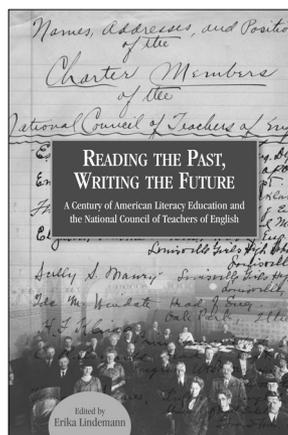




## The Things They Carried: 100 Years of Literacy Learning and Scholarship

Lillian G. Reeves, Amy Johnson Lachuk, & Diane DeFord

In this Centennial issue of *Language Arts*, we reviewed books that speak to the history of current best practices in literacy research and teaching, and to possible futures. Our title, “The Things They Carried,” is a nod to Tim O’Brien’s book of the same name; we, too, wish to challenge our readers and the profession to examine the line between fact and fiction, to rediscover the redemptive power of storytelling, and to reignite the courage and passion it takes to lead our students forward. To that end, we look to the past in search of lessons for the future. The historical depth of these professional books—*Reading the Past, Writing the Future* (Lindemann [Ed.], 2010); *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (4th ed.; Gee, 2011); and *Reclaiming Reading* (Meyer & Whitmore [Eds.], 2011)—is of significance for teachers, researchers, and students navigating the evolving literacies of the 21st century. To take up this momentous endeavor, teachers may be encouraged to turn to professional development offered in schools and districts, or to reach out to explore new literacies through personal inquiry. Teachers may also be asked to adopt the latest quick-fix reading program or to attend another Saturday seminar on the functionality of SmartBoards and the integration of educational technologies. However, as these books demonstrate, doing only these things as a means of defining the future of literacy instruction denies one crucial factor—the experience of the teacher in both the classroom and the contexts of local social, economic, political, and educational realities.



### *Reading the Past, Writing the Future: A Century of American Literacy Education and the National Council of Teachers of English*

edited by Erika  
Lindemann, NCTE, 2010,  
505 pp., ISBN 978-0-  
8141-3876-2

Since the doctoral seminar I took from Dr. Leo Fay at Indiana University, The History of Theory and Practice in Reading Instruction, I have had a passion for all topics historical. So when I saw the title *Reading the Past, Writing the Future: A Century of American Literacy Education and the National Council of Teachers of English*, edited by Erika Lindemann, I knew I wanted to review it for *Language Arts* readers. In the elegantly written foreword, Deborah Brandt refers to the authors in this volume as “a dream team of scholars” (p. xi) who revisit key events and explore topics of impact in NCTE’s 100-year history. The picture that emerges from each chapter is how the combined efforts of parents, students, teachers, researchers, activists, educational leaders, policy makers, and the public at large have struggled to build a better world.

Brandt goes on to say that teachers of English and the language arts, with the support of NCTE, have consistently accepted the enormous responsibility to teach amid “fraught circumstances” (p. x) created by times of social struggle, periods of public and administrative pressure, and relentless calls for change. “The essays in this volume document how one professional organization, the National Council of Teachers of English, understood those fraught circumstances over the first one hundred years of its history. This is an instructive story of how efforts at mass professionalization emerge in support of mass education” (p. x).

The authors write on a variety of topics and use archival documents, photographs, and other artifacts, as well as testimony of key historical figures to present this history. For example, Leila Christenbury writes an overview chapter that describes how NCTE shaped American literacy education and how the assembled authors enliven the people, the issues, and the history that tell the story of our professional struggles. Begun within a context of discontent in 1911, NCTE’s founders opposed forces that sought to institute a consistent course of study for high school English. These Uniform Entrance Requirements included “specific books all students should read in their high school English classes and on which they would be examined in order to enroll in college” (pp. 1–2). From the outset, the small group of 60 educators from 11 states who met in Chicago that year “agreed to create an organization that could give voice and power to oppose the status quo” (p. 3).

NCTE’s first actions opposed attempts from outside forces to dictate the shape of the English curriculum and mandates to direct secondary schools to focus primarily on teaching college preparatory students. The first secretary, a position that is similar to today’s executive director, was James Fleming Hosic. Hosic became president in 1920 and also served as editor of NCTE’s *English Journal*. He was instrumental in forming this first independent national society of English teachers that influences and shapes literacy education in the United States still today.

