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Review of

De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement

By Amélie Lemieux

Reviewer: Jason D. DeHart

Appalachian State University, Boone, NC



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An Overview of the Text

In *De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement*, researcher Amélie Lemieux offers an exploration of the elasticity of literacy practice, moving from traditionally imposed concepts of clearly delineated practices to the less-constrained conceptualizations of visual and textual representations of experience. This move stems from a focus not just on students themselves, but “on their interactions with the world, the objects, the digital, their environment, and their inner and outer circles” (p. 2).

Of chief importance in this project, Lemieux includes examples of their own multimodal reactions and reflections to lived experiences, situates the tenets of the book philosophically in the context of literacy research, and includes participant voice to anchor the work concretely. This thoughtful presentation, through a variety of artifacts, has resulted in a noteworthy text. Though the audience may best include other researchers, the practical applications of this work would serve well to challenge practicing educators. This review will examine the book chapter by chapter.

Summaries of Chapters/Section

Lemieux divides the text into five chapters, beginning with an exploration of phenomenological hermeneutics in relation to the literacy field. The author explores the notion of students as “whole,” in relationship to the world around them (p. 2), and notes current work in the field from scholars like Cassie Brownell and Jon Wargo. The ways that students interact with reading and writing processes, make sense of the world and represent their sense-making, serves as a timely position as education taken place in virtual and hybridized

environments in the 2020-2021 academic year. Lemieux notes the relational nature of text, and does so from the methodological vantage of phenomenological hermeneutics. This approach is well-suited for examining the relationship of literacy, and captured in the ways that students create and relate, in the present context. Moreover, the stance is both revelatory and prescient at points and turns that will be explored as future sections in the book are expounded on. The role of reader and writer as creator across a variety of media is not only described but embodied by the author as Lemieux demonstrates journey and experience through photographs and verse. This work is offered from the framework of a “literacy researcher who is interested in multimodality and the arts” (p. 13).

Moving from this ekphrastic introductory chapter, the author further pushes back on a fixed understanding of reading in chapter two. Lemieux attempts to de/construct reading engagement, drawing from Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow, as well as Rosenblatt’s often-cited notion of efferent and aesthetic reading. Again, working in a timely fashion that pierces the current rhetoric of division, Lemieux contends that there are empathetic possibilities for literacy practices. From this concept of possibility, the author then moves to explore the ways in which, as well as the conditions in which, students are engaged in literacy. Lemieux follows this chapter by illustrating reading engagement and roots the discussion of engagement in a multifaceted heuristic of what aesthetic and efferent experiences mean. The author presents this information in the context of high-stakes assessment and makes the case for the importance of authentic engagement in this context. To capture this context and represent its dimensions, Lemieux makes use of aesthetigrams, which are defined as “phenomenologically grounded maps that describe the moment-by-moment lived experiences and reactions of humans reading,

making, viewing, and interacting with artworks” (p. 67).

In chapter four, Lemieux traces student engagement across specific examples of research participants. Aesthetigrams add a visual dimension to these descriptions, acting in a multimodal fashion that stems meaningfully once more from the theoretical foundations of the book. By including these researched portraits, the author takes the work from the conceptual to the personal and gives voices and names to the concepts that are presented in the first three chapters. As a brief example to offer here, the words of one participant (Simon) capture their experience with reading engagement: “I start by being indifferent, I told myself that it was just a book. Then, I enjoyed the poetic style and I started understanding the meaning of the words. This is when I had my first emotion” (p. 85). By including such discussion, Lemieux moves the conversation into a new direction and includes other “I” perspectives in the work beyond the author’s thinking. The use of text and image traces the path of the readers through experiences with text, and includes their commentary. Additional renderings of literacy experience include participant-created drawings, as well as ekphrastic responses, in this section of the book.

In the final chapter, Lemieux explores community-oriented literacies, drawing on the work of Kathy Mills (2015). The inclusion of images taken with an iPhone camera both theoretically and aesthetically act as a bookend for the text, calling to mind the initial presentation of these ideas in the introduction and first chapter. This conclusion to the book includes a presentation of notions of the material in literacy education, including physical spaces and printed matter. Lemieux presents their own experience again visually and ekphrastically to

challenge the reader to think about the dynamic of constrained and expanded conceptualizations of reading engagement, creativity, and literacy practice.

Reflection/Critique

The author immediately positions the work in relationship to the literacy field by drawing on their epistemological foundations, as well as clearly stating questions of both methodological stance and educational research context. As suggested earlier, this exploration of literacy is both timely and relevant, and serves to challenge traditional, delineated views of literacy practices, often domesticated and tamed for the ease of aligning with a curricular standard. Lemieux makes the case, and adds to the ongoing conversation that literacies are not so “immaculate” (p. 2). This clear language and strong foundation at the outset of the volume helps to convey the author’s intentions and philosophical trajectory.

The book contains a multitude of textual examples to support the author’s framework, both from students and from the author themselves. The exploration of conditions of engagement is particularly well-suited for discussions with pre-service and in-service teachers, building the pragmatic application of the rich theory that is presented in this text. While deeply philosophical, Lemieux’s work is rooted in reflection on practice, as well as work with students. The author speaks to those exploring reading engagement and literacy practice from a research perspective, as well as those who deal with the material representations of such entanglement, including questions of power, identity, and privilege, with students in classrooms on a daily basis. The work, then, is wholly accessible

with focus on pedagogical tools, while also theoretically-woven. The implications of this work call for considered thought for educators, researchers, and policymakers concerning the role of reading engagement, creativity and innovation, and aesthetic literacy experience in a context that can often be reductive and highly controlled.

The use of voice and image from readers in later chapters presents a model for documenting and analyzing engagement, and demonstrates the further research-based practice of the author, beyond the descriptions that they offer in the initial chapters. It is a sense of presentation and then

application that unfolds throughout the text. By organizing the work this way, Lemieux makes a well-developed forward movement, drawing on prior work with New Literacies and multimodality, into the theoretical and practical space for what literacy means in our current context. Though this work may not fully render all avenues of literacy experience in the current pandemic age, or the hopeful post-pandemic period, Lemieux makes a relevant and revelatory contribution to the discussion as researchers and educators struggle to make sense of the ever-changing reality of socially-constructed reading and writing practices in deictic environments.

References

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