What We Know About Adolescents’ Out-of-School Literacies, What We Need to Learn, and Why Studying Them Is Important: An Interview With Michael W. Smith

Michael W. Smith, a professor in Temple University’s College of Education, joined the ranks of college teachers after 11 years of teaching high school English. His research focuses on how experienced readers read and talk about texts as well as what motivates adolescents’ reading and writing both in and out of school.

DWM: It seems that there’s been a burgeoning interest in adolescents’ out-of-school literacies. How would you characterize this work?

MWS: I see the research on adolescents’ out-of-school literacies as providing, in David Kirkland’s (2009) words, a “counter narrative” (p. 10) to the norms and practices of the official world of schools. This counternarrative seems to me to have three primary strands.

Donna Alvermann (Alvermann & Moore, 2011) talked about one when she discussed how understanding just how complex students’ out-of-school literacies are speaks against “reifying the distinctions between in-school and out-of-school literacy” (p. 158). That is, one strand of research says something like “Look at what’s involved in producing a zine, or participating in a complex multiplayer video game, or discussing anime with friends. What these activities require is very much like what we want students to do in school.”

A second strand seems to me to be focused on documenting the competence of adolescents when they engage in out-of-school literacies. Susan Weinstein (2009) argued that her examination of the out-of-school writing of nine urban adolescents from Chicago, primarily their raps and poetry, “can shift [teachers’] perceptions of students from individuals who know little about the ‘right’ way to write to people who have deep funds of knowledge on which to draw as they negotiate various forms of composition” (p. 9). That is, a second strand says something like “Look at these young people. Look at what they can do. You can’t dismiss them as illiterate or a-literate. They are just literate in different ways.”

A third strand, it seems to me, examines what can happen when a school’s or a teacher’s vision of the literacies that count is expanded. Carol Lee (2007), for example, has been an important voice demonstrating the transformative power of drawing on students’ cultural resources, the everyday literate practices in which students’ engage, what she called cultural modeling. This strand of research seems to me to be saying something like, “Look at what can happen when we make a place for new literacies in our classrooms.”

Taken together, the three strands of research on adolescents’ out-of-school literacies have challenged literacy educators to look at what kids do, what kids
can do, and what we ought to do in new ways. I believe it is having a very important hortatory effect, at least on literacy researchers.

**DWM:** What would you like to see as new directions for this research?

**MWS:** Let me start by saying that I think we need more of the kind of work I described earlier in this interview. When I go into schools, I’m afraid I see lots of the same kind of teaching of the same kind of texts I’ve always seen. The research I described earlier can ground important curricular and instructional reforms.

However, I worry a bit that the research is speaking primarily to like-minded people. I’d like to see more research designed to speak to an audience larger than literacy researchers, especially to an audience that includes policymakers. Doing that kind of research will require examining outcomes at least partly in terms of what matters most to policymakers.

We have some good models for this kind of work, I think. For example, Elizabeth Moje and her colleagues (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008) located a series of regression analyses of a large sample of participants amid a rich description of a smaller group, to explain the reading students do outside of school, their motivations for doing that reading, and its impact on their school achievement. Research of this sort has the capacity to speak both to the field of adolescent literacy research and to those outside the field.

I also worry a bit that research on bringing new literacies into classrooms is sometimes presented as unproblematically positive. Classrooms are just too complex for that to be true. One of the reasons I like Marc Hill’s (2009) work is that while he documented how a hip-hop curriculum in an after-school program empowered some participants to develop as “cultural critics who deploy[ed] critical literacies in order to identify and respond to structures of power and meaning within hip-hop texts” (p. 122), it also pointed out how the curriculum marginalized other participants.

Finally, I think we need to continue to do careful analyses of the out-of-school literacies in which students engage. For example, I was fascinated to read the analysis that Christina Haas and Pamela Takayoshi (2011) did on the language of instant messaging. Contrary to conventional wisdom that holds that communicating via instant messaging is characterized by abbreviations, Haas and Takayoshi found that two-thirds of IM’s most prominent language features are, in fact, elaborative. Research like this can keep us from jumping to unwarranted conclusions about how new literacies work and what impact they may have on other literacies.

**DWM:** The contexts for students’ literate activities outside school often differ from inside school contexts. Given these differences, what would you say are the implications of research on students’ out-of-school literacies for classroom teachers?

**MWS:** I understand that adolescents get to choose to participate in out-of-school literate activities, while they’re compelled to participate in in-school activities. And I understand that students’ out-of-school literate activities only occasionally involve the texts and textual practices that are privileged in school. But I still want to make two arguments.

First, I think that the differences might not be as inevitable as some people make them out to be. David Kirkland (2009), whom I mentioned before and who has done fascinating work exploring a wide range of semiotic activities (e.g., designing tattoos), warned of too readily accepting an unproblematic binary between literacy in school and out. The sieve metaphor that Donna Alvermann (Alvermann & Moore, 2011) proposed is a powerful reminder that the differences between what happens inside and outside of schools do not need to be as great as they sometimes appear to be.

But even if we accept the binary between in- and out-of-school literacies, I think that studies of out-of-school literacies can have a powerful heuristic value for us as teachers. Jeff Wilhelm and I (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) conducted a study of the literate lives of young men both in and out of school, and we identified five factors that seemed to foster engagement: (1) competence and control, (2) appropriate challenge, (3) clear and quick feedback, (4) a focus on the immediate, and (5) the importance of the social. If we’re right, then our students will be more engaged when these conditions regularly characterize our classrooms.
DWM: How has the research you discuss here influenced your work as a teacher and teacher educator?

MWS: Much of my professional life has been dedicated to helping educators rethink the way they teach reading and writing, but I haven’t done as much to encourage teachers to expand their understanding of the kinds of reading and writing that matter. The research I’ve discussed is forcing me to realize that I need to think harder about expanding my sense of the kinds of reading and composing on which we should focus. I’m coming to see that I should regard new literacies as important ends in themselves and not just as bridges to more conventionally academic literacies.

Second, the body of research I’ve discussed makes me realize that new literacies are emerging at an astonishing rate, a rate much faster than I can keep up with. This explosion of new literacies means that I have to make sure I create contexts in my university classroom in which my students can be my teachers as they’ve mastered literacies that I haven’t even dabbled in.

The explosion of new literacies also means that I have to help those students understand how to create contexts in their secondary school classrooms in which their students are to some extent cocreators of their curricula. Teachers don’t have to worry about keeping up if they provide enough opportunities for choice in both the texts with which students engage and the ones that they create. Their students will keep up for them.

References

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