

In Dialogue

Latin America

We have framed this *In Dialogue* as a conversation among five Latin American literacy scholars, with a special emphasis on their situatedness. As the title says, we are talking about scholars from Latin America, as they were all born and raised in their home countries (even if some of them had educational forays abroad). But, we want to emphasize the notion that all five authors are in Latin America, as being in this region, and the Global South by extension, poses different challenges to making our voices heard (recognizing that there are incredible scholars from Latin America in the North who continue pushing the envelope and opening spaces for other scholars in the region to speak up and be published). This *In Dialogue*, then, is an opportunity to share with the RTE readership some of the ongoing challenges and successes that make the field of literacy studies in Latin America a very vibrant one, full of stories and voices that will emerge in this decade. This *In Dialogue* will highlight the visions and efforts of five global scholars, reframing literacy as we know it in their own terms. It is important to mention here that all five authors are invested in creating communities of learning, affinity, and advocacy, not just in developing their own agendas single-handedly. Community thinking has always been part of the Latin American ethos, and these examples that Raúl Alberto Mora and Claudia Cañas (Colombia), Patricia Rosas Chávez (México), and Cláudia Hilsdorf Rocha and Ruberval Franco Maciel (Brazil) will share in their essays are only a sample of this community.

Literacy Studies in Colombia: Toward Repositioning Our Field and the Circulation of Knowledge Production

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Literacy studies in our region, especially in the past decade, has faced a gradual shift, echoing different calls from around the world to renew the field, to move from just looking at reading and writing (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) as events detached from the social setting (Street, 1984; Street, 2014)—usually reflected in notions such as “alfabetización” or “lecto-escritura”—to placing the field within issues of equity and social justice (Comber, 2015; Janks, 2014) as well as recent technological and social shifts—usually reflected in the more progressive notion of “literacidad”¹ (Mora, 2012, 2016; Trigos-Carrillo, 2019a). This shift also coin-

cides with a growing interest among scholars in our region (including our fellow authors in this *In Dialogue*) in situating the Global South as home of the new generation of innovators in the field (Mora, 2016). As we look at literacy in our region, we think one of the major issues at hand is the recognition that a growing academic community—possibly inspired by efforts from the Global North—has progressed from replicating the existing frameworks to recreating them to face new realities in our sociopolitical context (Mora, 2016; Trigos-Carrillo & Rogers, 2017), in search of more equitable forms of knowledge sharing and distribution (Trigos-Carrillo, 2019b).

In this sense, we feel very optimistic that there is a growing Latin American strand of literacy studies that is becoming more activist, more sociopolitical, and more critically conscious about its role in shaping education and society. As this community keeps growing, one of the major challenges we will have to face is bringing together the different scholars and research communities that are emerging in places like Mexico and Brazil, across continental Latin America, and in the islands (e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic). How we improve our networks will be the key to the coming decade; we will need to think about how to strengthen our regional advocacy and policy efforts (Mora, 2016) to counter the ongoing neoliberal push toward a view of literacy that leans closer to the “back to basics” movement (as witnessed in the efforts to increase testing scores to climb the PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] rankings, for example).

In the case of Colombia (and Latin America, by extension), as noted by a recent panel at the Literacy Research Association Annual Conference (Calle-Díaz, 2019; Mora, Cañas, Gutiérrez-Arismendy, & López-Ladino, 2019; Trigos-Carrillo, 2019b), there are three notable strands of literacy studies that are beginning to define what the field will be like in this new decade (Calle-Díaz, 2019). The first strand is the discussion around literacy in our mother tongue (Trigos-Carrillo, 2019a)—in our case, Spanish—from academic and sociocultural perspectives of how we should engage with language. The second strand is direct engagement with media literacy as an urgent call for our society. In the midst of the growing social movements in our region, critical consumption and production of media will be paramount to the development of a more informed society that, in turn, can demand greater accountability from our governments and the fourth estate.

