

Book Review: *The Handbook of Discourse Processes*

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The Handbook of Discourse Processes. Arthur C. Graesser, Morton Ann Gernsbacher, and Susan R. Goldman Eds., 2003. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum (10 Industrial Ave., Mahwah, NJ, 07430-2262). Cloth, 552 pages.

When I first opened the *Handbook of Discourse Processes*, I fully expected to be an informed reader. After all, I have read quite a lot of the literature on discourse analysis and the concept of discourse in sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, literary theory and cultural studies. I was only partially right. Although much of the work as well as chapter authors were familiar, I had not previously been aware of the *field* of discourse processes under which these researchers of disparate disciplines and approaches locate themselves. Discourse processes is a distinct field that distinguishes itself from certain approaches to the study of discourse. According to the editors, the Handbook is the first collection that attempts to both represent current research in the field and point toward its future. In this review, I begin with a discussion of the editor's introduction to the volume and then move to discussions of several chapters that should be of particular interest to literacy researchers.

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The editors, Graesser, Gernsbacher, and Goldman, define the field of discourse processes as a multidisciplinary field concerned with exploring the "processes of comprehending, producing, reproducing, composing, recalling, summarizing and otherwise creating, accessing, and using discourse representations" (p. 5). They mark the start of the field as 1978, the year of the inaugural issue of the journal *Discourse Processes*. Researchers in the field are located in six primary

disciplines: text linguistics, psychology, education, artificial intelligence, sociology and communication. Discourse processes research is currently dominated by seven approaches, including discourse psychology, corpus analysis, computational discourse, discourse technologies, conversation analysis, hybrid qualitative and quantitative approaches, and cultural foundations. (p. 5). The editors explain that most of these approaches are hybrids of two or more disciplines, a fact that they seem to view as both a strength and potential weakness of the field. One of the purposes of the Handbook is to push the field in an interdisciplinary as opposed to multidisciplinary direction. They argue that a move from multidisciplinary to interdisciplinary work will result in more sophisticated research. This increased sophistication, they argue, will follow from increased use of multiple methods to establish rigorous scientific claims. The editors offer three reasons why interdisciplinarity will benefit the field: first, collaborations across disciplines lead to deeper communication as researchers work to establish agreement across perspectives; second, these collaborations result in deeper science because researchers must confront differences, defend positions, and negotiate compromises; third, interdisciplinary work better addresses practical problems, problems that exist largely outside of disciplinary boundaries. Interestingly, the editors' approach to interdisciplinarity is focused only on collaborations between individuals grounded in single disciplines, without addressing the possibility of individual researchers engaging in interdisciplinary work.

Although discourse processes includes research of various theoretical grounding and employ an array of methodologies, the field does define itself in part through its methods. As described in the introduction, the field of discourse processes "embraces multiple disciplines as long as the discipline adopts a methodology that empirically tests the validity of its claims. Rigorous methods of empirical research have therefore dominated the research reported" at major conferences and in the field's primary journal (p. 4). Graesser, Gernsbacher, and Goldman write that this includes "qualitative as well as quantitative approaches to establishing evidence for claims" (p. 4). It was helpful to read the editors' description of what defines discourse processes as a field. However, it would perhaps be even more helpful in clarifying the field to better understand what theories and scholarship of discourse do not count as discourse processes. Just as methodological approaches define what the field is, methodology is also how the editors distinguish the field from discourse *studies*, which, in their words "does not fall under the umbrella of discourse processes because rigorous scientific methods

are not directly embraced as their dominant methodological and epistemological foundation” (p. 5). As I discuss further, later in this review, I found myself unsure of exactly what research would fall into the category of discourse studies. For a reader like me whose experience with discourse scholarship straddles discourse processes and discourse studies (based on my assumptions of what counts as discourse studies), it would have been helpful if the editors had been more explicit about the scholarship that they used to define themselves.

