



So Many Literacies

Author Lauren Rosenberg talks about what she's learned about writing in the lives of adult learners.

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In *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*, a recent addition to the CCC/NCTE Studies in Writing & Rhetoric (SWR) Series, author **Lauren Rosenberg** makes it abundantly clear that being nonliterate is not synonymous with being unintelligent, or being unable to participate fully in society.

At the same time, her journey alongside four adults working to develop their writing skills demonstrates how literacy can provide powerful structures that focus and strengthen an individual’s contributions to a community.

Early in our interview, Rosenberg, who is associate professor and writing program director at New Mexico State University, corrected my use of the word illiterate.

“Illiteracy suggests illness, and not just individual illness but some kind of social illness,” she explains. “Our culture frames the nonliterate as being lesser. It’s important to get away from the idea that a person who doesn’t have the benefits of reading and writing has something wrong with them.”

Rosenberg focused her study on four adult learners, working closely with them as she tracked their transition from being nonliterate to being more accomplished readers and writers with their own unique, narrative voices. Their prose became a key element of *The Desire for Literacy*. (In her acknowledgments, Rosenberg refers to them as “participant-authors,” and adds that they “*are* this book.”)

“They knew so much,” she says of the cohort. “It was an opportunity to work with older people with such rich lives and so much knowledge to share. And all four of them could reflect on how they’d been positioned as nonliterate people.”

In Rosenberg’s experience, most literate people take their literacy for granted. “We never think about it,” she points out. “We’ve had it all our lives.” The nonliterate, though, have a firsthand understanding of how literacy can function—in Rosenberg’s words (informed by Paolo Freire and J. Elspeth Stuckey)—as “social violence.” “I learned what it’s like when literacy is turned against you,” she says.

For example, a learner Rosenberg worked with told her that he suffered in legal situations. He spoke of the lawyer who told him to sign divorce papers without explaining their content. The lawyer assumed he couldn't comprehend the document's meaning because he couldn't read the words, confusing literacy with intelligence.

One of the group, whom Rosenberg refers to as "George," told stories of a boss who humiliated him by asking him to complete tasks that required reading. George was especially cognizant of how others perceived him. "If you're George and you can't read and write, you're going to do really complicated things to cover for that," Rosenberg explains. Working at a forge, George developed his own math formulas to make up for those he'd never learned. "The systems he came up with were a lot more complicated than just learning an equation and plugging things in," Rosenberg says. "He was *creating* the formulas."

She says she was often surprised by what motivates adult learners. "It's not just acquiring credentials or job advancement," she says. "Some reasons are very personal, like writing letters to faraway relatives. There's also the desire to reflect on their own experiences, and to analyze them."

Before inviting the four to participate in her study, Rosenberg spent six months observing adults at a literacy center in western Massachusetts. She learned that older students had the most consistent attendance and the fewest demands on their time. Of the chosen participants, only one had child-rearing duties. The others were retired and on disability.

"What they all had in common was that they used their bodies for their work," Rosenberg says. "And they

all started working really young. That was an important part of shaping who they were." Physical labor, and the resulting injuries, had led to early retirement. "What they wanted to do with their time was study," Rosenberg says.

Rosenberg describes "Lee Ann" as the most vulnerable of the four. "People would ask about her sanity," she says. "She'd spout this wild [religious] stuff and was very susceptible to TV evangelism. It was fascinating to me to discover what was underneath all that."

Rosenberg recognized in Lee Ann a search for fundamental truths, and saw that search reflected in her direct, unadorned prose. "She was getting at the core of how she'd been positioned throughout her life," Rosenberg says. "She'd been really vulnerable as a nonliterate single woman. But she was powerful in many ways. She knew a lot about how to get by in the world."

Two of the participants—"Violeta" and "Chief"—were keen to create change in their communities. "Chief especially wanted to reach out to other people and share his ideas," Rosenberg remembers. "He wanted literacy in order to understand more and to participate more. He was using self transformation in order to create social transformation."

Chief saw himself as a community leader, and had public responsibilities that included being a church trustee and singing with a successful gospel choir. "He frames himself as someone with the responsibility to lead others, and he uses his writing to do that," Rosenberg says. "He circulates things at church; he brings relatives to community literacy programs." Chief also models the concept of education as a lifelong experience. "It's this ongoing thing for him, something to do his whole life," Rosenberg says. "And he shares that imperative with other people."

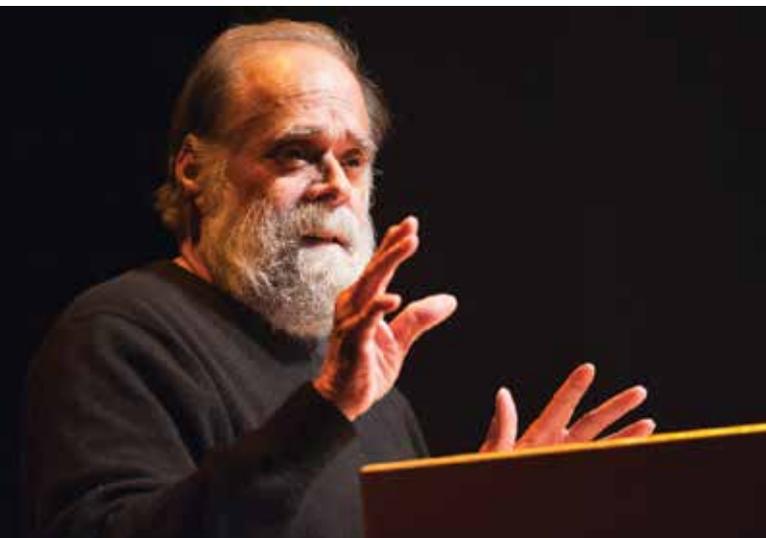


Adult learners want their voices to be heard and their stories to be told to people who will listen.