The last strand of literacy studies in Colombia (and the one we will zero in on for the remainder of this essay) is second language instruction (Mora, 2017; Mora et al., 2019a, 2019b), and specifically, how to move past traditional understandings of reading and writing, toward more creative and equitable frameworks to engage second language learners with literacy practices. This interest sparked the creation of the Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP; Mora, 2015; Pandya, 2019) at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in 2012. LSLP, as a research unit, is developing our idea of “literacies in second languages” (Mora, 2017) as a way to rewrite and rethink how we engage with literacy in places such as Colombia and the Global South, where there are multiple languages at play. The central premise of our research is that in- and out-of-school spaces present transformative possibilities for

language engagement in our communities. In the case of in-school literacies, our work explores how learners and teachers engage with critical literacy (Mora, 2014), multimodality and multiliteracies (Cañas, Ocampo, Rodríguez, López-Ladino, & Mora, 2018), and other current literacy frameworks in second language education at all levels in the preK–20 spectrum. Our out-of-school inquiries, on the other hand, explore the city as a learning site (Mora, Pulgarín, Ramírez, & Mejía-Vélez, 2018); the culture of gamers as second-language users (Gaviria, 2018) and their participation in gaming communities (Mora, Castaño, Londoño-Mazo, Ramírez, Mazo, & Mejía, 2019); and the digital literacy practices of second language users in online communities (Mora, Lee, & Gaviria, 2019).

Literacy studies in Latin America, as part of a call for the recognition of this region and the Global South at large, is an expanding topic, with a surge in scholarship from Latin America in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. One interesting feature of many literacy scholars in this region, therefore, is their ability and need to navigate multiple languages as they develop their scholarship and research, as a response to both the current flows of knowledge distribution (Trigos-Carrillo, 2019b) and the need to show that our issues, despite being regional, are global in reach (Mora, 2016). There is already a vast network of multilingual journals of language studies research (check this interactive map Raúl created and compiled at <http://bit.ly/LatAmJournals>), most of which are open-access, peer-reviewed journals. Our invitation is for our readers to seek out these journals, to learn from our efforts, and to engage with our research—not to provide external validation for our work, but to gain inspiration from it.

NOTE

1. The three terms mentioned in Spanish are all translated as “literacy” in English, but they have very different connotations, as Mora has explained in Spanish (Mora, 2012) and English (Mora, 2016) publications.

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A New Understanding of Literacy in Latin America

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New conceptions of literacy and literacy studies move with great effervescence throughout the world. In Latin America, one could say that the ghost of Freire's teachings is everywhere. We are at the dawn of a movement that fights for expanding ethical and educational awareness, which could be reflected in greater activism by researchers and educators who understand the systemic flaws that have, throughout history, brought forth poverty, inequity, and lack of opportunities in Latin America. This article describes a new understanding of literacy for social justice developed through the experience of one of Mexico's most prestigious public universities.

In the Latin American context, we live under several pernicious gaps, each overlapping one another. The first one is the economic gap, as described by Cañete Alonso (2015): "In 2014, the richest 10% of the population in the region accumulated 71% of Latin American wealth and patrimony. This concentration was so radical that in the same year, 70% of the poorest population barely managed to accrue 10% of the wealth" (p. 10). The economic gap has a critical impact on the education gap; as Ferreyra, Avitabile, Botero Álvarez, Haimovich Paz, and Urzúa (2017) note, only 28% of people ages 18 to 24 in this region have access to higher education, but people with higher incomes have more access. Regarding the digital gap, Galperín (2017) proposes the challenge that represents the 200 million people in Latin America who are not connected to the internet and thus cannot benefit from its economic and knowledge networks.

These gaps influence a cognitive one as well. Cognition is the capability of knowing; it is the basic structure of thinking that allows individuals to acquire new information, analyze it critically, apply said information to several scenarios, enrich and reflect around the learning offered by new knowledge, value its use in the community, and finally, expand on it. This structure aims at the creation of new knowledge that generates a memory, and that can be the base of an everlasting spiral of thought and work that can be synthesized in the cultural heritage of different nations.

The cognitive gap, as a basic thought structure, along with the other deficiencies mentioned above, feed the humanity gap. Poverty and inequity generate despair,

anger, and other emotions that foster an orientation toward individualism and violence as lifestyles. Places where institutional capabilities are low and; corruption, impunity, and indifference prevail become fertile land for the growth of organized crime, intrafamily violence, femicides, discrimination, and other cancers. Reducing the cognitive gap will allow us to face our reality differently, understand the context, and cultivate the knowledge necessary to foster a more humane society.

This context poses challenges for education: How shall we respond to the results of unequal access to scientific and technological breakthroughs? How could our countries catch up after being conquered and dispossessed for so many years? Responding to these and other questions requires a new understanding of literacy in Latin America. A way to observe this context, with a desire to carry out intervention in order to effect change, as approached by Rowsell and Pahl (2015): “Literacy takes place in communities to support people and to bridge different practices and perspectives. Literacy can act as an agent of change and can encourage new forms of activism, resistance, and revolution” (p. 1).