In addition to advocating for a shift from multidisciplinary to interdisciplinarity, the editors discuss two additional directions for the future of discourse processes: integration of neuroscience with discourse research, and the use of more advanced computer technologies for analyzing discourse. The integration of neuroscience involves examining brain activity during discourse processing. Graesser, Gernsbacher, and Goldman emphasize that this will require interdisciplinary collaboration between discourse researchers and researchers of brain mechanisms. In addition, the editors note that researchers’ abilities to harness new technologies to collect discourse data far exceed our current capacity to use technology to analyze those data. The editors point to possibilities for sophisticated speech recognition technology, increased web access to data sets, tools for generating coding schemes that allow for the flexibility necessary in discourse analysis, and more sophisticated tools for creating graphic representations of discourse. They describe these future directions as “either inevitable or profoundly needed for the field to survive” (p. 14). Although these future directions are interesting and do seem to be important considerations for the field, there seems some discrepancy in the wide range of research included in the Handbook and the comparatively narrow discussion of future trends. For instance, the promise of neurological imaging for extending the work of Bloome, Cazden and Beck, and Grimshaw (authors with chapters in the volume) is not self-evident.

The breadth of the field is reflected in the range of research included in the Handbook. In addition to the editors’ introduction, the volume includes the following chapters:

- Genres, Registers, and Contexts of Discourse (Allen D. Grimshaw)
- Text Comprehension (Rolf A. Zwaan and Murray Singer)
- Processes of Interactive Spoken Discourse: The Role of the Partner (Michael F. Schober and Susan E. Brennan)

- Classroom Discourse (Courtney B. Cazden and Sarah W. Beck)
- Learning from Traditional and Alternative Texts: New Conceptualizations for the Information Age (Patricia Alexander and Tamara L. Jetton)
- Theories and Methods in Mediated Communication (Steve Whittaker)
- Narrative Discourse (David Bloome)
- Literary Discourse (David S. Miall)
- Nonliteral Speech Acts in Text and Discourse (Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr.)
- Discourse Development (Michael Bamberg and Luke Moissinac)
- Discourse in Computational Linguistics and Artificial Intelligence (Johanna D. Moore and Peter Wiemer-Hastings)
- Quantitative Cognitive Models of Text and Discourse Processing (Peter W. Foltz)

Each chapter in the volume provides helpful discussions of past and current research in the area of focus, the methods used to collect and analyze data, and examples of studies employing the methods described. In most chapters the writing is accessible for those unfamiliar with any given area of research. In this way, the chapters lend themselves well to inclusion in course syllabi as introductory readings. I do not have space to summarize each of these chapters, but below I discuss several that I believe will be of particular interest to many literacy researchers interested in the study of discourse.

The chapter, “Genres, Registers, and Contexts of Discourse” by Allen Grimshaw is the first of the volume and is well-placed in that it works to provide a framework for reading the subsequent contributions. In his words, the purpose of the chapter “is to show how the understanding of discourse and discourse processes requires identification of constituent elements of and constraints on the phenomenon” (p. 27). He focuses on genre and register as two elements of discourse and context as one constraint on discourse. The chapter is an effective opening to the volume, in part because Grimshaw presents the range of ideas about what constitutes discourse and how those views inform researchers’ methods. The discussions of context, genre, and register are thorough and attend to concerns of various approaches to discourse study, including critical discourse analysis,

conversation analysis, and the more experimental approaches often employed in psychology and social psychology. A theme of the chapter, and Grimshaw's admitted bias, is that discourse studies that "illuminate general considerations of a sociological nature (e.g., larger social structural and processural issues) are most valuable" (p. 30). Given the concerns of many literacy researchers who examine discourse, this perspective is likely to resonate.

The chapter, "Text Comprehension," by Rolf Zwann and Murray Singer provides an overview of research on the cognitive mechanisms underlying comprehension of written text. The authors discuss construction-integration theory as the guiding theoretical framework for the chapter. This theory includes an assumption that readers comprehend text one chunk at a time and that the understanding of each chunk includes a construction and integration phase. Construction involves parsing the chunk into idea units or propositions and organizing the propositions into a network of related ideas or coherence network. The subsequent integration phase involves further organizing of propositions to those that are most highly connected with one another, interaction between these emerging understandings and memory, and finally encoding the text into long-term memory. The authors then turn to two dominant research methods in text comprehension: on-line methods and memory methods. The thorough discussion of on-line methods describes four types, including processing-load measures, activation measures, information-content measures, and brain activity measures. Memory methods, described as historically older than on-line methods, involve various ways of collecting readers' recall of text. The chapter includes reviews of the research on situation models in text comprehension, coherence and inference, and memory for text. Zwann and Murray's discussions are detailed and filled with the technical vocabulary of their sub-field and will be useful for those seeking a detailed introduction to this area of comprehension study. The authors include areas of comprehension study that may be less familiar to some literacy researchers than others, such as psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology, that have had such impact on both theory and classroom practice in reading.

