

## Production of Different Literacies / *A produção dos diferentes letramentos*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper we question the “modern” concept of literacy, observing it as it is a new theory aiming at replacing the concept of “alphabetization” and its practices so as to produce effective ways of inserting the subject in the worlds of writing and reading. We especially employ the Bakhtinian concepts of speech genres and responsible act on concrete utterances that exemplify the current teaching practice in order to show that the key problem in education is not the name change of a teaching practice, but it is both the mixture of two different realities when it comes to different levels of literacy or to different literacies and the unequal distribution of cultural goods in society.

**KEYWORDS:** Literacy; Alphabetization; Bakhtin Circle; Speech Genres; Responsible Act

### RESUMO

*Neste texto questionamos o conceito de letramento, da “modernidade”, observando-o como se fosse a nova teoria que vem para substituir o conceito de “alfabetização” e suas práticas, de modo a construir modos efetivos de inserção do sujeito no mundo da escrita. Utilizando-nos especialmente dos conceitos bakhtinianos de gêneros do discurso e também de ato responsável, a partir de enunciados concretos que exemplificam a prática docente atual, buscamos mostrar que o problema fundamental no ensino não está na mudança de nome de uma prática de ensino, mas tanto na mistura de duas realidades distintas quando se fala em diferentes níveis de letramento ou de diferentes letramentos, quanto na distribuição desigual dos bens culturais na sociedade.*

*PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Letramento; Alfabetização; Círculo de Bakhtin; Gêneros do discurso; Ato responsável*

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... the eternal struggle between theory and practice: One has instinct of youth, habits of activities and a fondness for future and progress; The other shows the coldness of mature age and an essentially prosaic and conservative nature, which is faithful to its past, its master, suspicious of the future that it does not know, harsh towards new ideas, whose mischievous moods make it impatient. One plays and hopes for tomorrow, it is like a child; the other scolds and sighs over yesterday, it is like a grandfather. One loves ideal and it is a repairer of *tuertos*, it is like Don Quixote; the other hates utopias and is pleased with the established order of things, like Sancho. In every field of human sciences, one may find those two rows of contenders face to face. While the new doctor bases his arguments regarding recent physiological findings, the old practical shrugs, smiles and formulates or operates. While the young scholar develops social science theories, transcendent views of law philosophy, the legal scholar, hoary in the forum, examines the articles of the code, goes over the letters of the law, advises the parties and disposes case files. Júlio Diniz, *Uma família inglesa* [An English Family] (our translation)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The counterpoint between theory and practice, which is employed by me here as an epigraph, appears when the characters Charles and Manoel Quintino argue about accounting process optimization. As presented by the narrator, this counterpoint enforces a separation between theory and practice, as if there were not constitutive relations between them. It is precisely because it outlines those worlds in black and white that the chosen epigraph can serve us as an indicator of an opposition to avoid when dealing with literacy and “alphabetization.”<sup>2</sup> It is an opposition that would mean

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt translated from the Portuguese version: ... a eterna luta entre a teoria e a prática; uma, com seus instintos de jovem, com seus hábitos de atividade, com seus amores pelo futuro e pelo progresso; outra, com a frieza da idade madura, com uma índole essencialmente prosaica e conservadora; fiel ao passado, que foi seu mestre, desconfiada do futuro, que não conhece, severa para com as ideias novas, cujos humores travessos a impacientam. Uma brincando e esperando no dia de amanhã, como criança; outra, ralhando e suspirando pelo dia de ontem, como avô; uma, apaixonada do ideal e reparadora de *tuertos*, como D. Quixote; outra, odiando utopias e contente com a ordem estabelecida das coisas, como Sancho. Em todos os campos da ciência humana se encontram, frente a frente, estas duas filas de contendores. Enquanto o médico novo baseia raciocínios sobre recentes descobertas fisiológicas, o prático velho encolhe os ombros, sorri, formula ou opera; enquanto o jovem letrado desenvolve teorias de ciência social, vistas transcendentales de filosofia de direito, o juriconsulto, encanecido no foro, examina os artigos do código, esmiúça a letra da lei, aconselha as partes e despacha os autos. Júlio Diniz, *Uma família inglesa*.

<sup>2</sup> TN. In Portuguese, there are two different concepts, “letramento” and “alfabetização,” which refer to teaching how to read and write. This article tackles the differences between them and their implications in education and once I could not find in English a proper synonym for literacy, I employed the word “alphabetization” and its derivatives (alfabetize, alphabetizations etc.) to translate “alfabetização”. Therefore, here “alphabetization” and its derivatives do not mean to arrange items in alphabetical order.

considering the first as the new theory developed to replace the latter and its practices and to perform other ways of insertion into the world of writing and reading.