Subsequent chapters explore NCTE’s impact on the teaching of reading (Donna Alvermann), the teaching of writing (Anne Ruggles Gere), the teaching of language (Stephen Tchudi), the teaching of literature (Arthur Applebee, Judith Langer, and Marc Nachowitz), and the teaching of multimodal/multimedia literacy (Mary Christel with Sandy Hayes). Four other chapters describe NCTE’s role in working toward social justice in the classroom, school, and community (Carol Lee and Anika Spratley), supporting student learning and fair assessment practices in literacy (Kathleen Yancy), preparing English Language Arts teachers (Patricia Stock), and the critical alliances and professional leadership that has characterized NCTE across the years (Jacqueline Royster). The final chapter by John Mayher offers a look to the future.

Several themes and the issues raised within this book struck me deeply. I appreciated the activism of the scholars, teachers, and leaders portrayed within these chapters to fight for reading and writing as constructive processes, and for the right of individuals to have and express themselves through their heritage language. This flagship organization, through its membership and its leaders, has fought for much of what we hold dear today: teachers as leaders and decision makers in their own classrooms, research and practice united in a quest to form sound instructional approaches, and the need to implement sane assessment practices and avoid high-stakes assessments that interfere with our goals to maintain high-quality teaching and learning.

As I read, I cheered those who fought against the forces that limit what we hope to accomplish with the students we teach. At times, I felt regret that we must continue to fight against oppression, faulty expectations, and harmful policies and practices. I felt renewed, though, in my own beliefs that all students can learn if I, as a teacher, am allowed to use my own professional judgment to teach what I know is best for the diverse learners I meet. Within these pages, I began to understand the vast effort and resources it takes to support our noble teaching profession; to fight for the respect we must win; to innovate; and to employ and maintain strong levels of professionalism, integrity, and high ideals.

No matter which area within the language arts each author explores, the leadership role and constant watchfulness of NCTE, as well as the diversity of initiatives it has spearheaded and supported, are detailed. As Alvermann states, “Although buffeted by the social, cultural, and political currents of the last one hundred years, NCTE has remained steadfast in its commitment to teaching reading within the English language arts curriculum, not separate from it” (p. 82). Gere notes that “Looking across the first one hundred years of NCTE history, we can see enduring issues and themes as well as the sustaining presence of a professional association that has served and been served by thousands of teachers of writing” (p. 117).

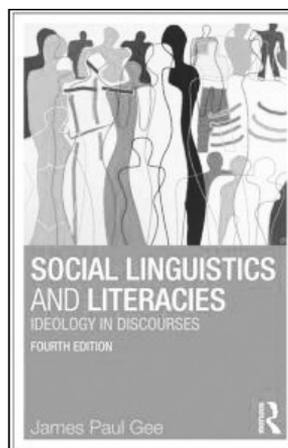
In terms of the work that NCTE accomplished across its first 100 years of working toward social justice in classrooms, schools, and communities, Lee and Spratley argue that NCTE has played an important role in three specific movements: 1) the proposition that classroom teachers, rather than an elite group representing university interests, should be the decision makers about requirements in the English curriculum; 2) conceptions of ability and the role that assessment should or should not take; and 3) progressive education, focusing on learning through experience as opposed to behaviorist theories of learning and its use of scientific assessments. Lee and Spratley suggest that many of the responses to social justice issues they discuss in their chapter—namely the role of language in instruction, the selection of texts to use in teaching, and the building of capacity for addressing the needs of historically underserved students—were influenced by NCTE’s policy statements, task forces, initiatives, and organizational structures as it responded to the key issues threatening social justice.

John Mayher supports this perspective, emphasizing the future role that NCTE must take in advocating for all children, “not just the best and the brightest or the native speakers, or the standard-dialect speakers” (pp. 397–398), and the need to attend to social justice issues for both students *and* teachers, recognizing human dignity and worth, respecting freedom of expression and

access to books, and fighting censorship of the books students read.

