

Reflexive Practice as an Answer to the “One/Many Question” in Literacy Education

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Abstract ID: 290

Event: Linguistics 2026 Paris

Subject: 21. Language education

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Abstract

Literacy educators routinely find themselves forced to choose between two ideological framings of literacy. Do they choose to teach literacy understood as an important and shared competency that society, mainly through schooling, provides to its citizens. Or do they choose literacies understood as social practices always contextually situated and associated with individually meaningful and everyday life-worlds. Gee refers to this as the “one/many question” (Gee, 2015).

I offer educators a third choice, an alternative ideological framing. The alternative posits both literacy and literacies as open and emergent semiotic systems, soft-assembled through the actions of individual agents, supported and facilitated within certain contexts through the available resources and relational interactions with others. The systems, contexts, agents and actions, their resources and relationships all serve projects.

Literacy and literacies are both understood as social interactions, context-bound, purposeful, developmental and emergent. This understanding of literacy is not new, although it has not been fully developed. It is anticipated by Barton (1994 / 2007) when he proposes an “ecological approach.” It is anticipated by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) and by “The ‘Five Graces Group’” (2009) when they propose that language be understood as a “*complex adaptive system*” (CAS). However, what this alternative ideological framing does is collapse literacy and literacies together (hereafter literacy/ies).

If literacy/ies are as I describe, then all must have affordances and constraints associated with local contexts, actors, available resources and interactions within those contexts, a range of possible trajectories for development, and the potential for new literacy/ies to emerge. The goal then for literacy educators is to teach literacy/ies as open semiotic systems attending to all the above. They can do this by teaching reflexive practice.

Reflexive practice is the ability to use language and/or literacy/ies to reflect on language and/or literacy/ies use. Reflexive practice occurs “naturally.” We witness it every time someone uses language or literacy/ies, for example, to report on or to evaluate, praise or criticize, someone else’s or their own language or literacy/ies use. However, the real significance of reflexive practice is that those practices can be transformative. How?

Reflexive practice is what makes language and/or literacy/ies powerful instruments for doing work by helping us to understand context, act as agents, use resources and relationships, all in service of projects.

In my paper/presentation, I develop the alternative framing of literacy/ies as open and emergent semiotic systems. I offer a process whereby teachers and students together can become reconstructive researchers of literacy/ies. That process involves three stages: 1) a description of literacy/ies cases with a focus on difference; 2) a description of the resources and relationships within and across cases with a focus on generative mechanisms; and 3) a description of agency or literacy/ies as socially meaningful and organized ways for doing work. I conclude by dismissing the debate between literacy and literacies as unproductive and offer a way for teachers and students to develop an appreciation for the efficacy of reflexive practice.