

Review of *Literacy as Conversation: Learning Networks in Urban and Rural Communities*

By Eli Goldblatt and David A. Joliffe, 2020. University of Pittsburgh Press. [ISBN: 978-0-82294-624-3. 228 pages.]

Reviewed by Angel Evans, The Ohio State University

Literacy as Conversation: Learning Networks in Urban and Rural Communities is a narrative of literacy in out-of-school contexts: after-school initiatives, community arts centers, urban farms, theatre, and healthcare. The authors, Eli Goldblatt and David Joliffe, converse across their respective geographic locations—Goldblatt describing his work with literacy-implicated programs in an urban setting, Philadelphia, and Joliffe sharing about his related work in rural Arkansas. Both scholars bring attention to literacy as not merely involving skills of reading and writing that one has. Rather, Goldblatt and Joliffe articulate literacy as “embedded in ongoing conversations that enable people to *do* things to make their worlds better” (p. 7, emphasis in original). This is the essence of literacy as conversation.

The authors’ definition of literacy involves an audience of all people, not only those in writing studies and academia, but also K-12 education, non-profit work, government administration, policymaking, and everyday folk living in communities. Beyond the academy, Goldblatt and Joliffe ask us to consider the meaning of literacy-as-action in everyday life, arguing that the role of learning networks is a central answer to this question. The authors’ concept of learning networks is strongly informed by Deborah Brandt’s concept of literacy sponsorship, which she defines as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach and model as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (Brandt, 1998, p. 166). Learning networks represent the wide range of possibilities for literacy-as-action. This concept functions as a key entry point for understanding community inter(action) throughout the text, a point to which I will return a bit later in this review.

Concerning methodological approach, Goldblatt and Joliffe traverse findings from interviews with each other and their own lived experience. They decidedly write what they call “honest-to-goodness essays” in the spirit of Michel de Montaigne’s *essais*—a discursive exploration that invites the reader “to participate in the mind’s *ongoing thinking*, not its completed *having thought*” (p. 6, emphasis in original). The book, then, is unabashedly personal—merging academic prose with intimate reflection. For example, in “How to Read This Book and Why,” Joliffe describes the importance of the first-person pronoun I in asserting knowledge. Even so, the authors clearly situate themselves in the knowledge-making traditions of their long-standing research on community literacy and public rhetorics. Qualitative data from their previous work, such as Goldblatt’s New City Writing housed at Temple University and Joliffe’s Arkansas Delta Oral History Project, seamlessly inform the book’s narrative structure.

Across the Disciplines

A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing
10.37514/ATD-J.2022.19.3-4.09

wac.colostate.edu/atd

ISSN 554-8244

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The book is divided into three parts. Part I: “Introducing Our Terms,” Part II: “Learning Networks in Philadelphia” written by Goldblatt, and Part III: “Learning Networks in Arkansas” written by Joliffe. In each section, conversation works as a central metaphor that rhetorically undergirds the authors’ discussion of literacy and community. Goldblatt asserts that “literacy is generated within the dialectic between the group and the individual—on the one hand, the broad socialness of language habits, dialect, national history and, on the other, the private intimacy of writing” (p. 13). This sets up the book’s conversational approach as an inherently rhetorical one—that is, an attempt to make meaning out of the contrasting elements of language. The conclusion, “Constructing Hope through Conversation,” offers a final consideration between the authors on the future of urban and rural literacy-as-conversation.

Part I (Chapters 1–4), “Introducing Our Terms,” reveals three conceptual focal points: communities, learning networks, and literacy. Communities, the authors argue, are based on activities that bring people into collaboration, even people who don’t always see themselves as a social unit (p. 7). The authors emphasize learning networks as “the web of public institutions, nonprofit organizations, and neighborhood centers that regularly sponsor activities in which people learn literacy through action (and) human interaction” (p. 8). Finally, literacy is a dynamic mode of social action. Within this conceptual array, Goldblatt describes his vision for the LEARN (Literacy Education Audit of Resources and Needs) model which seeks to address the issues and bolster the strengths of literacy education in a community by all available means (p. 11). This non-formal, DIY model informs the authors’ approaches to literacy needs in Philadelphia and Arkansas. For example, Goldblatt applies LEARN to identify under-valued projects in the city and amplify their work, and Joliffe uses the model to build healthcare self-advocacy partnerships with economically marginalized communities. In both cases, literacy operates as a primary means of community action and conversation. Part I concludes with the authors conversing about their own attitudes and positionalities in literacy education, particularly given their work with multicultural and multiracial communities (p. 45).