—Lauren Rosenberg, in "Adult Nonliteracy: A Silent Epidemic." *Media Planet/USA Today*, Education and Career News special supplement on adult literacy. December 4, 2015.

<http://www.educationandcareernews.com/higher-education/adult-nonliteracy-a-silent-epidemic>

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Victor Villanueva is Regents Professor and Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts at Washington State University. A former editor of the Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series (2012–2016), he's also the author of *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color* and the editor of three editions of *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*.

Ellen M. Gil-Gómez, another former student of Villanueva's, published a thoughtful conversation with him in the Spring 2012 issue of *Composition Forum*: "For Rhetoric, the text is the world in which we find ourselves: A Conversation with Victor Villanueva" <http://bit.ly/2dLqqCn>

Violeta was the youngest of the four, with the responsibility of raising both children and grandchildren. An enthusiastic writer, she developed an extensive portfolio and was eager to share it. "She used her writing for lots of purposes," Rosenberg says. "She examined her life and re-storied it. She used her writing to redefine herself as a model for others, mostly for Latina single mothers."

Rosenberg devotes a significant portion of the book to the practice of re-storying. "It takes us back to an idea that originated in narrative psychology," she says. "You can use writing to reexamine and even correct an impression. You can change how you see yourself, and how others see you. You can correct the narrative that's been used against you and that's portrayed you in a way you don't want to be portrayed."

Violeta, who is HIV positive, used her new abilities to read medical journals and to take charge of her own

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—Lauren Rosenberg

health care. She has also participated in creating a DVD as a community outreach project on living with HIV, and she gave a conference presentation on her situation. "She has succeeded in reaching out to the single mothers that she had once speculated about helping," Rosenberg says. "She's doing it, and she's inspiring others."

Rosenberg's own writing process mirrored the evolution of the cohort she'd been observing. Like them, she sought out feedback from peers and mentors, and made changes that deepened her work. During the critical review process, one reader expressed significant concern, questioning whether the book qualified as scholarly research. "A lot of the work is the telling of stories," Rosenberg explains. "It's not especially measurable."

Her resulting conversations with colleague Victor Villanueva, then editor of the SWR Series, led to a major revision. "I wanted to draw out this idea that the four people in the book were actually using narrative to analyze literacy," she says. "Narrative was there as an example of a new methodology. These four people were theorizing about literacy through their own narratives."

Rosenberg credits the breakthrough to Villanueva, who is Regents Professor and Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts at Washington State University. "He drew me out as a writer in a way that nobody ever had before," she says. "He pushed me. We talked about how to mix theory and narrative, and about the absolute parallel that exists there."

Like the four subjects of the book, Rosenberg used her writing as a path to greater self-awareness. "Victor helped me see my writer's role as a constant investigation of myself, of the research, of the four participants, and of the theoretical argument I was trying to make," she says. "He helped me bring all those things together."

Rosenberg's relationship with her four participants has come full circle since the publication of *The Desire for Literacy*. Eager to share the book with those who made it possible, she met with each of them individually—and watched as they recognized their own words on the page. "It was very intense," she says. "I'd been thinking

about their language and how they use their own writing, and there we were. They could actually see their words in print and reflect on them.”

The experience generated Rosenberg’s scholarly curiosity about what happens when participants return to a study after the initial work has been completed.

“We talk a lot about reciprocity and about subjects sharing in the interpretation of data,” she says. “But I couldn’t find any scholarship that looked at the perspectives of participants after publication. And it was so clear that the process wasn’t over. All four of them looked at their own words on the page and it opened them up again. They had *new* reflections.”

For Rosenberg, that continuing act of reflection is key. It echoes her belief in writing as a means to self-awareness, and her insistence that we remain open to the many forms of literacy utilized beyond the classroom.

“We can reach beyond school settings,” she says. “We can help students see that their literacy practices are applicable where *they* choose. Literacy can link them to social media. They can use it to reach out to family. They can use it in church. They can use it to reflect on their own lives. There are really so *many* literacies that we can practice.”

Norman Allen is a freelance writer and playwright based in Washington, DC. His essays and commentary have appeared in *The Washington Post* and in *Smithsonian* and *Yes* magazines. Follow him on Twitter: @WriterNorm.



Disrupting Subordination

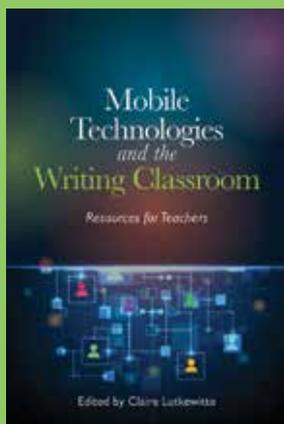
“It was important to me to make the four participants’ voices prominent. I did this in the narrative chapters by putting their words in the main font and subordinating my words in italics. To use Krista Ratcliffe’s phrase, I was ‘standing under’ the voices of participants. Visually, this challenges the way we read because we expect the author to be the prominent voice and study subjects to appear indented on the page, but I saw these formatting conventions as another form of subordination that I sought to disrupt.”

Lauren Rosenberg on EdTalk Radio

“We tend to believe that everybody in this country is going to go through the system and get what they need to be good literate citizens. That’s actually kind of a flawed idea—it doesn’t always happen.”

Lauren Rosenberg talks about adult literacy learners and adult illiteracy with Larry Jacobs of Education Talk Radio (0:40:00).

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