

Affect Theory in Literacy Research: Creating Coherence, Producing Difference

Mediation is a central concept in sociocultural studies of literacy, learning, and human development. Indeed, the mediational means on which human beings draw to make meaning in the process of speaking, reading, writing, and making media form the unit of analysis for literacy researchers in sociocultural inquiry (Smagorinsky, 2008). Derived from the work of Lev Vygotsky, the concept of mediation moved literacy researchers, among psychologists and others (e.g., Cole, 1996), away from the study of the individual and autonomous models of literacy (see Alvermann, 2009) toward the study of social groups, cultural histories, and ideological models of literacy (e.g., Street, 1995). The study of literacy as situated, cultural, contextual, political, and historical therefore relies on the foundational theory that learning and human development are always already mediated by psychological tools that produce, and provide access to, culturally determined social futures.

Currently, many literacy researchers are now turning to affect and what affect means for literacy learning and teaching (Leander & Ehret, in press). Many of these literacy researchers are drawing on process philosophy through their participation in a larger affect turn that has rippled across the humanities and social sciences since at least the beginning of the 21st century (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002). As Vygotsky's work did for sociocultural theory, 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza's work forms the basis for affect theory, wherein affect, like mediation for sociocultural theory, is an important concept. Yet, Spinoza's philosophy of affect is an irreducible alternative to mediation as a concept for analyzing activity (Roth, 2017), presenting an ontology in which the conventional humanist subject, or the human subject performing goal-directed mediated action on the world, is unthinkable (St. Pierre, 2016).

For example, Leander and Boldt (2013) described the case of Lee, a 10-year-old boy engaged in literate activity: the playful enactment of a character in a manga story (Japanese graphic novel). In Leander and Boldt's account, Lee and his friend are "bodies in persistent and largely unpremeditated motion" (p. 28). Their actions "were spontaneous and improvisational, produced through an emergent moment-by-moment unfolding" (p. 29), and this movement, together "with the assemblage of time, place, material objects, and the worlds of manga" (p. 29), produced Lee's exclamation: "I love this so much...I don't know why I love this so much, but I do" (p. 27). How literacy studies may come to terms with this incommensurability, while also moving forward productively together as a field and with theoretical rigor, is therefore a central concern for a large swath of emerging and senior researchers currently turning to affect.

Like others (e.g., Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), we are concerned with the potential for literacy researchers to conflate this rather radical theoretical approach with those more familiar in literacy studies. Similarly, we are concerned with the potential for a new generation of literacy scholars (those currently being trained through Spinozist perspectives on affect) to possibly disavow or ignore the still essential sociocultural perspectives on literacy that will continue to produce important insights for the field. With these concerns in mind, we hope to articulate the potentials of affect theory in a way that highlights what is new across these approaches and forms a more coherent statement of this newness without eschewing the essential insights still emerging through sociocultural theory by creating a special issue of *Reading Research Quarterly* (RRQ). Fields beyond literacy education have been considering nonrepresentational theory as the heart of theoretical and methodological innovation for some time (see Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), and we

believe this special issue can push literacies studies forward toward its own related theoretical and methodological innovation.

This special issue therefore calls for close attention to the central concerns that we have outlined in order to create coherence, and to produce theoretical difference from that coherence, that might have a lasting effect in the field and on those alongside whom we research. The special issue will do so by bringing together literacy researchers to do the following:

- Communicate the unique potentials for affect theory to inform larger field movements toward more just and humane practices of research and instruction in social context
- Describe and organize the basis of a theoretically informed language for analyzing affect
- Develop this language in the analysis of data from empirical studies and highlight the movement between researchers and participants enabled through methodologies and concepts derived from affect theory

We invite the submission of 1,000-word abstracts **by November 15, 2018**, to the *RRQ* managing editor at rrq@reading.org, with “RRQ special issue abstract” in the subject line. Authors of approved abstracts will be invited to submit full manuscripts for peer review and adjudication by both the editors of *RRQ* and the guest editors of this special issue. Invitations for full manuscripts will be sent **by December 15, 2018**, with full manuscripts due **by March 31, 2019**.

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