Part II (Chapters 5–7), “Learning Networks in Philadelphia,” continues the conversation of literacy in urban environments. Chapter 5 begins with the story of Tree House Books, a non-profit neighborhood literacy center that Goldblatt helped launch in 2005. Amidst the bright-eyed youth coming in after school, college student volunteers, and passionate staff, Tree House represented the typical struggles of literacy education and nonprofit life—including the fight for financial resources, staff stress, and locating consistent support. Despite these struggles, Goldblatt concludes that the non-profit underscored the value of “a branching and constantly extending network rather than a closed institutionalized system” for the purposes of urban literacy (p. 77). Chapter 6 explores Philadelphia’s rich tradition of community art as a form of literate action, from establishments such as Fleisher Art Memorial and Settlement Music that have survived over 100 years to the Village of Arts and Humanities founded in 1986 (p. 89). Chapter 7 considers an urban farm as a metaphor for language development, representing how learning networks can transform regional literacy in creative, unexpected ways (p. 126). Throughout the three chapters, Goldblatt continues to thread the argument of learning networks—often public, distributed, in flux, and highly adaptive—as key forms of literacy sponsorship.

Part III (Chapters 8–9), “Learning Networks in Arkansas,” furthers this argument in the context of a rural environment. Chapter 8 engages the relationship of literacy and the work of ARCare, an operation of thirty clinics that centers health and education in the regions surrounding Augusta, Arkansas. ARCare’s Augusta Recovery Initiative, with its highly localized network of town leaders, businesspeople, teachers, students, and parents from Augusta High School, served as a key example of community health and literacy. Given this example, Joliffe asserts that community health includes “literacy as action, literacy as doing, come to life” (p. 145). Similarly, Chapter 9 considers theatrical performance as literate doing. Twelve students from small rural high schools in central Arkansas—

Latinx, African-American, and White—“came to write—and then to perform” (p. 146). With their words, the students used performative literacies to create a world of their own, or what Joliffe calls, “a world of the word” (p. 149). Joliffe maintains that reading and writing dramatic texts, such as plays and poetry, calls for a distinct form of literacy-as-action. Participants must actively construct the dramatic situation as it unfolds, as demonstrated by the student actors. Between both chapters, Joliffe firmly situates literacy as a networked practice—an act of local construction and discursive world-building.

Literacy as Conversation successfully engages the rhetorical work of uncovering “the world of the word”—that layered continuum of social interactions taking shape wherever written symbols are present. Indeed, Goldblatt and Joliffe establish the shape of this world within Philadelphia and Arkansas respectively. Though the two scholars are framed as having a conversation between urban and rural literacies, one critique is the lack of back-and-forth dialogue between their two respective contexts. The chapters are primarily grouped into context 1 (Philadelphia) and context 2 (Arkansas), yet it would have been insightful to inquire of both within each chapter. There is a move toward doing so in the conclusion, where Goldblatt and Joliffe revisit the LEARN model to comparatively discuss the literacy environments of Philadelphia and Arkansas. Additionally, the two authors admit wanting to avoid making direct comparisons between urban and rural contexts prior to their conclusion. However, more of this back-and-forth consideration—even in the earlier chapters—may have added an interesting conversational thread. This thread would have further engaged the authors’ argument toward literacy-as-action and the role of geographic space/place, thus heightening the attention to sharp questions that the text raises: how does literacy-as-action differ across geographic space/place? And how might a sensitivity to these differences impact our future work?

Spatial conditions largely determine the acts of literacy we engage in. The authors signal this argument by noting how learning networks operate as dynamic webs of public interaction. Joliffe speaks of locals traveling four hours from Augusta to Fayetteville to see a community member’s performance. Despite the spatial distance, the rural network in question remains highly interconnected. On the other hand, Goldblatt tells us about North Philadelphia, where ethnically diverse Black and Brown neighborhoods are across the street from a large, predominantly White university. Despite the spatial proximity, network interconnectedness only manifests when it is actively pursued by interested agents. Had Goldblatt and Joliffe merged their discussion of such differences in one chapter, perhaps these nuances in network would have become even more visible. Beyond difference, a more blended conversation may have resulted in other discoveries of common ground. Back and forth—from traveling between towns to transferring between metro stations or living near a farm to visiting one near a city parking lot—we might further consider how these space/place relationships generate unique literate impulses and needs.

Ultimately, *Literacy as Conversation* presents a nuanced understanding of geographic location, learning networks, and the role of literacy. The text is inviting and reflective, reading in some ways like an autoethnographic inquiry with strong attention to local context. Scholars in writing studies who are interested in community literacies, public rhetorics, and social action will most likely find value in this book. The text also renders value to individuals and entities more broadly interested in how literacy can impact all sectors of community life: from small non-profits to large-scale medical clinics. *Literacy as Conversation* offers widespread disciplinary application. It extends a warm hand to anyone in the world of literacy and asks those who accept to do something in this world, in school spaces and beyond.

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Complete APA Citation

Evans, Angel. (2022, December 30). [Review of the book *Literacy as conversation*, by Eli Goldblatt & David A. Jolliffe]. *Across the Disciplines*, 19(3/4), 290-293. <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2022.19.3-4.09>