

ENACTING ADOLESCENT LITERACIES ACROSS COMMUNITIES: LATINO/A SCRIBES AND THEIR RITES.

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How can teachers tap into the rich cultural, linguistic, and experiential assets of their adolescent students to help them become engaged writers? In *Enacting Adolescent Literacies Across Communities: Latino/a Scribes and Their Rites*, R. Joseph Rodríguez provides multiple answers to this question by sharing insights gained from a number of research studies he conducted in several Texas communities. One of his main objectives was to challenge the notion that adolescents, especially Latinx young people, are disinterested in or incapable of participating actively in literacy activities. To do this, he had to find what he calls “spaces often overlooked or misunderstood (or both)” (p. xviii). These spaces included school and out-of-school settings in which literacy came alive for the students, teachers, families, and librarians he studied.

Part odyssey, part reflection, part ethnography, this book honors young people who are often invisible in texts that focus on literacy, specifically on writing. Joseph was one of these young people living in similar circumstances: a young Latino who had a hard time finding himself in books, in history, and in writing assignments. He includes his own literacy autobiography in these pages, no doubt giving voice to the experiences of many other Latinx and other young people of nondominant backgrounds. Though he had been an avid reader, until he came across texts that included him and his peers, he had felt as if he didn’t belong. As he recounts, it was when he met a real-life Mexican American researcher – in this case, Angela Valenzuela – who went to his high school to solicit students’ ideas and perceptions for a research project she was initiating, that he decided that teaching, research, ethnography, and an academic life were, in fact, possible. In the intervening years, he became a high school teacher and, later, an academic, primarily in service to his beloved Latinx community but also with a commitment to other disenfranchised communities. His passion to research and document the lives of young writers, and to help others understand what it means to support them, shines throughout this book.

Using a theoretical lens influenced by critical literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogies, Rodríguez makes a strong case for literacy directly connected to Latinx identity. But it is not only identity that features prominently in this book, it is also a concern for broader social issues that affect the lives of young writers, often in negative ways, and how to motivate youth to advocate for change. He pays particular attention to problem-solving literacy activities in which young people learn to understand issues such as audience, culture, identity, purpose, power, and society. The final chapter presents a moving example of student advocacy: The Reading Ravens, a self-selected and self-motivated group of high school students who not only read for pleasure, but also focus their efforts on planning community literacy programs to benefit children and families in their communities.

Enacting Adolescent Literacies Across Communities: Latino/a Scribes and Their Rites includes accounts of research in secondary schools in diverse geographic areas of Texas (urban, rural, suburban, and a state university) over four years. A comprehensive ethnographic account, the book is based on the author’s field notes, assignments completed by the students in each setting, and literacy events. In these research projects, Rodríguez addressed two major questions:

1. What does the teaching of diverse literacies (e.g., cultural, disciplinary, linguistic, and social) to bilingual, bicultural students involve for teachers and communities?
2. How do students, teachers, and librarians enact adolescent and multimodal literacies in and out of school?

With six chapters and a conclusion, the book documents what the author calls the “literacy habits” of students as well as the lessons created by caring and competent teachers and librarians. In Chapter 2, for instance, he highlights Mr. Guerra, a history teacher at Milagros High School (all the names are pseudonyms). Teaching media and social media literacy as well as document analysis, Mr. Guerra encouraged his students to question how history is told in their textbooks. At the same time, he taught them to question decisions made about their school and out-of-school lives that do not always take students’ perspectives seriously. Using Twitter and hashtags, Mr. Guerra made history and social justice come alive for his students. No longer did they complain about history being “boring” or “useless.” On the contrary, the students got to see how significant it was, both in their texts and in how they were changing history as they were actually living it.

In Chapter 3, Rodríguez describes how the librarian at Guadalupe Middle School, Ms. Garofalo, showcased the school’s students by providing them with books reflecting their identities, as well as by displaying motivational posters, poetry, and other features found in most libraries. But she also demonstrated her care by the attentiveness and hard work she put into her lessons. As Rodríguez writes, “Ms. Garofalo’s planned lessons engaged the students from the beginning as if she were a master of setting the stage with an anticipatory set or hook” (p. 34).

In his own college classroom, Rodríguez examines how his students, all preservice literacy teachers, presented their writing beliefs while participating in an undergraduate seminar. Using a document that outlines 21st century skills necessary for college readiness and success, he investigated how the preservice teachers learned writing in their own schooling. The preservice teachers revealed that they had never observed their own teachers as writers, editors, or researchers. Instead, in interviews, they “recalled their secondary schooling dominated by authority, control, and compliance” (p. 63). Sadly, as the students in most of the other research studies in the book claimed, unimaginative and irrelevant literacy experiences in their previous schooling also held true for them. This leads me to the conclusion that literacy teachers – and all teachers —are literacy teachers in that they use language to teach whatever subject matter they happen to teach. As such, they need to first unlearn and then relearn what it means to be literate and how to approach literacy with creativity and critique– an important message for teacher educators.

Rather than “findings,” the conclusion presents five core principles and “ethnographic realizations” that would be beneficial for all teachers to reflect on:

1. The enactment of adolescent literacy is connected to democracy and its manifestations.
2. Literacy and literacy events can be cultivated through a scribal identity.
3. Adolescents seek ways to practice literacies that favor social, personal, and disciplinary interests.
4. The elements of literacy appear in and out of the classroom and reveal adolescents’ decision-making, meaning-making, and linguistic wealth.
5. Cultural knowledge is interconnected to language arts, literary engagement, and scribal identities (pp. 98-99).

Because these are significant lessons for practicing literacy teachers, preservice teachers, and action researchers working with students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the book would be a good choice for courses in literacy, foundations of education, and diversity.

Poetic and evocative, yet scholarly and research-based, in the end, this is a book about language and identity, power, self-confidence, and self-determination. It challenges stubbornly held deficit-based approaches to teaching and learning – especially literacy approaches with diverse populations – that are unfortunately still evident in too many schools and teacher education programs. As Rodríguez concludes, “Literacy in action is synonymous with advocacy work” (p. 100). I would extend that sentiment and say, as I often do, that teaching itself is advocacy work.

References:

Rodríguez, R. J. (2016). Enacting Adolescent Literacies across Communities: Latino/a Scribes and Their Rites. Lexington Books.

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