The concept of literacy is very hard to specify, because it refers to subjects both as readers that access their abilities to move themselves in a world inhabited by texts and as authors of new texts, who enrich the legacy of concrete utterances available in different spheres of social communication of a given society.

Although the theoretical concept is not limited to the processes of initiation into the world of writing and reading, it is particularly to those that it has been applied by us, as if “literacy” were the name to be given to the initiation of social subjects in a world that would only be accessed by them through this process.

Textbooks for literacy incorporate this concept in their titles, government programs for training primary school teachers also make use of it on their titles (*Pró-letramento* [For Literacy]), and numerous courses and scholar works dealing with “literacy” are restricted to the period when one is learning one’s first letters. As a consequence of this approach, one can ask: “What are the changes implied by a designation change?”; that is the case of Zaccur (2011), who uses this question as a subtitle of her book *Alfabetização e letramento* [“Alphabetization” and literacy].

Another difficulty in understanding this expression is due to its quick expansion to different fields: the first stages of learning different subjects (mathematics, for example) or even the different practical techniques that do not make their users experts (Information technology, for example) began to be designated as “Mathematical literacy,” “Digital literacy,” “Legal literacy,” etc.

This expansion of the word use and the dubiousness of its meanings led me to believe that literacy is too broad a concept, covering such a range of phenomena that makes it epistemologically problematic (GERALDI, 2011). This criticism has nothing to do with biased restrictions on the utilization that has been socially given to the expression: The social practice of using an expression covers it with an aura of meaning which can be extremely diffuse, but does not stop language from functioning in face of those relative meaning indeterminations. The awareness of these (in a broader way) helps understanding the themes of the concrete utterances. I am employing here a

distinction that appears in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (VOLOŠINOV, 1986<sup>3</sup>).

Mottos as “*to alphabetize by literacy and to literate by alphabetizing*” only reaffirm this term’s special referential aspect to the early stages of the world of writing and reading (or to any world that it expresses – such as the world of mathematics and legal science – or to typing skills that has made press accessible from the typing machine until this surprisingly digital world).

I will not revisit here the study of this concept or the consequences of its assumption both in the scholar world and in the political world, which make use of such a concept to entitle their official programs. There is already extensive literature on the subject and on the moment when the concept stopped being a study hypothesis to become commonly used, being employed beyond the frontiers of theoretical studies. I would only like to register that no alphabetization performed before the “modern” concept of literacy has thought about it as a one-time process in which the learners were not expected to be writing and reading. Even these “alphabetizations,” which were believed to be only about learning stages of coding and decoding, thought that this learning would happen without contemplating the greater world of writing and reading and their social uses, because, if so, the efforts to alfabetize would be innocuous; thus, the access to the world of writing and reading is both in the alphabetization horizon and in the literacy, the latter being presented as a “new theory” (it does not occur without recovering past practices, including those alphabetization methods that were doomed by other critical studies). I am interested here in the adjective that comes next to it in the title of this study: “different literacies.” And I am mainly interested in problematizing the development of these “different” literacies.

## **1 Different Spheres of Social Communication**

As taught by Bakhtin (2013, p.60<sup>4</sup>) “all the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language” and these areas develop different speech genres. The more

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<sup>3</sup> TN. The full reference is VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R.Titunik. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. [1929]

complex the society is, the more it diversifies its various possibilities of human activity and the more complex is the set of relatively stable types of utterances, or speech genres, in circulation.

Taking in consideration this diversity (and its particularization) as characteristic of contemporary societies, we may say that we are distinctly skilled to socially use a language, because this always implies the employment of a speech genre. Obviously, we move around different areas or spheres of social communication and for this reason we master various speech genres. However, we do not move around all spheres with the same capacity: As not assiduous readers of the highly technical and specialized utterances from the fields of engineering, math, or visual arts, we will have greater difficulty reading them and we will be practically not able to produce them. The same applies to those, who are from such fields, when they face utterances from pedagogy or philosophy. We are at the same time competent and incompetent text readers and producers depending on our activity fields and on our movement around different areas of activity. If we designate every initial stage of every field as a process of “literacy,” there will be as many literacies as the inexhaustible possibilities of human activity specialization. And we would have different literacies, as the recent use of adjectives implies: digital, legal, philosophical literacies...

In this sense, the adjective “different” associated to literacy does nothing more than acknowledge the real complexity of the social uses of language. And we learned differently according to the different fields of activity – at the same time, we are literate and illiterate. Previously, we called it specialization, without the need to appeal to the “illiteracy” of readers and authors of texts, who, outside their own fields, are not “proficient” (to use here an expression which agrees with the contemporary likes) in remote areas of those social subjects needs and interests.

