
In a carefully organized and coherently argued book, Bloome et al. explicate an approach to discourse analysis of classroom language and literacy events that they call microethnographic; an approach that foregrounds “the daily life of teachers and students in classrooms” (xvi). The authors insist they do not view the daily lives of teachers and students as essentialized or homogenized; but rather view the classroom as a complex network of student/teacher creations, re-creations, adoptions, and adaptations, all of which engage the students and teacher in dialectical relationships involving language and literacy. For these authors, people are “active agents in and on the worlds in which they live. . . not dependent variables” (p. 5). Through action and reaction, people create situations. The book provides a comprehensive articulation of a sociolinguistic approach to classroom discourse analysis that will be an important resource for language and literacy researchers.

Complex research tools are often presented in ways that are difficult to interpret. A strength of this book is the clear definitional work done throughout. Bloome et al. initiate the reader with a chapter that demystifies the constructs of microethnographic analysis for novice and seasoned researcher alike. Chapter 1 situates their work historically and theoretically, and through doing so, provides the reader with the methodological warrant for the discourse analysis framework that follows. Five theoretical tools for microethnographic analysis (contextualization cues, boundary making, turn-taking, negotiating thematic coherence, and intertextuality) are discussed in depth using data-rich illustrations, serving both to clarify the authors’ use of the tools and to explain the vocabulary of the analysis. Analysis is situated in the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences, which for the authors, “is closely related to the intellectual and political concerns with how people and institutions use language within everyday life to exert power and control on the one hand and to engage in resistance, creativity, agency, and caring relations on the other hand” (p. 47). Situating their analysis in the language used by both teachers and students as well as in the research process (including the writing of the research) enables the authors to ask who is doing what to whom, where and how through the use of language and literacy in the classroom, questions that are iterated through the succeeding chapters.

The next three chapters of the book examine the cultural practices, social identity work, and power relations immanent in classroom language and literacy events, respectively. In all three cases, the authors articulate definitions (cultural practices, social identity, and power relations), use (or non-use) of the theoretical tools mentioned above, as well as theoretical and methodological issues central to each of the research agendas. Transcripts from videotapes of classes (a Grade 7 Language Arts class in both Chapters 2 and 4; a Kindergarten storytelling and a Grade 6 Social Studies/Language Arts class in Chapter 3; and a Grade 6 Social Studies class in Chapter 4), as well as detailed, multi-level analysis and discussion of the transcripts are found in each chapter. The complexity and depth of the analyses reported by the authors in each chapter offers a rigourous model of language research. They do not merely examine, for instance, static notions of cultural practices, but rather scrutinize how classroom language and literacy events are part of a process of “continuity and change over time and place” (p. 99).

Briefly, by way of illustration in the second chapter, Ms. Wilson and her 7th Grade Language Arts class are studying a poem, by first reading it then discussing it. In this regard, they are engaging in an academic discourse practice—the ‘given’ way of examining a poem in the classroom or ‘doing poetry’ from a traditional, school-based perspective of literacy. The particular poem they are studying contains both standard and African American Vernacular English and Wilson uses it as a springboard for discussion of cultural variations in language use—thus causing the students to engage
in reflection of their cultural practices, rather than a skill-based analysis of the poem for rhythm, rhyme, and other poetic devices which form the traditional pedagogical focus of poetry studies. In this way, the authors claim Wilson problematizes the language arts curriculum, moving the locus of knowledge from the curriculum to the students’ lives. This shift from traditional pedagogy to more interactionally situated engagement in poetry exemplifies the notion of language and literacy events contributing to the processes of continuity and change over time and place. As Bloome et al. state, “it is not the location of knowledge per se that constitutes continuity or change in a classroom literacy practice but rather the location of knowledge invoked within an interactional structure” (p. 91, emphasis added). Similarly in the succeeding two chapters, the authors engage in an in-depth analysis eschewing simplistic approaches to the examination of social identity and power relations respectively. In both cases, the authors do recursive analyses, moving back and forth between data and theory, illustrating the ways in which the social dynamics of classroom literacy and language events contribute to the development (or deconstruction) of notions of personhood and institutional identity or serve to create, transform, uphold, or undermine power relations in the classroom.