Whereas the work reviewed by Zwann and Murray may be less familiar territory to some in literacy, the chapter on "Classroom Discourse" by Cazden and Beck will likely be more familiar ground. Cazden and Beck begin the chapter by discussing the concept of discourse as it has been understood and employed in research in education over time, moving from "discourse" as any stretch of language longer

than a sentence to an understanding of discourse as also involving interactional roles and identities (citing Gee's, 1996, distinction between 'little d' and 'big D' discourses). Their chapter provides an overview of several important areas of research in classroom discourse, including: sharing time in classrooms, both traditional and nontraditional lessons, variation in discourse features, talk with peers and computers, differential treatment and cultural differences, and students' discourse development. Each of these discussions is divided into areas of focus within the broader category of research. For instance, the section on variation in discourse features includes speaking rights and listening responsibilities, teacher questions, teacher feedback, pace and sequence, and classroom routines. As the authors state, the chapter does not include a discussion of research on discourse difference (i.e., nonstandard versus standard dialects of English), but they provide suggestions for where readers can find discussions of research in that area. This chapter provides a valuable overview of research, and I expect it will find its way onto many syllabi for courses in research methods or discourse analysis.

Patricia Alexander and Tamara Jetton's chapter, "Learning from Traditional and Alternative Texts," delves into the question of how students will navigate the flood of information that they now, and will increasingly, encounter in and out of schools. To address this issue they discuss, first, what counts as text and, second, how students navigate different kinds of text. The authors discuss the following kinds of text: traditional text, focused on printed texts such as books, magazines, journals; hypertext, including the Web, email, and text edited on-line and shared electronically; and oral text, including classroom lectures and various forms of discussion. Each category of text is discussed in relation to knowledge (divided into text-structure and content knowledge), strategies, and motivation (including goals, self-determination, and interest). As part of a framework developed early in the chapter, these areas are presented as salient to research across categories of text and function as a schematic for organizing the review of research. Alexander and Jetton do an admirable job of effectively addressing an area with a vast research base. Like the Cazden and Beck chapter, their work here will be relevant to many literacy researchers and will provide both novice and veteran with a source to which to turn for a current look at the state of this area of research in our field.

In introducing the large and varied research in narrative discourse, David Bloome writes that he chose to take a positive view of the disparate theories and

approaches that make up this sub-field, seeing the variations as “an indication of vibrant theoretical and methodological debates and tensions in the contemporary study of language, part of the broader, historical debate over ideologies of language” (p. 287). Given that array of perspectives, Bloome does not attempt a comprehensive review of all relevant research. Instead he chooses, effectively, to focus on a heuristic through which he can discuss trends and issues in the field and, thus, the research that informs those directions. His heuristic is a “series of problematics” that he believes provide useful entry points for the study of narrative discourse. The chapter begins with a discussion of what constitutes the boundaries of a narrative, in which Bloome takes the position (a position he describes as “controversial”) that narrative is a language process that underlies all genres, including those not usually considered to be narrative. His position rejects the binary of narrative/non-narrative that has oft been used to distinguish narrative from other genres. Instead, Bloome argues that the more productive approach is to inquire about what is being called (or not called) a narrative, where, by whom, when, how, and for what purpose. Having established a theoretical and methodological stance toward the study of narrative, he then discusses two central problematics in the study of narrative discourse: narrative discourse as text versus narrative discourse as event and practice; and narrative discourse as structure versus substance. To overly simplify the explanations provided in the chapter, the first tension refers to ideas of narrative as a temporally structured textual recapitulation versus narrative as constituted through and part of people’s interactions with one another. The literature reviews in these sections include theorists who inform the work of many in literacy, including Labov, Bakhtin, Ricoeur, Foucault and Fairclough, as well as literacy researchers whose work has been influential in this field including Heath, Dyson and Genishi, Bloome and Egan-Robertson, and McCabe, to name just a very few. These discussions are thorough and noteworthy for retaining clarity without sacrificing complexity. I particularly appreciated Bloome’s attention to the complexities that arise when the two problematics are juxtaposed. He acknowledges that the two identified tensions overlap, and his discussion of each primary tension includes attention to the complexities created by this juxtaposition. Those with interest in narrative discourse will find this chapter extremely interesting.