These are but a few of the issues and themes discussed within Erika Lindemann’s edited volume. Deborah Brandt, in her foreword, takes the long view of how NCTE “has chosen its campaigns and its alliances, where it has fallen silent, where it has succeeded, and where it has failed . . .” (p. xi). She begs us, as we move into our future, to consider several haunting premises and questions:

- *What we take for granted in our professional background is there as a result of somebody’s insight and effort* (p. xi). “Whose forebears are we? What do they need from us now?” (p. xii).
- *Low expectations are never reliable*. “Today we continue this pattern of low expectations, using testing to stigmatize, underestimate, and malnourish human potential, repeating these same miserable myths. . . . How do we stop the loss?” (p. xii).
- *The need to articulate a relationship between language learning and civic life is ongoing and urgent*. “As a professional organization, NCTE has always focused its attention on the power of communication—in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and the interpretation of literature” (p. xii). “How do we leverage this tradition in these times? How do we make our voices better heard and our knowledge more respected?” (p. xiii). (DD)



***Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses (4th ed.)***

by James Paul Gee,  
Routledge, 2011, 242 pp.,  
ISBN 978-0-415-61776-5

Reading the second edition of James Paul Gee’s *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* in graduate

school is what inspired me to study literacy. Since that time, I have read and reread this now classic text several times and have assigned it as essential reading to both undergraduate and graduate students. In May 2011, the fourth edition was published.

The first edition of Gee's groundbreaking text, published 21 years ago, marked the advent of the "sociocultural turn" in literacy studies. As Gee notes, since the first (1990), second (1996), and third (2007) editions of this book, "social and cultural approaches to language and literacy have made great progress" (p. 1). Today's students have much to gain from reading this volume, but what about those of us who have read earlier editions? Given their overwhelming popularity, what would compel a reader of those earlier editions to read the fourth edition?

First, when Gee wrote the first edition, "the traditional view of literacy was 'cognitive' or 'mental.' Literacy was seen as something residing primarily inside people's heads, not society" (p. 1). Currently, and largely as a result of the first edition, the definition of literacy has expanded to be understood as a social and cultural practice. Although in previous editions, Gee sought to background the cognitive aspects of literacy, in this fourth edition, he attempts "to integrate more material on learning and mind" (p. 2).

Second, when the first edition was published, New Literacy Studies was considered to be a new field of study. In fact, Gee writes that with the first edition, his goal was to bring the New Literacy Studies into existence, particularly within the field of educational research. Now, however, "the New Literacy Studies is [. . .] established and the perspective developed [in this book] has become one standard viewpoint within" educational research (p. 1). For such reasons, the fourth edition of *Social Linguistics and Literacies* offers "an introduction to what it originally only hoped to help bring into existence" (p. 1).

Divided into 10 chapters, *Social Linguistics and Literacies* offers readers an overview of the New Literacy Studies, as well as an explanation of Gee's Discourse perspective on literacy. While Gee draws

on many of the same examples as he did in previous editions, including the "bachelor" and the "sausage" examples, the "aspirin bottle," and "Leona's stories," the organization of the book (as reflected in the Table of Contents) has been revised significantly, so that Gee's argument is even more lucid.

In Chapter 1, "Ideology," Gee significantly revises his explanation of ideology, making his understandings of ideology and theory even more accessible. As with previous editions, Gee explains how perspectives on language are always morally laden. In Chapter 2, "Meaning," Gee entirely focuses on meaning, arguing "meaning is something we negotiate and contest over socially" (p. 24). In Chapter 3, "Literacy Crises," Gee reframes the perceived "literacy crises" over the past several decades as a "crisis of social justice" that is only inflamed through neoliberal social policies.

In Chapter 4, "The Literacy Myth and the History of Literacy," he summarizes the history of literacy as it relates to his argument, including key works by Scribner and Cole (1981), and Freire (1970). In Chapter 5, "The New Literacy Studies," Gee marries work on social cognition and sociocultural literacy to explain the origins of the New Literacy Studies. To update this chapter, Gee draws on sociologist's Annette Lareau's (2003) ethnographic study of two different models of child-rearing, the "cultivation model" and the "natural growth model." Gee engages with Lareau's research to argue the two different models of child-rearing have led to an equity crisis, particularly with regards to digital tools and media: "Digital media like games [. . .] are making it easier and easier to 'cultivate' a child and are allowing children to get more and more mentoring, mentoring that now often goes beyond their parents" (p. 85). In Chapter 6, "Social Languages, Situated Meanings, and Cultural Models," Gee outlines his now widely cited understandings of situated meanings and cultural models. Undergirding his explanation is a belief that "there is no knowing a language without knowing the cultural models or figured worlds that organize the meanings of that language for some cultural group" (p. 110).

