

## The Turtle and the Fish in Latin America

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If you had the opportunity to listen to Brian Street present a talk or read his work, *the turtle and the fish* will strike a familiar chord. Brian Street was an ethnographer, a literacy researcher, and an overall enthusiast about what human beings did and how they made sense of their worlds. He used the parable of the turtle and the fish to explain how what is familiar to us gets in the way of what is not, and the difficulties and often impossible obstacles to understanding other people's lives and worlds. The way he told the story varied from time to time. Sometimes it was longer than others, but generally, he started out introducing the turtle who lived in a lake with a group of fish. Then he would go on to narrate the turtle's travels out of the water:

One day the turtle went for a walk on dry land. He was away from the lake for a few weeks. When he returned, he met some of the fish. The fish asked him, "Mister turtle, hello! How are you? We have not seen you for a few weeks. Where have you been?"

The turtle said, "I was spending some time on dry land."

The fish was a little puzzled, and they said, "Up on dry land? What are you talking about? What is this dry land? Is it wet?"

The turtle said, "No, it is not."

"Is it cool and refreshing?"

"No, it is not."

"Does it have waves and ripples?"

"No, it does not have waves and ripples."

"Can you swim in it?"

"No, you can't."

The fish said, "It is not wet, it is not cool, there are no waves, you can't swim in it. Don't tell us what it is not, tell us what it is."

"I can't", said the turtle. "I don't have any language to describe it". (Street, 2013, 76).

Brian used this story to illustrate critical points in ethnographic and qualitative literacy studies. He continuously invited us to find ways of talking about dry land – unfamiliar places, practices, and meanings rather than only point out what we thought might be missing. He advocated analyzing an unexpected teaching approach, ways of reading and writing we had not seen before, or an innovative institutional arrangement by developing categories and a vocabulary to talk about them in the affirmative. A great example of this kind of work is his book *Hidden Literacies: Ethnographic Studies of Literacy and Numeracy Practices in Pakistan*, published in 2009 with Rafat Nabi and Alan Rogers, where the authors recognize multiple uses of reading and writing as "real literacy". Rather than disparage or ignore the practices Rabat Nabi uncovered, they discuss them in terms of how they are organized, their usefulness, their situated entanglement with the broader context, and they note clearly who is reading and writing, when reading and writing take place, the purposes of the discovered literacy practices, and who makes decisions about how to read and write. In the opening lines of their book, they note:

...there are a significant number of persons who are labeled 'illiterate' and indeed who call themselves 'illiterate' but who (sometimes unconsciously) use some forms of literacy and numeracy in their daily lives. An illiterate domestic servant reads when preparing breakfast and 'writes' when taking a message over the telephone or making a note about laundry given to the cleaner. An illiterate street beggar keeps a record of the money she acquires and the loans she makes. Shop keepers and self-employed workers have their own informal literacy and numeracy practices. To these people, what they are doing does not count as 'literacy'; only the kind of literacy which is taught in schools or in adult literacy learning programs is 'real literacy' – and they have not been to school or adult literacy class. So they still think of themselves as 'illiterate.' The findings here show that the distinction between 'literate' and 'illiterate' is uncertain – with all that this implies for the statistics on which adult education policies are built. (Nabi, Rogers & Street, 2009, ix)

He argued forcefully for getting beyond dichotomies such as literacy/illiteracy and challenged us to decenter from our own experiences and expectations so that we could appreciate others. He also promoted using this same approach when studying the familiar, making our existences strange and seeing them in a new light. Even when looking at our own contexts, practices, and beliefs, he believed that we could see what there (Heath and Street, 2008) was. He understood ethnography to be much more than a method, and he understood it to be a theory of how to describe something and relate events, people, and places with each other (Nader, 2011). For Brian, it was a way of being in the world. Sometimes in uncomfortable situations or unexpected circumstances, he would say to me, “I am moving into ethnographer mode”, as a way of signaling that he was taking it all in as a learning experience.

Brian visited Mexico on several occasions, presenting seminars and meeting with students. He was an interested listener and a careful critic of their work. Reminiscing recently with Laura Macrina Gómez Espinoza, one of my doctoral students years ago, she reminded me of how her encounter with Brian helped her progress in her work. Presenting her research to him was challenging because she had to speak with a well-known scholar in English, a language she read and understood well but spoke with some hesitancy and uncertainty. Brian carefully reworded her comments and translated them to academic English and helped her find the words to talk about her findings. She told me this gave her confidence in her work because he could understand what she was narrating. As he rearticulated her ideas, he also cleared up a critical methodological point for her by making explicit how to take a concept and use it as a lens for looking at qualitative data and then turning around and thinking again about the theory from the empirical evidence. This conversation with him was crucial for getting past several roadblocks in her writing until completing her work. This incident illustrates how Brian helped students learn in practice, to learn how to do something they were already doing (Lave, 2019).

Brian continuously invited us to venture out of the water onto land and often actively facilitated doing so. I first met him in person in 2002 in New Delhi when he, along with Alan Rogers, invited me to participate in an Uppingham seminar on Urban Literacies. This gathering was the first of several such events that I would attend (<http://www.uppinghamseminars.co.uk/>). These seminars were meetings for discussing issues related to education and development, and for some years, it became our meeting and catch-up space, along with other professional conferences we both attended. Through these encounters, I met other literacy researchers from around the world: New Zealand, India, Brazil, South Africa, Uganda, Pakistan, Germany, and the US, among many other places. A published volume came from the New Delhi meeting, the first of several writing projects I would share with Brian.

