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The Anthropology of Writing. Understanding Textually-Mediated Worlds

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Book review

Barton, D., & Papen, U. (Eds.) (2010). *The Anthropology of Writing. Understanding Textually-Mediated Worlds*. London: Continuum | ISBN 9781441108852

David Barton and Uta Papen have embarked on an ambitious theoretical and cross-disciplinary enterprise. Theoretically, their edited volume aims to draw the contours of an anthropology of writing, loosely defined as “the comparative study of writing as social and cultural practice” (p9) and largely inspired by literacy studies. As the editors argue in the opening chapter, anthropology is a latecomer to the field of writing research, but its theories and methods offer valuable insights into the sociocultural complexity of writing. To illustrate this point in depth, the editors draw on, and for the first time, bring together two research traditions from two linguistic regions: anglophone research on literacy studies and francophone research on writing. The former draws on a social theory of literacy (as articulated in Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1985) which sees literacy as a textually mediated interpretive process, rather than the ability of read and write. The latter is a disciplinary amalgam of applied linguistics, history and anthropology that finds synthesis in questions of how, where and why writing matters in the workplace, in the public sphere and in post-colonial societies.

The volume is organized around four parts. Part one has two introductory chapters of which the first is essential reading: the editors motivate their anthropological approach to writing, sketch the disciplinary backgrounds of the anglo- and francophone research traditions and spell out the main theoretical differences and similarities between both traditions. Here we learn how and why an anthropology of writing looks at acts of writing that are “incipient and ordinary, often invisible and hardly known, frequently ignored or mistakenly taken for granted” (p. 10) yet indicative of broader issues and practices such as institutional regimes, historical significance, urban life and social change.



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Parts two, three and four each consist of three chapters which sample the theoretical breadth and empirical wealth of anthropological research on writing. The chapters in part two focus on writing in the workplace and offer case studies of biomedical database management (chapter three), paperwork demands in a childcare center (chapter four) and cow herding administration (chapter five). Writing by individuals and its role in institutional contexts make up the topic of part three. Here too, the empirical diversity is striking: from multilingual writing practices on photo-sharing platform Flickr.com (chapter six) to the materiality of notebook keeping in rural Mali (chapter seven) and the role of writing in healthcare knowledge production (chapter eight). Finally, part four offers historical perspectives on Edwardian postcard writing (chapter nine), forms of legal and illegal public writing in seventeenth century urban France (chapter ten) and doctor-imposed autobiographies of sexual agency in nineteenth century France (chapter eleven). An afterword by Brian Street concludes the book.

One of the central aims of the book is “to make the work of francophone researchers more widely known in the anglophone world and to promote dialogue between French and English speaking academics interested in writing as a social and cultural practice” (p. 23). The book certainly succeeds in providing an anglophone forum for francophone research on writing. The translated chapters in question are novel and worth reading. While Béatrice Fraenkel’s chapter two would work better as an empirical contribution to part three, her work on forms of writing such as graffiti and road signs sets the stage for David Pontille’s, Nathalie Joly’s and Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye’s chapters. Not only do these authors approach writing and literacy in a refreshingly different way – an argument which applies a fortiori to the historical research presented in part four – they also make use of a body of literature that I was not familiar with. How the book promotes dialogue between French and English language literacy scholars is less obvious. Echoing Brian Street’s observations in the afterword, cross-references to work in the two languages are few and far between and there is to date no complementary volume available in French. Moreover, despite an explicit, shared analytical interest in literacy events and practices and a self-ascribed comparative outlook, it remains unclear how the two research traditions match up methodologically. This methodological opacity is perhaps the greatest weakness of the book and one which I hope the editors will address in a follow-up book project.

Overall, *The Anthropology of Writing* is a welcome addition to a growing body of qualitative writing research (Schultz, 2006). The research presented offers rich case studies of literacy practices in a wide range of contexts. That the book attempts to bridge two research traditions is exceptional.

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