

Bourdieu in Educational Research



Language and Literacy Learning
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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 Jacques 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.

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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).

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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 Wildemeersch (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.



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