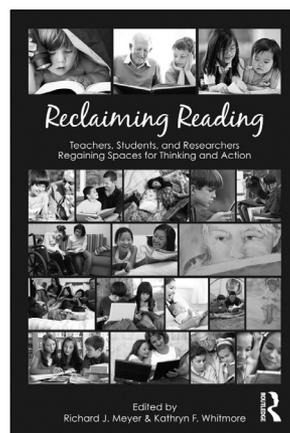
In Chapters 7–10, Gee articulates how Discourses relate to literacy and language teaching and learning. In Chapters 7 and 8 (“Discourse Analysis” and “Discourse Analysis: Stories Go to School,” respectively), Gee presents his approach to understanding how meaning works in language through discourse analysis. For Gee, looking closely at language can illuminate the social identities of speakers. Using the example of Leona’s stories, Gee highlights how Leona’s social language, which functions well within her community, is rendered invisible and is opposed by the school, instead of being recruited to apprentice Leona into the social language of school. In Chapter 9, “Discourses and Literacies,” Gee writes concerning the New Literacy Studies:

It is a problem to call any enterprise “new,” because, of course, it soon becomes “old” and the New Literacy Studies is now old. Were it not so cumbersome, it would be better to call the field something like “integrated-social-cultural-political-historical literacy studies,” which names the viewpoint it takes on literacy. However, for better or worse, the term New Literacy Studies [. . .] has become well known and widely used, so, reluctantly, I will continue to use the term. (p. 147)

Although reluctant to use the term “New Literacy Studies,” Gee’s goal in this chapter is to explain what such a perspective on literacy looks like. Using the “On Being a Real Indian” example, Gee defines his term “Discourse” and how it relates to literacy. For Gee, a Discourse is always political, and thus literacy teaching is always political, too. In Chapter 10, “Language, Individuals, and Discourses,” Gee uses students’ responses to “the Alligator River story” to examine how “language becomes meaningful only within Discourses and how language-within-Discourses is always and everywhere value-laden and ‘political’” (p. 179).

As the reader has probably already noted, *Social Linguistics and Literacies* is about much more than simply reading and writing. Rather, Gee sees the book as presenting a moral contract to the reader. He concludes by offering a challenge to all of us to continue the work laid out in the book—that is, to accept the “moral obligation to reflect on, gain meta-knowledge about [our] Discourses” so that we

can discontinue “harming others” or being harmed ourselves (p. 216). Gee’s vision of linguistics is morally laden and has the power to change the world. “And in that regard, the book is by no means over. It is just a beginning” (p. 216). (AJL)



***Reclaiming Reading: Teachers, Students, and Researchers Regaining Spaces for Thinking and Action***

edited by Richard J. Meyer and Kathryn F. Whitmore, Routledge, 2011, 304 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-88810-3

*Reclaiming Reading* is an exploratory text

that takes a historical look at the contributions scholars and teachers have made and are making to K–16 reading instruction as they continuously expand their research and practice to meet the needs of students using, observing, and creating new literacies in and for the 21st century.

Ken Goodman’s (1991) pillars of whole language inspired Meyer and Whitmore to organize this edited volume into five critical pillars for reclaiming reading: reclaiming learning, reclaiming teaching, reclaiming curriculum, reclaiming language, and reclaiming sociocultural contexts. An extension chapter follows each of the pillar’s chapters, enacting the theory underlying each pillar and demonstrating how teachers and students can use updated whole language approaches, integrated with critical practices, to reclaim reading in their daily learning engagements. Each chapter challenges us to eschew product-oriented schooling, detrimental and ineffective high-stakes testing, legislatively mandated curriculum, and packaged reading instruction, all of which have proliferated under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001). Contributing authors to *Reclaiming Reading* issue a call for

schooling to be reconceptualized with liberatory pedagogy at its foundation. Further, the authors support the use of theory-driven practice for elevating teachers, in collaboration with their students, their peers, and their communities, as change agents within the educational enterprise.

