer to two recently published scholarly works that explore the notions of transcultural, mobile and placed literacies: *in Languages and literacies as mobile and placed resources* editedby Sue Nichols and Collette Snowden, and *Literacy lives in transcultural times*editedby Rahat Zaidi and Jennifer Rowsell. Much research in the field of literacy education has recently acknowledged how literacies are continually changing due to globalisation and transmobility. People move, places change, and objects shift in and through these spaces. Researchers and educators are therefore grappling with how best to address these diversities and engage learners in such environments. Through a review of the books mentioned above, two key questions are explored: what are appropriate pedagogies for literacy education? where and how is literacy education research leading us into the future? This review takes a socio-cultural perspective of literacy by presenting the contemporary research that attempts to answer these questions.

Keywords: literacy, literacies, globalisation, transmobility, transcultural, place, objects

**Introduction**

The migration of people across the globe is swift and constant. Indeed in 2013, it was reported that more than 230 million people lived outside their own home country (Thornhill, 2013), with this number set to increase each year. With such extensive transmobility along with massive technological advancements, including easier and more cost-effective access to mobile devices, people can engage in incredibly diverse literate practices (Barton, Lemieux & Chabanne, 2018) that are influenced by others, place and objects. We are more connected than ever before through online platforms—any day, anytime, anywhere. It was indeed a different story just 50 years ago.

*Languages and literacies as mobile and placed resources* (Nichols & Snowden, 2017) is a contemporary critical academic text exploring the concepts of language and literate practices within a complex global environment. Considering diversity across a range of contexts, the contributing authors present unique instances of communication. They do so by asking: What are mobile and placed literacies? Can those that are mobile become placed? And can we challenge the values that are attributed to some literate practices over others?

The contributing authors to this book, who represent many countries across the world, share stories of plurality, thus challenging the hierarchical model of valued literacies. Nichols, in Chapter 1 of Nichols and Snowden (2017) sets the scene for the authors by considering the full range of semiotic devices in various learning and teaching contexts including: historical and social events (Chapters 2, 4 and 7); print and digital materials (Chapters 3 and 8); diverse communities and languages (Chapters 5, 6, 9, 12 and 13); young children (Chapter 10), youth (Chapter 11) and higher education (Chapter 15).

Similarly, the book *Literacy lives in transcultural times* (Zaidi & Rowsell, 2017) is an important addition to the libraries of literacy scholars and educators as it explores the concepts of both globalisation and transculturalism embracing how they differ and how they interact. It also draws on perspectives from the fields of linguistics and semiotics. This dualist view makes the book an original contribution to the literature on literacy and literacies in the contemporary context.

The editors of this text, Zaidi and Rowsell, utilise Appadurai’s (1996) model of globalisation as a common framework for contributors. The model explores a “series of flows and disjunctures that course through meaning-making and communication” that “makes literacy and language research more entangled" (p. 5) with global practices. Appadurai (1996) posits five interrelated yet disjunctive cultural flows. These are:

1. Ethnoscapes; the migration of people across cultures and borders,
2. Mediascapes; use of media that shapes the way we understand our imagined world
3. Technoscapes; cultural interactions due to the promotion of technology
4. Financescapes; the flux of capital across borders
5. Ideoscapes; is the global flow of ideologies (p. 48)

This review essay will, therefore, draw on work from both volumes to illustrate the themes of people, place and objects in an attempt to address the questions: what are appropriate pedagogies for literacy education? And where and how is literacy education research leading us into the future?

**People**

Due to continually changing literate practices at the turn of, and through the twenty-first century, terms such as multiliteracies (New London Group, 2000), New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2010), New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) and Literacy as Social Practice (Street, 2017) emerged. With an acknowledgement of multi-literacies concerning the types of texts and how people communicate with each other, literacy education research has undoubtedly covered the consequences of such diversity, including different identities, both within schools and outside these settings in the community.

Indeed, Moje and Luke (2009) presented a review of the ‘identity turn’ in literacy studies that foregrounded the actor or agent in literate practices. They argued for an approach that was not skills-based or from a cognitive perspective but rather one that values how the roles of people change depending on context, time and space. People can both influence and be influenced by what others do to make meaning of the world around them. But what happens when these roles or identities are blurred and ever-changing due to transcultural and mobile-literate practices?