Certainly, the characteristic circulation of inhabitants in a complex world allows us to recognize and, sometimes, to comprehend what is not familiar to us. This happens because the speech genres keep relations between them, which are called intergeneric: no field of human activity exists without relationships with its exterior and, therefore, there are communicative exchanges, there are dialogues in greater or lower extent.

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<sup>4</sup> TN. The full reference is BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of Speech Genres. In: EMERSON, C.; HOLQUIST, M (Ed.). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Transl. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. p.60–102.

A careful reading of Bakhtin's work (2013<sup>5</sup>) regarding the speech genres can teach us two lessons: a) the origin of each genre is so closely related to the needs of a field of human activity that within it several interconnected genres are developed; b) no field of human activity is isolated because all of them were also shaped by language and its functioning ways (for example, considering that the linguistic signs are historically and ideologically featured, no language activity can be neutral or detached from the social world).

Cristina Campos, who is a teacher in a municipal school on the outskirts of Campinas, SP, is used to writing chronicles about events that take place in her classes. These chronicles are referred by her research group as "popcorns," because the events pop up in the daily routine of every school, class and teacher. Let's read one of those delightful chronicles.

#### A magazine's preferences

Yesterday one of my pupils asked me to learn how to write my name and today that request was restated:

- Cristina, today we are going to write your name, aren't we? – I smiled at him and answered yes. Subsequently to a group chat, a reading and a storytelling performed by them, I said to all of them:

- Well, now we are going to write my name, but we will need to look for it in a magazine. The boy, the smallest one of the group, asked me:

- Why are you in the magazine?

- I'm not in the magazine, João, or even better, we are all in the magazine! – By the look in their eyes, I noticed that nobody understood what I meant, then I whispered:

- I will tell you a secret! – Can you keep a secret? – They nodded their heads and held their breaths:

- Good! The magazines have eaten and eat all the letters in the world. They go wherever there are letters for them to eat and so do books, newspapers and....

Before I could finish it, Hugo said:

- Is that the reason why we come to school? Is that because they eat letters? – I just nodded my head to confirm it in order not to laugh about his surprised expression.

I explained the activity and handed them the magazines. After a while, João asks me another question:

- Teacher, we eat food, and magazines eat letters. Is that right?

- That's it. Do you prefer eating letters or food? – He thought for a little while and answered:

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<sup>5</sup> TN. See footnote 4.

- I prefer pasta! – And just as I was about to answer, Hugo states the following:
- Teacher, I guess that magazines don't like some letters, just like we don't like vegetables, because the one I'm with has no T!<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the complicity and the exchange of secrets between the teacher and the pupils that this chronicle indicate, the circulation of different magazines in the classroom with the purpose of finding the teacher's name shows that the process of language teaching is extremely porous in the sense of it letting itself be penetrated by the most different use of language and, therefore, by the most diverse speech genres.

However, it does not seem to me that this porosity agrees with the idea that it would be a school's duty to introduce all speech genres in circulation in a given society to its students. If this were a mother's language teaching goal, it would never be possible for a student to finish his/her studies because he/she would always be "illiterate" in one of the spheres of social communication among the different fields of human activity. And more than that it would mean that it is the school's responsibility to teach everything, as if one could not learn anything from life and establish relations that even the greatest educational program would not be able to handle.

It is not suitable to the primary school to teach all the different literacies, in the meaning that we are regarding to "different" in this section. It is suitable for the school to recognize the multiplicity of genres and from it choose some – and, therefore, opt for

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<sup>6</sup> Chronicle translated from the Portuguese version:

O Gosto da Revista

Ontem um dos pequenos me pediu para aprender a escrever meu nome e hoje o pedido foi renovado:

- Cristina a gente vai escrever seu nome hoje né? - Olhei sorrindo para ele e respondi que sim. Depois da roda de conversa, leitura e contação de história feita por eles falei para todos:

- Bom agora a gente vai escrever meu nome, mas vamos procurar na revista. Ele, o mais pequeno da turma, perguntou:

- Você tá na revista por quê?

- Não estou na revista João, ou melhor, estamos todos na revista! - Pelas caras notei que nessa hora ninguém entendeu nada, então falei baixinho:

- Vou contar um segredo para vocês! - Vocês sabem guardar segredo? - Balançaram a cabeça, prendendo a respiração:

- Bom é que as revistas comeram e comem todas as letras do mundo, onde elas sabem que tem letras, elas vão lá e comem tudo, os livros, jornais e...

