

Bourdieu in Educational Research



Language and Literacy Learning
October 2020

 @AERABourdieuSIG

Sarah Galloway

Structural Inequalities and Adult Literacies Education

My research has developed through critical engagement with Bourdieu's scholarship. I was aware of Bourdieu's broad influence on research encompassing literacies learning, particularly for those accounting for contexts of power in education specifically James Paul Gee (1991) and Shirley Bryce Heath (1983). More recently, Bourdieu's work is revealed in practical approaches to adult literacies education, placing emphasis on the development of students' linguistic and discursive practices (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015, pp. 108-111; Grenfell et al., 2012, p. 68; Janks, 2010). My perception of the broad-reaching application of Bourdieu's theory motivated me to engage with his work.

My initial reading of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Culture and Society* was a critical one. I critiqued the broad concepts of symbolic violence, habitus and capital reproduction by placing these in dialogue with concepts of equality found within the seminal works of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) and Jacque Rancière (*The Ignorant School Master*) (see Galloway, 2015; 2019).

In line with many others, my own reading suggests that Bourdieu's theory of power reproduction in education points towards the impossibility of escaping from structural inequalities and existing power hierarchies. However, researchers of adult literacies learning have offered educational alternatives informed by Bourdieu's analyses. I would summarise these alternatives as adult learning understood to build social capital or encourage positive identity formation. To put it another way, it is education that takes power into account. Indeed, it has been argued that: 'literacy [education] that obscures the power relationships inscribed in its construction ultimately disempowers' (Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett; 2003, p. 3). In practical terms, this is literacy learning where teachers might encourage students to valorise their vernacular ways of speaking, so that they might express their own self-narratives and reclaim these as stories of success (e.g. Grenfell et al., 2012). Social and cultural capital might be gained through the telling of learners' stories and the connections made with audiences and peers. The role of the educator might include intervening to make students more aware of and therefore more able to value their existing literate practices.

“Social and cultural capital might be gained through the telling of learner’s stories and the connections made with audiences and peers. The role of the educator might include intervening to make students more aware of and therefore more able to value their existing literate practices.”

Implied approaches to teaching (e.g. Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015, pp. 108-111; Grenfell et al., 2012; Janks, 2010) are drawn out from empirical research incorporating ethnographic methods. Indeed, it is suggested that teachers might adopt ethnographic methods to gain insights into their students' valuable everyday literacy practices, or encourage students to undertake this type of research themselves. The idea is that the students' literate practices, as revealed, might be drawn upon as productive resources serving to empower them, where their existing literate practices are valued rather than judged (Street, 2012, pp. 75-77). It follows that categorisations of literate and illiterate might be refused by teachers and students as the whole spectrum of literate practices are afforded value (Street, 2012, p. 77).

Whilst the above approaches are helpful in countering instrumental teaching and learning geared towards narrow and instrumental aims (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2015), there are also constraints. The implicit assumption, which can be traced to Bourdieu's influence, is that learners may not be capable of understanding the power of their own evolving discourses without the assistance of an educator. The empowering teacher is accorded the privileged role of an orchestrator (e.g. Bourdieu, 1988) who might make judgements about which discourses are desirable and therefore to be encouraged. It is in this sense, the replication of power remains inescapable.

The above critique of Bourdieu's work has been expressed forcefully (e.g. Ross, 1991) and has drawn me towards revisiting principles of adult education, orientated traditionally towards exploring the meaning of equality in education. This represents a move away from explaining inequality in education in terms of power, discourse, identity and symbolic violence, as conceptualised by Bourdieu. Instead, equality is explored as the enactment of educational relationships, between educator and student, orientated towards human attributes of love, trust, hope and generosity (see Guillherme, 2019; Williams, 1993).

“...equality is explored as the enactment of educational relationships between educator and student, oriented towards human attributes of love, trust, hope and generosity.”

For me, this reorientation is important and urgent whilst we struggle towards educational responses to current political, environmental, and economic crises, as expressed, for example, in the work of Cowden & Ridley (2019) and Wildemeerch (2014). Here there has been some grappling with the question of who, in society, gets to speak and to be heard and on what basis. In my own work, I have attempted my own exploration of this question in the context of adult literacies education (Galloway, 2017) and, more recently, in relation to the education of prisoners. I have been informed greatly by the critique of Bourdieu's ideas, some of which I have explained above. I would characterise Bourdieu's influence on my research, not as a rich seam to draw from. Instead, my engagement with his work resembles the act of felling a great tree and gaining strength from the arrogance of doing so.



Dr. Sarah Galloway lectures in Further Education at the University of Stirling in Scotland, UK. She directs the University's Access Programme offering routes to undergraduate studies for adult returning learners. Her theoretical research explores empowerment and emancipation in the contexts of adult literacies and prison education and she is currently researching the impact of economic austerity on adult literacies provisions in Scotland. However, in the current crisis, her central focus is working to secure the continuation of academic programmes geared towards adult learners.

References

- Ade-Ojo G. & Duckworth D. (2015). *Adult literacy policy and practice: From intrinsic values to instrumentalism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillian.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1988). *Homo Academicus* (P. Collier, Trans). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, culture and society* (Nice, R. Trans.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Cowden S. & Ridley D. (eds) '*The practice of equality: Rancière and critical pedagogy*'. Dublin: Peter Lang
- Crowther, J. Hamilton, M. & Tett, L. (Eds.). (2003). *Powerful literacies*, Leicester: NIACE.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Galloway, S. (2019). *Rancière, Freire and critical pedagogy*. Cowden S. & Ridley D. (eds) '*The Practice of Equality: Rancière and Critical Pedagogy*'. Dublin: Peter Lang
- Galloway, S. (2017). Flowers of argument and engagement? Reconsidering critical perspectives on adult education and literate practices, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*.
- Galloway, S. (2015). What's missing when empowerment is a purpose for adult literacies education? Bourdieu, Gee and the problem of accounting for power. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, (47)1, 49-63
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology and discourse*, London: Falmer Press.
- Grenfell, M., Bloome, D., Hardy, C., Pahl, K., Rowsell, J., & Street, B. (Eds.) (2012) *Language and ethnography, and education: Bridging new literacies studies and Bourdieu*, London: Routledge.
- Guillherme, A. (2019), *Ilan Gur-Ze'ev and Education: Pedagogies of transformation and peace*, London: Taylor & Francis
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Janks, H. (2010). *Literacies and power*. New York: Routledge.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (Ross, K. Trans.). Stanford California: Stanford University Press
- Ross, (1991), Introduction. Rancière, J. *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (Ross, K. Trans.). Stanford California: Stanford University Press
- Street, B. (2012). LETTER: Learning for empowerment through training in ethnographic-style research. In M.Grenfell, D. Bloome, C. Hardy, K. Pahl, J. Rowsell & B. Street (Eds.), *Language and ethnography and education: Bridging new literacies studies and Bourdieu*, London: Routledge.
- Wildemeersch, D. (2014). Adult and community education in complex societies: reconsidering critical perspectives. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 33(6), 821-831.
- Williams, R. (1993). "Culture is Ordinary" In Westwood, S. And McIlroy, J. (Eds.) *Border Country: Raymond Williams and Adult Education* (pp. 89-102). University of Leicester: NIACE.