Diverse literate practices have for some time been presented as essential signallers for learners and teachers to better understand each other. Much literacy education research has shifted to exploring the concept of ‘literacies’ given this significant diversity of practice. With distinct literacies comes diverse identities, of people making meaning of and through varied communicative purposes. Literacies are therefore situated within specific contexts of learning. Chapters 5, 6, 9, 12 and 13 in Nichols and Snowden’s (2017) book for example present information from Bweyale in Uganda; the Murray-Darling Basin in Australia; the South Australian state education department; foreign language learners in an Australian university; and Vietnamese speakers in global contexts. These diverse practices confirm the rich identities in people’s everyday lives.

Openjuru, in Chapter 5, unpacks rich literacy practices within a small village, Bweyale in Western Uganda. Places of livelihood, education, religion, bureaucracy and family are examined as places of variable literacy resources. The author argues that literacy is used differentially in everyday life and in a range of contexts. Rather than viewing such locations as non-literate according to formal education standards, the people in this rural place engage in unique literate practices that preserve and innovate on community and culture. In this sense, Openjuru expands our perspectives on literacies and identities by proffering up to us the need to consider practices in broader contexts including learning that occurs outside of institutionalised places like schools. Literacy is presented here as an economic tool to express community and cultural identities.

Kerkham in Chapter 6 discusses the Murray-Darling Basin as a place of mobilised literacy and resource through sustainability and education. The research saw students connecting “bodily with the landscape and its grasses, rocks and trees, its smells, textures and seasonal changes” (p. 87). Without embodying the natural environment and expressing this connection through textual features, Kerkham argues that students would be limited in understanding literacy as both local and global processes. Developing such identities, local and global as well as acknowledging how both interconnect is important in today’s world.

Bao and Ha in Chapter 12 discuss literacy and its relationship to silence as mobility. Silence refers to “an aspect of embodied literacy performance…which is shaped and reshaped by internal as well as social interactions” (p. 170). They argue that foreign language learning classes place pressures on students to actively and spontaneously engage in classroom talk rather than also appreciating that quiet students may also be successfully learning. Teachers see silence as a sign of their pedagogical aims being at risk or not fulfilled. Both talk and silence are therefore critical to acknowledge when considering language as a mobile resource.

In a similar vein, Whitty in Zaidi and Rowsell (Chapter 2) proposes to unsettle the deficit perspectives of students’ literacy abilities once they begin school (p. 24). She argues that schooling discourses blame parents and families and “fail children who may not have had exposure to reading prior to school” even to the point of having them repeat the year. She asks: how can six-year-old children be seen to be failing the system? Whitty offers up a decolonising pedagogy of solidarity (p. 28)—one that gives Indigenous peoples a voice which is so too often absent from practices. Further research that explores the identities of Indigenous peoples is carried out across the globe yet there is still concern whether these cultural individual and collective selves are reflected in schooling.

It is indisputable that people create unique and distinct literacies constantly. As a consequence, new and emerging identities locally, globally and both individually and collectively are ever-present. Understanding and unpacking these practices is critical for improvement in inclusivity and tolerance.

**Place**

The concept of Place has filtered through much of the research on literacy in schools, communities and other diverse contexts. Street (2017) in Zaidi and Rowsell (2017) for example, presents the concept of place as situated but also every-changing. Street questions the perspective of low literacy levels in education and argues this is contrary to a social practices approach. He provides information from the United Nations policies *Millennium Development Goals* and *Sustainable Development Goals* that aim to address ‘low literacy skills’ and contrasts it with a Literacy as Social Practices or LSP approach that views education across the lifespan and contexts, not just allocated to schooling and institutions. Such research can make visible the complexity of local, everyday community literacies that can challenge the dominant myopia of literacy skills. Involved in such practices are the places in which they are expressed. In this way, Street’s work values the concepts of local/global, physical/online, single mode/multimodal not as binaries but rather from a perspective that values how they intersect, interrelate and create both dichotomous and autonomous actions and reactions to conceptualising literate practices in different contexts.