Under the first pillar of reclaiming reading, “reclaiming learning,” Goodman and Goodman argue that . . .

In order to reclaim learning, we must reclaim pedagogical strategies that support learners in coming to be effective and efficient readers of texts, contexts, and their worlds. Methods and materials for teaching reading need to be rooted in a view of research and a theory of the reading process and reading development to truly support learning. Whole language was developed by teachers who understood the nature of the reading process and who rejected reading instruction that is preoccupied with words, phonics, and skill sequences. In fact, the term “whole language” contrasts with teaching parts of language outside of the context of meaningful use of language. (p. 20)

Teachers seeking to both articulate their pedagogical beliefs and reclaim learning will be relieved to find resources throughout this book. The authors situate effective strategies and practices firmly within constructivist theory, drawing from and expanding on particular aspects of Dewey’s (1916) work and the concurrent research of Piaget (1978), Vygotsky (1978), Goodman (1978), and Halliday (1975). In an effort to challenge the misperceptions about reading that have fueled the packaged reading program industry, Goodman and Goodman round out their chapter by reclaiming reading terminologies that have long been ensnared in the rhetoric of “scientifically based research.”

In Chapter 2, Meyer and Altwerger draw on Goodman and Goodman’s updated reading model as a springboard to acknowledge the multidimensionality and complexity of reading in digital mediums. Defining reading as including words and other sign systems, the authors document the use of multiple literacy practices over the course of a day—in and out of school—by 15-year-old Wendy. Reinforcing knowledge and

meaning making as being social in nature, Meyer and Altwerger focus on teachers’ obligations to recognize not simply how instructional technology has changed, but how radically technology changes our teaching (p. 204). They also demonstrate how to empower students to take a critical stance toward technology when consuming media and other texts.

The implementation of miscue analysis in all of its variations is central to developing this critical stance, to the success of the five pillars for reclaiming reading, and to this book. Working from the strengths of readers and teachers toward an “integrative meaning-construction process” (p. 109) allows for an environment characterized by inquiry, problem posing, and shared discovery across disciplines. Further, the reading and retelling portions of miscue analysis eliminate testing anxiety for students and teachers because both are directly involved in and aware of what kinds of data are being collected and what is done with the data once it is collected. Familiarizing students with strategies to talk about their thinking and their understanding of a variety of texts is valuable for “facilitating critical reading” (p. 203).

Unwaveringly, *Reclaiming Reading* is as much about naming the political aspects of teaching and learning as it is about maintaining critical literacy classrooms. In living a critical stance, “children learn to consider multiple points of view, interrogate them, and compose their own perspectives after taking risks within dialogues” (p. 210). To illustrate this, Fain and Horn look closely at Vasquez’s work (2004) with young children and then recreate similar sociopolitical dialogues with young learners in their own school communities. Each chapter and its extension put forward a model from the five pillars for reclaiming reading. This book seamlessly integrates theory and practice, illustrates strong examples of what reclaiming strategies, curriculum, and pedagogy look like, and puts us, as teacher and students, on “pathways that involve change” (p. 159). The dialogue generated in these critical contexts is positioned as the center of the reclaiming reading movement and

certainly stands as the basis for sustaining a vibrant democracy. (LGR)

## Conclusion

Each of these volumes extends an invitation for teachers to recognize that they and their colleagues are positioned as beneficiaries of the rich collective experiences found in the archives of our profession. Borrowing from the work on culture by renowned British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971), who viewed experience as a defining characteristic of thriving societies, we would suggest that teachers' experiences are also defining characteristics of the culture of schools:

“The accent is on experience. In using the word culture I am thinking of the inherited tradition. I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw *if we have somewhere to put what we find.*” (pp. 102–103)

The outpouring of renewed thought and energy added to the seminal work of these professional books may be an indication of how close the teaching of reading brings us to creating the “common pool of humanity.” As such, these texts may aid us in deciphering what contributions of import have been made and how we can, through innovation and inquiry, meet the challenges of generating “somewhere to put what we find.” Our greatest hope for meeting this challenge may emerge when we reexamine our storied lineage,

one of trailblazers and activists, members of society who have, for decades, felt compelled to intervene on behalf of young people everywhere so that we may build a more just democracy through the exploration of language in all its adaptations.

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