

Book Review

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Rural Literacies. K. Donehower, C. Hogg, and E. E. Schell. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007, 233 pp., ISBN 978-0-8093-2749-2.

Reviewed by

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We recently attended a meeting of reading teachers in a rural school district in northwestern Pennsylvania. The superintendent convened the meeting in order to address his concern with community sustainability. The superintendent knew that educators in the district, like many throughout the state, had changed their teaching practices as a result of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), the state's standardized test. He was concerned about the ways in which shifting pedagogical practices might compound the effects of other challenging issues faced by the area. For example, the district experiences high levels of poverty: approximately 37% of the children receive free and reduced price lunches, and many more qualify but do not apply. Countless families throughout this district are "unofficially" poor, unable to make a living wage yet earning more than the \$20,000 limit the federal government uses to define poverty for a family of four.

As the meeting with the reading teachers began, the superintendent conveyed his convictions about the importance of reading and his reasons for convening this group. Without the ability to read well and critically, the superintendent explained, the students in the district would not be able to sustain their lives in rural communities or a democratic society. He told the teachers that he knew reading well did not automatically lead to good or well paying jobs, but if the students

could read critically, they could participate in plural ways as citizens in a democratic society that has too often turned its back on the poor, the rural, and so many others. In other words, the superintendent emphasized the need for students to read the word and the *world*, as educator Paulo Freire encouraged, so that they could engage life in and with their community in ways they decided, not ways that were imposed upon them.

The superintendent's words were heartfelt and clear. He did not want the teachers to spend time on test preparation or remediation to improve test scores. He wanted children to read and to enjoy reading, and he wanted them to learn to read critically so that they could question the conditions of their communities. He asked these teachers to work as professionals and intellectuals to redesign reading instruction for the students, to develop their own curriculum connected to local issues and concerns, and to discard practices that were focused only on test preparation. The superintendent reassured the teachers that he would be on the front line explaining the test scores to the public and the state if needed, although he doubted that test scores would dip as a result of this change in curriculum and pedagogy.

Central to the rural superintendent's message to the reading teachers in his district is the negotiation of social and economic sustainability in rural communities and the relationship that literacy has to this aim. This concern is at the core of the argument put forward in the book *Rural Literacies*, written by Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell. In this book, these researchers express a multidimensional view of sustainability that is critical to rural education research. The authors rely in part on Derek Owens' work to define sustainability as:

an intergenerational concept that means adjusting our current behavior so that it causes the least amount of harm to future generations. Sustainability is also concerned with intergenerational equity: understanding the links between poverty and ecosystem decline. . . . It means looking critically at our contemporary behaviors from the perspective of children living generations hence, and modifying those behaviors accordingly. (p. 6)

Extending Owens' explanation of sustainability, the authors address concerns about social sustainability in rural communities. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell are interested in the interrelated economic, ecological, political, and social factors that will sustain rural communities, and like the rural Pennsylvania superintendent, they believe that literacy should be emphasized while fostering dialogue and action toward this goal (p. 6-7). The authors clearly distinguish sustainability from preservation, which they astutely point out "suggests locking cultural practices into the past" (p. 20). Donehower, Hogg, and Schell believe that critical literacy, which involves teaching rural students how to question popular and commonly held (mis)perceptions of rural life and the political motivations behind such representations, is central to the task of redefining rural literacies and engaging discussions about sustainability.

Rural Literacies is a combination of two co-authored chapters that bookend three single-authored chapters highlighting the authors' research in different rural communities in the United States. After establishing the context for this project, situating it within historical and political parameters and in relation to rural and educational research, the authors demonstrate the potential for critical research to inform understandings and possibilities for sustaining rural life. For example, through interviews with rural residents in Haines Gap, North Carolina, Donehower examines the history of stereotypes of Appalachian literacy as she shows the complex role of literacy sponsors in practicing and supporting literacy in rural communities. Donehower notes that "literacy sponsors in rural areas have an obligation to do research, to determine the specifics of local literacies situated in particular contexts, and to assume that past characterizations may be riddled with inaccuracies" (p. 70). She demonstrates that literacy is a resource that can help to renegotiate relationships

among rural people as it contributes to sustainability.