Similarly, the social context of the workplace is investigated in Chapter 4 by Snowden in Nichols and Snowden (2017). In particular, Snowden examines the concept of surveillance and transfer of knowledge in the workplace environment. She shares information about how information flows through various forms of communication in journalism. Additionally, the contributors in Nichols and Snowden (2017) share work from across the lifespan with Lin (Chapter 10) exploring early childhood education and Teaching English as a Foreign language; French and de Courcy (Chapter 11) investigating high school students’ multilingual resources; and Behrend (Chapter 15) showing how digital academic writing in higher education contexts can be viewed as a resource in a transcultural space.

In Zaidi and Rowsell’s edited collection, Early and Kendrick (Chapter 4) discuss multiliteracies and the links between outside of school/21st literacy skills and traditional literacies. They argue that in response to transculturalism many scholars have explored cultural and linguistic diversity as resources for meaning-making. They provide further evidence as to how access to language can reveal power dynamics and work if the metalanguage of multiliteracies is encouraged. They present inquiry-based approaches in investigating multimodality in the context of Teaching English as a Second Language.

Ntelioglou (Chapter 5) also discusses relational space of self and others and explores the transcultural character of literacy. Ntelioglou suggests an approach where common schooled literacies are unlearned and reimagined. Such an approach values students, particularly minoritised students, as part of a cosmopolitan curriculum. She explains that a transcultural multiliteracies method is situated practice and provides examples via dramatic performance.

Place is therefore a powerful component of literacies, practices and meaning making. It is important that researchers consider place as a key driver in contextualising literacy in transcultural times. Changing contexts also mean that place can be complex as the networks of global and local discourses including how these intersect and inform one another.

**Objects and materials**

Not only can people and places impact on diverse, literate practices but scholars have investigated how various objects and materials influence how we communicate with each other. Nichols (2017) investigates how languages and literacies as resources can be placed in particular environments but also moved between these places. The concept of ‘placed resource’, inspired by Prinsloo’s (2005) work, can be fluid and shaped by the context in which it exists. The multiplicity of spaces, Nichols argues, are embroiled in elaborate economic, textual and communicative modes; that is, they are unbounded and shift and change over time. Complex modal ensembles or assemblages are categorised by Arzarello and Paola (2007) as semiotic bundles.

In Nichols and Snowden’s edited book, Caldwell (Chapter 2) explores several cases that involve placed resources on printed t-shirts. Using three ‘readings’ – an initial, alternate and radical reading – Caldwell explains the t-shirt resource as both commodification and mobilisation of culture. The notion of fashion as a signifier of identity and place is highlighted throughout the chapter.

A historical perspective of learning between 1887 and 1889 is presented by Cormack (Chapter 7). A focus on the materials in a schooling context is used to "go beyond usual accounts of the history of the teaching of reading and writing" (p. 95). A significant amount of communication in this era was carried out on slates – a key material object in teaching literacy. Cormack unpacks the purpose and role of slates within this environment.

Nichols in Chapter 3 views parenting magazines as a ‘mobilisation of childhood’. Data collection involved two sites in Australia and one in the United States, whereby parenting magazines were analysed. The use of geo-semiotic perspectives uncovered the sites as diverse locations and the materials as mobile yet stable resources for parents/carers and children.

Wohlwend and Medina (Chapter 6) explain that in contemporary classrooms there is limited creative and productive play and argues that converging imaginaries are necessary for transformed practice. The study sees children as purposive cultural participants and producers of knowledge who make meaning from the world around them. Darvin and Norton (Chapter 7) similarly investigate how an increasingly technological and transmobile world impacts on literate practices and posit that more investment should be made into what a mobile and fluid world resembles.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 in Roswell and Zaidi’s edited book unpack the concept of technoscapes through digital authoring, transcultural literacy pedagogies and rescripting classed lives through online practices. Technology acts as an object capable of forming and influencing new identities and literacies. More specifically, Stornaiuolo and Jung in Chapter 8 present the online community Write4Change. The project aims to cultivate young people’s engagement with critical literacies through collaborations online. The authors argue for pedagogical shifts by educators, who are well-positioned but may lack the knowledge and confidence to do so. As an ethnographic study, the project supports young people to be "*effective* and *ethical* participants in a globally connected world” (p. 113). Chapters 9 and 10 respectively propose: how arts-based ways of knowing through the use of objects as catalysts encourage students to represent transliteracies; and a re-scripting of classed lives, urging for documentation of a ‘cosmopolitan self’. The authors also put forward a case for transformed, transcultural pedagogy within classroom spaces.

