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Comments
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Everyday Literacies: Students, Discourse, and Social Practice. Michele Knobel. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1999. 275 pp.

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Everyday Literacies presents case studies of four young Australian adolescents, focusing on their literacy practices both inside and outside of school. Michele Knobel uses these case studies to explore the relationship between school learning and students' everyday lives. She also uses her research to point out problems with contemporary educational reform movements, and she provides some concrete suggestions for improving classroom practice.

The book makes two compelling points. First, Knobel follows Colin Lankshear (*Changing Literacies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Allan Luke ("The Body Literate," *Linguistics and Education* 4:107–129, 1992), Brian Street (*Literacy in Theory and Practice*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and others in criticizing the popular view of literacy as a set of decontextualized skills. Such a view fails to see that literacy "skills" are both multiple and inextricably woven into social contexts and activities. Educational reforms that promise to empower all children by giving them fixed skills and knowledge are naive, in Knobel's view. People are literate in different ways within different types of socioculturally located activities, and we can only understand how people learn to perform in literate ways if we understand these varied sociocultural contexts and activities. Knobel illustrates this first point by describing the socioculturally embedded literate activities that each of her four case study subjects participate in. Second, Knobel goes beyond "difference" or "mismatch" theories of school failure and offers a "hybrid" account of cultural and individual differences. She gives detailed descriptions of the multiple literate identities that the four subjects enact. These descriptions of multiplicity represent the strongest part of the book.

Knobel describes her methodology as an "ethnographic multiple case-study design." She spent two intensive weeks observing each of the four subjects. From an anthropological point of view, these data do not suffice to give a rich and warranted description of the cultural activities that Knobel's subjects participate in. Her narrative accounts are engaging, in part because of her own cultural familiarity with the settings she describes, but I am not convinced that we can draw empirically warranted conclusions about cultural activities based on such limited data. Knobel also claims to combine a microanalytic approach to discourse analysis with a more macroanalytic approach to social forces and cultural practices. While I find this an admirable goal, she does not give sufficient evidence of her microanalytic analyses to make the reader believe her conclusions about students' actual practices. She gives convincing narrative descriptions of how the four students positioned and identified themselves in habitual practices. But without any detailed evidence showing how she arrived at these conclusions, the reader has to take her conclusions on faith.

Conceptually, aside from the two compelling points mentioned above, the book raises several interesting and important questions—for example, about the types of literacy appropriate for globalized society, about the type of validity one should strive for in a postmodern science, and so on. But the book does not address these questions systematically. In the first two paragraphs of the book, for instance, Knobel describes seven aspects of contemporary capitalist societies: the growing multiplicity of identities and roles; the globalization of marketplaces; increasing control by multinational corporations; the shift from assembly-line to more flexible commodities; the fact of social classes, as shown by the existence of workers who cannot afford the products they help manufacture; the increased contact among linguistic and cultural groups; and the expanding access to information worldwide. These are all important developments ripe for analytic attention, and Knobel does address a couple of them later in the book. But she offers no analysis of how they might interrelate or of how her data might speak to them in a systematic way. More than once, this pattern of raising but not analyzing important issues obscures the important points and interesting data that is presented.

Despite these empirical and conceptual shortcomings, however, Knobel does succeed in reaching her main goals. She explicitly does not intend to provide a definitive study of literacy practices but, instead, wants to provide researchers and practitioners with "tools to think with." She succeeds in making her two compelling points about literacy as a matter of sociocultural practices and about the multiple literate identities that individuals have, and she illustrates these points with engaging narratives of four young adolescents.

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