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De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement

De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement is a compact book filled with ideas about and actions on literacy, engagement, and comprehension of both the self and the world around us. Amélie Lemieux, a Canadian professor who researches digital literacy practices and maker-education, steps forward here to champion a more integrated, organic embrace of reading engagement. From this, we gain not only a call to action but an educator's tool to use in the continued effort to better understand the involved, immersive nature of literacy.

In taking on how we have traditionally defined and approached literacy and what it is to be 'literate' in educational settings, Lemieux reframes the ongoing conversation about how we assess comprehension and our position as learners in the engagement process. As the author herself states, *De/constructing Literacies* is about the multiple, concurrent (and sometimes messy) dimensions to reading engagement through the perspective of the *other*: of a student *being-with* the reading content—its characters, its environment, its journeys and consequences—and studying the internal and external exploration that comes from that. By dissecting the deeply researched field of reading engagement, she unfolds it as a holistically aesthetic experience, ultimately outlining the gap between our traditional assessment of reading and our actual experience of it: We test knowing *about* books, when in fact the true engagement is in *living-through* and *-with* them (p.41).

Central to this is her focus on posthumanism and actively *being-with* an experiential storyline, such as a novel or movie; the idea that literacy is a relationship of emergence created by the various human and nonhuman interactions that make up our collective environment at any given moment. It positions the reader/viewer as part of an assemblage, shifting them away from ownership of a narrative and towards a more relational power dynamic, thus developing 'comprehension' as a series of connections rather than definitions. Here we see how new materialism and Deleuzian *becoming* are foundational in framing the approach and purpose of this book and its practices. Lemieux connotes literacy as part of the individual act of becoming when quoting academic Michelle Honeyford's experience with reading: "I become both de-centered and centered, part of the larger forces of the world around me; their movement and becoming part of my own (15)." In this decentering, the author expresses engaged reading as the transformational process of embracing multidimensional perspective.

This is the opposite of the fixed identity that “reading engagement has had a long tradition of being defined as (p.23).” Lemieux is saying that reading is anything but a static experience. She asks us to stop measuring it in one-dimensional increments and focus instead on the synergistic effects that work in coordination the multiple ways we engage and are involved with reading. For her, there’s a sense of responsibility here— because patterns of engagement are both “emotionally and intellectually oriented, and not necessarily at the expense of one or the other (p. 116),” we should be able to expect education to permeate and at least *glimpse* that complexity (p.128). By carefully researching and laying out the ways in which reading and literacy are more amorphous and complex than the dualistic, subject-object encounter it is often regarded as, Lemieux proves the pragmatism of aesthetic appreciation and that institutional change is a realistic endeavor.

It is helpful to approach the book as a collection of essays rather than as sequential chapters (there are five). In this way, we can appreciate the full title, “—*Considerations for Engagement*,” as an assemblage in itself that explores the author’s research and introspections on multimodal learning and presence. Between personal expression, academic research, and philosophical musing, Lemieux builds her position that engagement in reading is multi-faceted, active, and tangled within varying modes of learning—and should, and in fact can, be measured as such. The book is a call to action for researchers and practitioners to honor the holistic involvement of comprehension processes, and is a larger argument about how, as educators, we quantify *experience*. Reading is “active meaning-making” and instrumental in social imagination—that “capacity to make connections (p.44)” which builds empathy and, in turn, furthers comprehension and our process of *becoming*.

Acts of *becoming* are entities and concepts in motion, and Lemieux explores the ideas of active engagement literally and figuratively throughout the book. Movement in fact becomes a thread that ties sometimes seemingly-disparate thoughts together: The author moves from discussing the act of building ekphrastic poetry from introspective walking and the experiential pathways created by placing a Little Free Libraries system on university grounds—both expressions of *being-with* the environment and objects around us and understanding ourselves through that external lens—to the nonlinear, meandering ways in which reading comprehension uniquely forms and the act of visualizing this intangible thought process on paper by creating a map that, in and of itself, is a symbol of movement.

In discussing this visual projection of literacy, Lemieux creates for us a book that is also a toolkit, sharing well-documented research into her continued development and use of Aesthetigrams, an active reflective practice pioneered by her mentor, Boyd White, that aids students with critical thinking and explores not just the interactions happening in a piece of media, but also the intra-actions happening within the student through that experience. By mapping the process of understanding and association in a decentralized format, students are removed from themselves and able to reflect on their role as a member of an experience, not the definer of it.

What is critical with Aesthetigrams is that they provide tangible artifacts that can be studied and assessed, as students physically connect their thoughts to actions through writing—literally mapping the complicated and messy ways our brains develop connections (stickiness). Lemieux’s argument is that *this* is what is at the heart understanding comprehension: That Aesthetigrams, as a visual and verbal practice, explore our entanglements with reading—and that engaged reading is involved, relational and plural. Reading, as Lemieux states, is like “a puzzle” (p.6) and the mapping she studies is about the reader’s reflective process of metacognitively exploring where and how they place themselves into the larger ecosystem of that particular experience.

Important also to this is that through mapping, it is *students* who are identifying their engagement with the work they are studying and what that looks like, not an instructor or test. As Lemieux states, “students should be the ones showing us what reading engagement means, as they are the ones doing the reading (p.40).” With Aesthetigrams, they can. Specific to this method is that it decenters the reader/creator, offering a lived experience through thoughtful but external perception. With that, educators and learners have a unique opportunity to visualize not only comprehension, but its process, mapping the indirect, nonlinear way we individually come to conclusions and where and how readers are positioned in the relationship with reading/experience.

This book is as complicated as it is crucial—the themes and ideas in *De/constructing Literacies* are critical and dynamic for those in media literacy research and practice, though its language and structure assume prior conceptual understanding of Aesthetigrams and the philosophy Lemieux uses to inform them, including posthumanism and phenomenology. While its heavy use of academic lexicon can feel daunting and at times preclusive to the very sense of *flow* she discusses as necessary to the aesthetic experience of literacy, *De/constructing Literacies* is essential to advancing the cause and conversation about reframing what is possible in educational engagement. The amount of meaningful

conceptualization that Lemieux puts forth in just 147 pages speaks to the depth and breadth of her dedication to this effort. By declaring from the very beginning that “there is no such thing as immaculate literacies (p.2),” she advocates for what is beautiful in the sticky, labyrinthine act of literacy and comprehension, and for that, Lemieux and her work should be celebrated.

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