Antes que eu terminasse Hugo falou:

- É por isso que a gente vem pra escola? Porque elas comem as letras? - Só balancei a cabeça afirmando, para não rir, tamanho a cara de espanto dele.

Explicada a atividade distribui as revistas, passado pouco tempo nova pergunta de João:

- Prô, a gente come comida e a revista as letras?

- Isso mesmo. Você prefere comer letra ou comida? - Pensou um pouco antes e respondeu:

- Prefiro macarrão! - Quando eu ia responder Hugo solta essa:

- Professora, acho que a revista não gosta de algumas letras, igual a gente não gosta de verdura, essa aqui não tem o T!

some spheres of communication – which are essential. Among these it would certainly be the fields of literature and arts, because the access to such cultural goods, humanity’s wealth, should be preferred by the school. One should not be afraid of learning from life and for this reason it would be a waste of time to be teaching how to “read an electricity invoice.” This was a lesson that I have found in a textbook for 8/9-year-old kids. By the way, who, besides those who work with accounting, would call “a power bill” an “invoice”?

## 2 Social Inequalities and Literacy Levels

Let us start this section with a piece of a teacher’s narrative:

I worked at a school in the outskirts, which was the farthest from the city center and was located in the poorest region of the city. It was bordered by a main avenue, but all the neighborhood streets were dirty. Very few houses were made of brick; the vast majority were shacks without sanitation or lighting. I daily faced two completely distinguished realities: In the mornings, I went to a private school, where all the students were clean, tidy and with their uniforms on. They had full lunch boxes and every sort of school supply. In the afternoons, poverty was daunting: The malnourished kids were hungry and wearing the slippers and the clothes they could find, which often were larger or smaller than they were. I crossed the city by car to get to school exactly at 1:00 p.m., the time when kids were arriving. As soon as they arrived, I took attendance and we had lunch. They ate a lot. Their relatives (adults and teenagers) used to stay outside the school gates, waiting for the kids to feel “satisfied” and to pass them a plate of food under the gate so they could also eat (BALSAMO, 2014, p.29-30, our translation<sup>7</sup>).

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<sup>7</sup> Excerpt translated from the Portuguese version: Trabalhei numa escola de periferia, a mais distante do centro urbano, na região mais pobre da cidade. Esta beirava uma avenida principal, mas as ruas do bairro eram todas de terra. Pouquíssimas casas eram de alvenaria; a grande maioria eram barracos sem iluminação ou saneamento básico. Encontrava diariamente duas realidades completamente distintas: de manhã a escola particular, com todos os alunos limpinhos, penteados, com as lancheiras fartas, material completo, uniformizados. À tarde, uma pobreza assustadora: crianças subnutridas, esfomeadas, calçando chinelos e roupas que tivessem à disposição, muitas vezes maiores ou menores do que elas. Atravessando a cidade de carro, conseguia chegar exatamente às 13h00, junto à entrada das crianças, na nova escola. Assim que entravam na sala, fazia a chamada e íamos almoçar. Elas comiam muito. Seus parentes (adultos e adolescentes) permaneciam do lado de fora dos portões, esperando que, depois de “satisfeitos”, passassem o prato de comida por baixo do portão para que também pudessem comer (BALSAMO, 2014, p.29-30).



This requires no further comments: there are not only differences in society; there are inequalities. Differences enrich human experience; inequalities deform humanity.

In the press, two major economic groups, whose leaders participate in the movement “Todos pela educação” [“All for Education”], pointed out the reasons for their concern and engagement with education.<sup>8</sup> One of them pointed to the fact that their industries in Brazil, although using the same technology of overseas factories, had lower productivity rate. It ordered a study of the differences between them and it was pointed out that the only difference was the Brazilian workers’ lower level of schooling in comparison to the workers from other countries where other production units of the group were located. As a solution to increase industrial productivity, the great entrepreneur developed an education plan for their employees, and today nobody is hired by the group without having at least finished High school, even for serving coffee.

The other group owns a factory in a northeastern city in Brazil where the educational system is recently presented as a model: A country town where the factory employs more than 60% of the economically active workforce. Thanks to the state government incentives for education, its productivity has increased in the last years and the group’s leader shows his satisfaction by having his factory located in this municipality.

The relationship between productivity and education is openly stated in these engagements and it shows how far the actual customers of the school system are from the public schools. For this reason, the concern with schooling emerged in recent decades, when the Brazilian elite stopped being exclusively constituted by landowners. Agribusiness and industry sectors gained ground in economic development in such a way that a modern capitalism arrives in the country and changes a little the narrow-minded national elite. However, this more modern capitalism meets a general lack of good basic education in Brazil, a historical damage that dates back to approximately 500 years ago. We must not forget the following figure: It was only in the last decade of the last century that we reached around 100% enrollments of school age children (and in that same year – 1998, more than three million kids were out of school!).