Brian and I co-edited two volumes together, first in Spanish and then in English: *Lectura, Escritura y Matemáticas como Prácticas Sociales: Diálogos con América Latina* and *Literacy and Numeracy in Latin America: Local Perspectives and Beyond* (2009). The first one is the product of a seminar we organized in the *Centro de Cooperación Regional para la Educación de Adultos en América Latina y el Caribe* in 2008. Our goal was to bring together in one volume literacy researchers from a variety of countries and regions (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, the US, the UK, and New Zealand). It explores theoretical issues, classroom practices, reading and writing in the social world, and numeracy practices in various contexts. The second volume, published in English, includes some of the authors from the first book and some new ones. Here we wanted to make research from Latin America on literacies and numeracies available to an English reading public and scholars worldwide. Like the first collection, the chapters cover a variety of theoretical and practical discussions on literacy and numeracy as social practices. Most recently, Brian was the guest editor for a special issue of UNESCO's *Prospects*. This publication was one of his final projects. Scholars from various regions wrote pieces for this issue, and Brian generously invited me to be one of them. For this, Iliana Reyes and I worked together on a paper titled *On Literacy, Reading, and Learning to Read in Mexico* (2016).

In Latin America, Brian's work was vital for rethinking literacy research, reading and writing at school, teacher training, and public policy. His seminal book *Literacy in Theory and Practice* set the stage for questioning dominant views about literacy, questioning beliefs about illiteracy, and connecting theory and practice for understanding reading and writing as situated activities, diverse across multiple cultural contexts. By challenging the disassociation of orality and literacy that sustained the notion of the *Great Divide* and positing that oral ways of thinking were functionally and formally different from literate ones, he laid the groundwork for the New Literacy Studies (NLS) research agenda. He helped move researchers' and educators' attention from strictly cognitive processes to broader, contextualized social considerations.

Traditionally in Latin America, the notion of literacy is divided into two distinct moments. First, an initial phase that involves learning the most rudimentary aspects related to encoding and decoding written language, followed by a second phase of learning how to use written language, known as post *alfabetización*. Many programs for unschooled and under-schooled youth and adults are built on this principle directing their efforts toward acquiring decontextualized skills such as recognizing the alphabet, name letters, reading and writing their names, or reading and writing simple messages. Learners tracked into these programs are considered to be *analfabetos absolutos*. Those deemed as lacking in the abilities related to reading, writing, oral expression, and basic arithmetic thought necessary for employment or participation in different aspects of social, political, school life, are known as *analfabetas funcionales*.

Since the 2000s, these definitions have come under scrutiny. Researchers and educators have expressed concerns about the narrowness of the term *alfabetización* and its tendency to conceal the use of written language as social practice. In Brazil, for example, the term *letramento* has been used to analyze literacy as social practice and examine its pedagogical implications (Kleinman and Moraes, 1999; Masagao Ribeiro 2003); Brian's work has helped us to think about who reads and writes, what ways reading and writing is accomplished, when one reads and writes and what is read and written. We also have to consider various phenomena related to reading and writing: Who controls what is read and written? How are these practices socially spread? What languages and alphabets are used? And what speeches are legitimate? Which ones are alternatives? What are our beliefs about reading and writing? What are the public policies ordering reading and writing or making demands on readers and writers? Do we value one way of reading and writing over another way? (And, in consequence, do we value one type of reader and writer over others? Brian's theoretical positions opened the door for qualitative literacy research methodologies and new questions of inquiry concerning reading and writing in the social world. His thinking helped us move away from the dominant prescriptive and normative views about written language use and become more sensitive to how readers and writers used written text in multiple ways and situations, with different purposes and outcomes. He helped us become aware of how reading, writing, and orality are fluid, changing practices intimately connected to their contexts of use. He showed us how to look for the social arrangements and power relationships where written texts are immersed.

In his later writings, Street (2016, 336) noted that “The term ‘literacy as social practice’ (LSP) has replaced, to some extent, the earlier term ‘new literacy studies’”. The LSP concept refers to literacy in use. Literacy and its context of use are inseparable; their analysis requires seeing one through the other: context through the lens of literacy practices and practices through the lens of context (Lave, 2017). Necessarily, LSP recognizes the plurality of literacies, that there are different reading and writing practices with different values and possibilities.

He was open to exploring ideas from other fields and finding ways to connect literacy to different conceptual frameworks, forms of representation, languages, and social actors. He connected literacy to multimodality (Kress, 2003), figured worlds (Holland et al., 2001), explored ways to link NLS research to Bourdieu's theories about practice (Grenfeld et al., 2013). This is particularly relevant for Latin America, where indo-American languages coexist with dominant European languages and where English has a strong presence as a growing lingua franca. Using his work and ideas, many of us working as educational researchers and participating in classroom research, curriculum development, material designs, teacher learning programs, and educational policy (Knobel and Kalman, 2016; Lorenzatti, 2019; Zavala, 2011; have been able to introduce and promote a more social practice approach to reading and writing at school. As I noted elsewhere (Kalman, 2016), the definition of literacy as social practice now has widespread acceptance, as shown by its recent inclusion in the curriculum for language arts in countries such as Argentina, Mexico, and Chile. However, this does not imply that it has been easily integrated into teaching practices or educational policies.

Brian was the turtle *and* the fish: He questioned and probed new situations looking for the right words to explain what he saw and what he learned. He moved in multiple worlds with colleagues from around the globe. He had a unique talent for bringing people together, helping researchers connect with each other, and promoting ideas, work, and after hours, jazz. He left us with much to think about and pursue. Like so many others, my research and thinking are shaped by Brian's writing and teaching and his friendship and support. He continues to have a strong presence in my work and thinking, and every now and then, I conjure him up to engage in the lively academic debates he so loved.

### **Disclosure statement**

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