Subsequently, Schell considers the economic aspects of rural life as she examines the dominant rhetorics of the farm crisis, including those in the popular press. Schell calls for critical literacies that lead to a "food democracy" (p. 118), opening the possibility for the entire country to become invested in the sustainability of rural communities based on our shared "human need for food" (p. 118). Schell suggests that we suffer from "agricultural illiteracy" in the United States, as citizens in general seem to be unwilling or unable to recognize the sources of their food and ultimately their connection to rural communities. She describes the work of the organization Farm Aid as that of a literacy sponsor invested in helping consumers reconsider food choices and the fact that family farms can be sustainable and successful enterprises.

Finally, Hogg points out the contributions rural women have made and continue to make to the sustainability of rural life. She notes how this work has been less visible than the stories of men's contributions, even in the work of prominent rural scholars like Wendell Berry and Paul Theobald. Hogg relies on Deborah Fink's explanation of agrarianism, which emphasizes "the moral and economic primacy of farming over other industry, rest[ing] firmly at the base of the collective U.S. ideological framework" (p. 122), to demonstrate the contribution rural Nebraskan women have made to rural life. Calling for a critical pedagogy of place that relies on David Gruenewald's work to blend ideologies of critical pedagogies and place-based education, Hogg uses an ethnographic approach to describe her own experiences of being sponsored by rural Nebraska women who employ literacies not valued by traditional masculinist ways of knowing. These efforts contribute to "rhetorics of preservation" that are intricately connected to the potential to sustain rural community life.

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's work is well situated in the histories and contexts of rural life and education. They understand how the socioeconomic fabric of rural life has been shredded through neoliberal practices that emphasize competition and the free market, and that most of urban and suburban America is unaware of the devastation that rural neighbors experience (p. 16). The researchers offer a critique of current influences on rural education that work to unravel rural life, including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), contradictory and unproductive popular culture notions that some rural communities should be

preserved and others should be saved from themselves (chapter 2), and NCLB's efforts to normalize rural students in ways that ignore rural identity, contexts, and education. They note:

As the country has completed its shift from rural to urban, rural students have continued to be unheard, unseen, and under-represented. Since the United States has become industrialized and urbanized, it has scarcely looked back, and the effects of this trend are significant to rural students. (p. 25)

Standardized tests and curriculum further this trend of rendering rural students invisible in the current contexts of public education.

These researchers soundly reject views of rural life and education that take a deficit approach or a "rhetoric of lack" that is commonplace in rural literature (p. 27). They also reject recent trends in education, including distance education. As Donehower, Hogg, and Schell point out, technologically delivered distance education is not a panacea for rural education, and relying on distance delivery modes sacrifices direct contact with a teacher or the ability for students to work in collaborative groups (p. 42). Instead, they explain that rural communities need literacy educators and community members who foster critical understandings of place through public pedagogy. Included in this public pedagogy is the complicated role of literacy sponsors, those agents who, aligned with Deborah Brandt's work, "offer to groups or individuals a certain set of methods for practicing literacy and particular reasons why literacy should be done. . . . They demand from their students compliance with the values—linguistic and otherwise—of the sponsor" (p. 50).

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell conclude their book by calling for "literacy educators to examine rural literacies in context and work against the urban biases that inform much of the literacy research in our field" (p. 155). The final chapter of the book demonstrates ways that this work can be done in the context of university experiences, leaving the door open for readers to consider similar possibilities in their own contexts. For example, we would encourage educators and public intellectuals to critically engage rural literacies before students attend college or a university, much like the rural Pennsylvania school superintendent is doing. An ability to engage in dialogues of sustainability will

serve those students who do not pursue higher education in addition to those students who may inevitably come up against stereotypes in higher education.

This text is well researched and should be read by anyone interested in the role literacy plays in sustaining rural life. Rural educators and scholars, including those who teach undergraduate and graduate courses, will benefit greatly from the contribution this book makes to the research on rural communities and the potential it has to inform the complicated discussions and efforts to sustain rural life in the 21st century.