

BOOK REVIEW

De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement

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Book review

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Lemieux, A. (2020). *De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement*. Peter Lang, Inc.



De/constructing Literacies: Considerations for Engagement is a compact book filled with action-oriented ideas and examples illustrating 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 to champion a more integrated, organic embrace of reading engagement. In this book, readers will find a call to action and tools to use in the continued effort to better understand the involved, immersive nature of literacy.

Lemieux discusses how education systems have traditionally defined and approached literacy including what it means to be literate in different educational settings. The author reframes the ongoing conversation about how educators assess comprehension and the position of learners in the engagement process. As the author states, *De/constructing Literacies* is about the multiple, concurrent (and often messy) dimensions of reading engagement through the perspective of the *other* meaning through the students' *being-with* the reading content. *Being-with* is a concept Lemieux uses to represent the decentralization of the reader's subjective orientation during the engagement process. This heightens awareness of the internal and external exploration that comes from that experience. By dissecting the deeply researched field of reading engagement, the author unfolds that process as a holistically aesthetic experience, ultimately outlining the gap between standardized Western assessments of reading and the actual experience of it: Learners are tested on their knowledge about books, when in fact the true engagement is in *living-through* and *-with* them (p. 41).

Lemieux focuses on posthumanism and actively *being-with* an experiential storyline, such as a novel or movie. The book explores the idea that literacy is a relationship of emergence created through various human and nonhuman interactions that make up our collective environment at any given moment. This vantage point, informed by the author's interest in phenomenological hermeneutics, positions readers/viewers 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 by referencing the concept of decentering

during the reading process, thus describing engaged reading as the transformational process of embracing multidimensional perspective. "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" (Honeyford, 2015, as cited by Lemieux, p. 15).

This is the opposite of the fixed identity that "reading engagement has had a long tradition of being defined as" (p. 23). The author is saying that reading is anything but a static experience. She asks educators to stop measuring it in one-dimensional increments and focus instead on the synergistic effects that work by coordinating the multiple ways we engage and are involved with reading. There is a request for responsibility here: we should be able to expect education to permeate and at least *glimpse* the complexity of engagement patterns, as they are both "emotionally and intellectually oriented, and not necessarily at the expense of one or the other" (p. 116). Reading and literacy are more complex than the dualistic, subject-object encounter it is often regarded as. By looking into this complexity, Lemieux advocates for the pragmatism of aesthetic appreciation and claims 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 second part of the title: "*Considerations for Engagement*". The book is as a body of work 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. She claims that it can and should be measured as such. The book is a call to action for researchers and practitioners within the education field to honor the holistic involvement of comprehension processes. It is also a larger argument about how this field quantifies experience. Reading is "active meaning-making" and instrumental in social imagination. It is that "capacity to make connections" (p. 44) which builds empathy and, in turn, furthers comprehension and our process of becoming who we are meant to be.

The process of becoming involves multiple entities and concepts in motion, and Lemieux explores the ideas of active engagement literally and figuratively throughout her 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, to introspective walking, and the experiential pathways created by placing the Little

Free Libraries system on university grounds. All these events are seen as expressions of being-with the environment and objects around us and understanding ourselves through that external lens. The author goes on to discuss 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 a book that is also a toolkit, sharing well-documented research into her continued development and use of *aesthetigrams*. This is an active reflective practice pioneered by her mentor, Boyd White, that aids students with critical thinking. It 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 can reflect on their role as participants of an experience without defining it.

What is critical about *aesthetigrams* is that they provide tangible artifacts that can be studied and assessed. Students physically connect their thoughts to actions through writing literally mapping the complicated and messy ways our brains develop connections via simultaneous, multi-modal processes (referred to as a “sticky” in Lemieux’s work). The argument is that this is what is at the heart of 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). 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 experience.

Connected to this is the idea 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 in *De/constructing Literacies* are critical and dynamic for those in education research and practice including media literacy. It is important to mention that the language and structure of the book 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. For that, Lemieux and her work should be celebrated.