Understanding our reality, and the desire to transform it, resulted in the creation of a reading motivation program by the University of Guadalajara in 2010: *Letras para Volar*. This program aims to develop a new generation of independent critical readers, through leadership in providing access to books, encouraging the love of reading, and developing academic writing skills. Its philosophy involves four principles: to encourage the love of reading; to encourage scientific thinking; to rescue ancient Mexican traditions regarding their deep sense of friendship, colorful art, and respect for nature; and to promote social justice and solidarity. In nine years, the accomplishments of this program from an outreach perspective have included serving more than 46,000 elementary school students every week, as well as publishing 120 titles as a massive print run adding up to more than 750,000 books printed to this date.

At the same time, *Letras para Volar* has promoted the development of spaces for research and education. And therefore, in 2019, the creation of the Transdisciplinary Literacy Institute (ITRALI is its Spanish acronym) was approved to institutionalize these efforts. ITRALI is an academic space that intends to respond to problems related to reading, writing, and multimodal literacy to improve education through the generation and application of literacy. It seeks to educate high-level human resources to develop their speech analysis abilities, innovate educational practices, and to empower them to elevate literacy to a position of paramount importance in the public and government agenda as a human right of the Mexican people.

At ITRALI, we mainly use participatory research methods because our philosophy is to make knowledge available to the communities as we’re working to make a social impact. Our research projects seek to evaluate the effects of social interventions on teaching, reading comprehension, cognitive abilities, reading habits, and the evolution of reading communities; that is to say, they are research-action projects. Our primary educational venue is the Masters in Literacy Program.

In Spanish, *literacy* translates as *alphabetization*. The term *literacy* is seen in many spaces as an anglicism, nevertheless, the discourse analysis intends to make

a distinction in Spanish. Alphabetization is the ability to read and write, and its scope is mainly linguistic and psycholinguistic. Literacy, as the ability to analyze speech and to make meaning, has a vision with an enormous scope, as proposed by Street (2014). Our proposal is to promote literacy as a way of innovating education, to extend our awareness of the relationship between text, thought, language, reading, writing, and multimodality within the education process to improve cognition and to allow students to appropriate their cultural heritage and play an active role in society. Literacy has a transdisciplinary scope because it includes the ability to construct meaning from different text formats, as well as multiple domains of knowledge.

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Brazilian Views of Literacy Studies: Major Issues and Ongoing Social and Educational Challenges

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The concept of literacy can be approached from a range of different fields and perspectives, which likewise leads it to take on a plurality of possible meanings, as stated by Soares (1998, 2003). In this essay, we aim to explore the most prominent paths of literacy studies in Brazil, more specifically within the scope of language education. To do so, we refer to some (current) studies as a small sample of the vast body of Brazilian literacy research.

Several scholars (for example, Rojo & Moura, 2019) state that the term *letramento*, in Brazilian Portuguese, was first used by Kato (1986) to refer to the English word *literacy*. The late '80s and '90s were times of intense political, economic, sociocultural, and technological growth in Brazil, and such a term was necessary to describe the new educational demands (Soares, 1998, 2003). At first, the term *literacy*, in Brazilian studies, was used in association with the idea of “alfabetização” (alphabetization), to approach both the acquisition of the alphabetic and orthographic systems and their conventions, as well as the sociohistorical aspects and skills related to literacy practices (Soares, 1998). Long before *literacy* emerged as a well-respected concept in Brazil, Freirean theories (Freire, 1970) advocated for an *alphabetization* project which, as opposed to a *banking* concept of education, could involve more situated and meaningful reading and writing practices in schools. This philosophical and pedagogical view called for social awareness and fought to break free from oppressive social and educational dynamics (Mastrobuono, 2017).

Similarly, for Monte Mór (2015), the reception of (new) literacy studies in Brazil was aligned with a revival of Paulo Freire’s ideas (Freire, 1970, 2000, 2003, 2013), which brought new insights not only to the concepts of alphabetization and literacy, but also to Brazilian education as a whole. Brazilian literacy studies can be explained in terms of the contributions of three different generations. The first generation fought against the phonics methodologies, pursuing renewed and more equitable epistemologies, while the second was more strongly connected with Freire’s social concerns. Consequently, the second movement more emphatically questioned the universalist and oppressive views of literacy and education that had long silenced popular knowledge and voice. Resonating with scholars who highlighted the ideological nature of reading and writing as socially and culturally embedded practices (among others, Heath, 1983; Street, 1984), the concept of *literacy*, in Brazilian language education fields, was then and has since been based on a social and anthropological perspective (Rojo & Moura, 2019). Thus, Brazilian literacy studies have been deeply connected with the idea of the social uses of reading and writing in the world (Soares, 1998, 2003). Consequently, such studies

have focused on the diverse and culturally hybrid ways people (from different social and educational backgrounds and with different levels of literacy skills) have made use of (written and oral modes of) language to engage in social practices (Rojo, 2009; Rojo & Moura, 2019).