The final chapter of the book discusses the location of microethnographic discourse analysis of classroom language and literacy events in the broader field of research. The authors make a case for situating their study in multiple locations depending upon the various points of focus (in this case, the broader realms of cultural practice, social identity, and power relations). Of note in this discussion is what the authors term the “research imagination” which for them, “refers both to the process of fashioning research and to an ongoing conversation about how researchers imagine the ‘other’, themselves, and the world in which we all live” (p. 243). Research imagination can be benevolent, as in the case of the development of culturally relevant pedagogies emerging from the ethnographic research of Ladson-Billings (1994) or malevolent, as with Foucault’s (1980) discussion of the brutal treatment of those who deviate from what is considered to be normal. In consideration of their own work, the authors maintain that research imagination transpires as a result of debate and discussion among people, not just researchers, but those researched also.

With this book, Bloome et al., through careful discussion and analysis, illustrate how the theoretical and methodological lenses of discourse analysis serve to extend the fields of literacy studies and educational ethnography in terms of both clarity of terminology and warranted methodology. By clearly tying together theory with methodology, the authors continually question both their roles as researchers and how their research connects epistemologies, people, and language. Extending the theoretical–methodological connection to include current reflections in the field directs the reader’s attention not only to contemporary theories concerning language and literacy events in the classroom, but also to those theories that govern the mode of discourse analysis used, as well as the theories embedded in the classroom literacy events presented and embodied by the participants therein. Juxtaposing these three theoretical constructs with methodology enables the authors to present a robust examination of cultural practices, social identity and power relations in classroom language and literacy events.

Nonetheless, despite the detail and clarity with which these authors present their research, there are some questions that come to mind. The first of these has to do with their choice of focus. Bloome et al. make a distinction between those research agendas focusing on people as captives of literacy practices (institutional literacy practices such as school) and those focusing on people as creators of literacy practices creating (or reproducing) histories and social relationships/identities, claiming that their focus lies in the ‘people as creators’ aspect (p. 6). Given the attention to detail in this book, it is surprising that there seems to be no evident justification for their choice. Why focus there? Why not focus on both the captive and creative aspects and how they are mutually constituted? Specifically in their discussions of social identity formation and power relations, the distinction does not seem to exist. Despite his efforts to not be positioned as a non-learner, Andrew, a Black, male student in the Grade 6 Language Arts/Social Studies class remains a captive of the institutional definition of personhood (p. 157). How might the theoretical and methodological frame articulated in this book help explain this role? Or, to what other frameworks or evidence might researchers looking at similar questions turn? Certainly one book cannot answer all questions. We suggest that this volume is one starting point to look at power relations in classroom interaction, one that provides an important frame of analysis that can inform many.

Combined with a growing corpus of space-related research (Leander, 2002; Sheehy & Leander, 2001; Soja, 1989, 1996), the analysis illustrated in this book would serve a number of purposes. For instance, it would enrich a microanalytic stance on classroom interaction and contribute to researchers’ ability to bridge these microanalyses to a macro-level analysis of social relations and their consequences on literacy. Recent work using spatial theory in education has challenged researchers to rethink the meaning of “face-to-face” interaction. What happens to definitions of interaction that rely exclusively on bounded physical space in light of the complex, authentic, and meaningful interactions in digital
space (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003)? Research on interaction in videoconferences, as another example, has shown how “face-to-face” interaction across cyberspace might build meaningful social relationships and authentic knowledge in ways that are not accounted for in traditional classroom discourse analysis (Larson, 2005; Larson, Gatto, & Perhamus, 2006). Furthermore, the approach described in this book may provide rigorous analytic tools to researchers looking at interaction in digital spaces as well.

To conclude, the authors’ intent in this book is to illustrate a microethnographic approach to discourse analysis from a sociolinguistic perspective that illuminates the complexity and ambiguity of classroom literacy events in terms of cultural practices, issues of social identity, and power relations. Through their examination of who does what with language to whom, when, where, how, with what significance, and for what purpose, this book embodies “thick description in motion” (p. 52) and will be an important contribution to language and literacy research.

References


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