Finally, Chapters 11 and 12 both explore the notions of post-structural and posthuman literacies. They highlight the need for researchers to de-centre the human in literacy scholarship. The questions: whose identities are we talking about? And what do literacies mean? shifts to: what new literacies emerge? What is produced in the interaction between human and nonhuman? And how do we reconfigure the world? Post-structural and post-human research allows us, as researchers, to consider theories and concepts as methods where non-human forces become equal to human components. The authors suggest that the focus should be on how the processes and ways of multimodal literacies come into being. It makes for research that is un-boring and outside the boundaries of human ontologies.

Chapter 8, by Rowsell and Gallagher, uses Actor Network Theory (ANT) to describe the interaction between ideologies, discourses and epistemologies in the classroom setting. They mainly focus on the use of digital tablets in three contexts globally. Exploring language through the lenses of receptive and expressive networks shows that ANT is an appropriate approach to viewing learners' activities in local and global contexts as it shows how both objects, such as touch tablets, and humans are closely intertwined.

**Conclusion**

Despite such inclusive and much-needed research in both of these volumes, there is evidence to suggest that practices in schools, universities and communities continue to marginalise non-dominant peoples and dismiss transcultural literacies across place and via objects. These resources can assist researchers and educators to better understand both literacies and languages as mobile and placed resources as well as those that can transcend cultural boundaries. Such research has the potential to assist in improving educational outcomes for marginalised communities as well as young people who choose to engage with rich and diverse literate practices in various locations globally.

The diversity and sweep of all of the contributions in Nichols and Snowden’s (2017) *Languages and Literacies as Mobile and Placed Resources* allow the reader to thoroughly connect with the idea that both language and literacy are indeed mobile and placed resources that are at times static or ever-changing. The knowledge presented in this book should be taken up by educators, researchers and teachers to best support their students.

In Zaidi and Roswell’s (2017) *Literacy Lives in Transcultural Times*, the editors begin the text by firstly exploring the concept of cosmopolitan learning, stating that it depends on a "pedagogically open framework that explores the dynamics of cultural interactions" (p. 3). It is undeniable that due to transnational movement of people across the world such ‘cultural interactions' will increase. It is therefore vital, as Zaidi and Rowsell profess, that minoritised voices are given power through effective research.

Even though a number of rich studies amid a range of contexts are explored in both books, there is limited information on how educators can lead change in literacy related to people, place and objects. Without specific strategies for teachers to enact such change pedagogy may remain teacher-driven and controlled, mono-cultural, and continue to focus on narrow views of literacy and culture. We are living in diverse environments that shift in exciting ways. If we continue to value limited and dominant west-centric approaches to literacy development student voice will consistently be silenced. It is therefore recommended that more robust, culturally-appropriate and ‘transcendent’ pedagogical strategies are offered that teachers and educators can quickly ‘take-up’ in practice. These practices should privilege students’ experiences and knowledge.

With an exponential increase in the ways in which we communicate across time and space, due to technologies, modalities and socio-cultural artefacts it is critical that we effectively embed these diverse ways of making meaning in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting in our institutionalised settings. These books suggest that we may be some way off in doing so, but the potential in Artificial Intelligence developments and post-humanist practices will force us to embrace such literacies and languages.

In the least, however, these books offer some food for thought that can ultimately enable us to finally consider how to transcend the notions of multi-culturalism/literacies and instead embrace the world how it truly is and has been for some time – one world with colourful ways of making meaning now and in the future.

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