The second generation of literacy studies in Brazil represents a transition between a more traditional, that is, instrumental, cognitive, and disciplinary view of language, literacy, and educational practices, and a more open, uncentered, and dynamic orientation. In its turn, the third generation has vigorously challenged conventional and authoritative (language and culture) educational models. The works of many Brazilian scholars (Kleiman, 1995; Menezes de Souza & Monte Mór, 2006; Soares, 2010) have been aligned with (foreign) language and literacy studies that address the great diversity of cultural contexts and communities involved in both literacy practices and literacy events (Heath, 1983; Street, 2003, 2013). Such plurality leads to wide use of the term in its plural form: *letramentos* (Rojo, 2009). In Brazil, where both cultural diversity and inequality are prominent, such a situated and pluralistic view of literacies challenges the limited range of oral, written, and multimodal practices addressed in formal educational contexts, and questions what is generally understood as school and academic literacies (Fiad, 2015; Rojo, 2009; Rojo & Moura, 2009; Vian Junior, 2014).

Brazil's current generation of literacy studies is usually linked to the new/multiliteracies approaches (New London Group, 1996). Consequently, current views regarding literacy practices, in connection with multilingualism, multimodality, and multiculturalism, have promoted the goals of pluralistic education, active citizenship, and social justice in times of reflexivity (Takaki & Maciel, 2014). Likewise, some studies have contributed to expanding views of literacy research by connecting literacies with Bakhtinian theories (Rocha, 2012; Rojo, 2013; Rojo & Barbosa, 2015).

From the year 2000 onwards, a great deal of research in Brazil, mainly in the foreign language field, has revisited the notion of critical literacy (Menezes de Souza, 2011; Jordão, 2015; Jesus & Carbonieri, 2016; Maciel & Morgan, 2017; Mattos, 2017). This interest in criticality influences studies on curriculum policies (Menezes de Souza & Monte Mór, 2006), curriculum design (Duboc, 2015), and language and teacher education (Rocha & Maciel, 2015a) in varied contexts. Furthermore, the National Literacies Project (<http://letramentos.fflch.usp.br/sobre>), launched in 2009, can be considered an important nationwide source of new perspectives on education, (foreign) language, culture, and technology.

More recent Brazilian studies have been concerned with the onto-epistemological effects of new technologies and media on the dynamics of contemporary literacy practices (Araujo & Leffa, 2016; Braga, 2013; Junqueira & Buzato, 2013; Rocha, 2019a; Rojo, 2009; Rojo & Moura, 2019; Zacchi & Wielewichi, 2015). Also, questioning instrumental, universalist, and a-political views, a growing number of (media) literacy studies have addressed non formal educational spaces (Bunzen & Mendonça, 2013), identity construction, and questions of race, gender, sexuality, and social status (Windle & Ferreira, 2019).

As an attempt to fight the authoritative political, sociocultural, economic, and educational policies and discourses currently in place in Brazil (Pinheiro-Machado, 2019), which have allowed the survival of phonics methodologies, scholars and educators have conducted a range of studies on alphabetization, (multi)literacies, and (language) education politics and policies (Liberali & Megale, 2019; Tilio, 2019). Minoritized groups have received increased attention from Brazilian literacy studies, as a result of the rise of decolonial, participatory, and activist perspectives. Some works use terms like *letramentos de sobrevivência* (survival literacies; Maia, 2017), *letramentos de reexistência* (literacies of re-existence; Souza, 2011), and *literary re-existence literacies* (Neves, 2019) to highlight the counter-hegemonic power of performative (media) literacy practices in transgressive social and educational movements.

To challenge hegemonic and monolingual perspectives, some Brazilian scholars have approached literacies from dynamic (Potter & McDougall, 2017), affective (Massumi, 2015), sensory (Mills, 2016), and transdisciplinary standpoints (Maciel & Barbosa, 2019; Rocha, 2019b). Such approaches highlight the translingual, pluralistic, and transdisciplinary nature of literacies as situated and rhizomatic experiences (García & Maciel, in press; Rocha & Maciel, 2019). All in all, greatly inspired and encouraged by Freirean theories, Brazilian literacy researchers and educators have globally built a strong, richly diverse and counter-hegemonic scholarship, which can go on to inspire other generations and make Latin American dialogues stronger.

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