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<sup>8</sup> I do not indicate here the name of those two economic groups, because they are only taken as examples of the relation between education and productivity. The interviews and reports were published by a major national newspaper with a difference of more than a year between one and the other.

This social reality also produces “different” literacies: A difference that is not an enriching one, but which is a consequence of inequality. And what does this have to do with literacy in contemporaneity?

Unfortunately, “reading and writing” plans that are proper to the social conditions and demands from the subjects that are recently going to school end up spreading different “literacies levels,” in such a way that in accordance to those levels even those who are unlettered can be considered “literate”:

A final inference that can be drawn from the concept of *literacy* is that an individual who cannot read and write, that is, *unlettered*, is somehow *literate* (attributing to this adjective a meaning related to *literacy*). Thus, an adult may be unlettered, because he/she is socially and economically marginalized, but if he/she lives in an environment in which reading and writing have a strong presence and he/she is interested in *listening* to the newspaper reading done by a lettered person, if he/she receives letters and has others reading them to him/her and he/she dictates what a lettered person should write in the letters (and it is significant that, in general, he/she dictates using vocabulary and language structures that are proper for writing), if someone asks you to read warnings or indications that are affixed somewhere, this unlettered person is, somehow, *literate*, because he/she makes use of writing, engages in social practices of reading and writing (SOARES, 1998, p.24, our translation<sup>9</sup>).

[...] what are the reading and writing skills that would make a person “literate”? What kind of written texts should a person be able to read and write in order to be considered “literate”?

The answers to the above questions are quite problematic. The skills that constitute literacy are continuously distributed; each point of this continuous way indicates different kinds and levels of skills, abilities and knowledge, which can be employed to different kinds of written texts.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpt translated from the Portuguese version: Uma última inferência que se pode tirar do conceito de *letramento*, é que um indivíduo pode não saber ler e escrever, isto é, ser *analfabeto*, mas ser, de certa forma, *letrado* (atribuindo a este adjetivo sentido vinculado a *letramento*). Assim, um adulto pode ser analfabeto, porque marginalizado social e economicamente, mas, se vive em um meio em que a leitura e a escrita têm presença forte, se se interessa em *ouvir* a leitura de jornais feita por um alfabetizado, se recebe cartas que outros leem para ele, se *dita* cartas para que um alfabetizado as escreva (e é significativo que, em geral, dita usando vocabulário e estruturas próprios da língua escrita), se pede a alguém que lhe leia avisos ou indicações afixados em algum lugar, esse analfabeto é, de certa forma, *letrado*, porque faz uso da escrita, envolve-se em práticas sociais de leitura e escrita (SOARES, 1998, p.24).

<sup>10</sup> Excerpt translated from the Portuguese version: que tipos de material escrito um indivíduo deve ser capaz de ler e escrever para ser considerado “letrado”?

Respostas a tais questões são bastante problemáticas. As competências que constituem o letramento são distribuídas de maneira contínua, cada ponto ao longo deste contínuo indicando tipos e níveis de habilidades, capacidades e conhecimentos, que podem ser aplicados a diferentes tipos de material escrito. (SOARES, 1998, p.70-71)

The key issue is that two distinguished realities are mixed up when one talks about different levels of literacy or about different literacies. The first involves every complex society, in a way that every subject is at the same time literate and illiterate, depending on the fields of activities, the knowledge that are demanded and the kind of language which is employed. The latter is a result of social inequality, which unevenly distributes cultural goods, in particular, those expressed by written language.

A school, no matter which school it is, should not adopt different levels of literacy for distinct social subjects. This would restrict some “adequate answers” in their social contexts whereas others would count with a literacy that allows them to comprehend the social relationships, to deepen them or to make efforts to change them in a critical way. A school should never aim at “proper answers,” but at critical answers and, to reach critical awareness, it is necessary for the school to define itself as a teaching-learning place not of all fields of human activity (and, therefore, responsible for introducing all speech genres to the social subjects), but of socially deprived areas that enable the constitution of critical and ethically responsible subjects. I refer here to the concept of responsibility as it is found in Bakhtin (2010<sup>11</sup>), that is: not a moral responsibility of one with oneself, but an ethical responsibility grounded on the relation with otherness.

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<sup>11</sup> TN. The full reference is BAKHTIN, M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. 3 ed. Trans. V. Liapunov and Edited by V. Liapunov and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999. [1920-1924]

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