The last chapter I will discuss, “Literary Discourse” by David Miall, focuses on empirical research on literary reading. Like the authors of other chapters, Miall

acknowledges that the variations and controversies within the field of literary study make a comprehensive review impossible. He delineates his task by focusing on the following questions: What is literary discourse? Does it result in a type of reading different from that studied in mainstream discourse processing research? Although Miall's chapter focuses on empirical research on literary discourse, he includes a helpful discussion of the distinction between that empirical work and more mainstream literary scholarship. As he discusses, it is important to understand this empirical work in contrast to and relationship with the various traditions of literary theory and criticism that predominate in the study of literature. He identifies three issues in literary research that complicate the relationship between the fledgling area of empirical research and literary criticism: the role of the reader, genre, and what constitutes a "literary" text. As in Bloome's discussion of the boundaries around narrative, Miall explains that empirical work in literary discourse has reawakened debates about how and whether to identify text as "literary" (in this case, a cognitive processes versus an affective processes approach). The chapter is organized around areas of relevant research, including discourse processes (discourse structures, expert/novice differences, and "beyond discourse processes"); alternative frameworks of literary reading (literary perspective, polyvalence, anticipation, rereading effects, and literary meaning); personal readings and feeling (implicating the self, two types of feeling—feelings aroused by fictional events and feelings in response to the artifact, and feeling-based understanding); and, finally, literary components (imagery, foregrounding, and phonetic variation). These sections include discussion of research studies and the methods used to access reader's understandings and responses to literary text. For instance, as one might imagine, think-alouds are a key tool for researchers interested in accessing a range of readers' engagements with literary text. Other methods include rereadings, reader reports of responses and feelings, surveys, observations, reader ratings, and reminders (readers mark a text when they are reminded of a feeling or thought and then they recount those 'reminders' to a researcher following the reading). In his thoughts on the future of research in literary discourse, Miall suggests a need for attention to both cognitive approaches and research focused on the affective, self-referential, and cultural aspects of literary discourse. He also argues that the growth of electronic texts—and the predictions by some that this growth signals the inevitable of written texts—argues strongly for research that helps us understand what constitutes literary reading (e.g., is a printed text somehow fundamental to the experience of reading literature?) and its role in human experience.

I was pleased that this chapter, which will be of interest to those with interests in literary response and engagement, included both familiar studies and those that were new to me. I particularly appreciated Miall's valuable discussions of the tensions between various approaches to the empirical study of literary discourse, as well as the tensions between empirical approaches and literary criticism. This chapter does overlap with certain other chapters in the volume—particularly the Zwann and Murray chapter on text comprehension—since literary texts are used in studies of other aspects of discourse processes, but given that each chapter will likely be read by a different audience, this is certainly not a flaw.

In conclusion, I return to the introduction of the *Handbook of Discourse Processes* and Graesser, Gernsbacher, and Goldman's arguments for what defines their field. Given the challenge faced by most of the chapter authors to define the borders of their respective subfields, it would seem an even greater challenge to define what counts or does not count within the wide-ranging field of discourse processes. It is clearly one of the editors' goals to begin to articulate those boundaries and, as I discussed earlier, they do this largely by distinguishing the methods of discourse processes from those used in discourse studies. I do believe this volume will be of great interest to literacy researchers engaged in analysis of discourse in and out of classrooms. Yet, I found myself uneasy about the methodological boundaries the volume editors create in the introduction through the repeated use of phrases like "rigorous scientific methods." The articulation of those boundaries seems to rely on dichotomies that are all too familiar in our field at the moment, with terms such as *scientifically-based research* drawing lines around what research can be stamped with the label of legitimacy.

That said, I found no such dichotomy present in the chapters. Most chapters discuss the multiple methodologies and theoretical perspectives that inform their area of research and address the advantages and disadvantages of each. For instance, when discussing genre research in his chapter "Genres, Registers, and Context of Discourse," Grimshaw writes, "I do not mean to imply, by my metaphorical labeling of my final category of treatments of genre as 'scientific' to in any way suggest that those already mentioned are not careful, disciplined, and rigorous. . . I mean rather that investigators whose work falls into this category use methods that can be sufficiently and specifically described that others can replicate their research and findings" (p. 53). This is just one example of how some of the chapters in the volume seemed to challenge the distinction between scientific and non-scientific methods as a marker of research in discourse processes.

Similarly, the range of theoretical and methodological perspectives included in the volume's chapters made murky the distinctions I had begun to draw between discourse processes and discourse studies. It was my own assumption after reading the introduction that discourse studies must refer to certain critical and poststructural theorists in literary theory and cultural studies, and might include Foucauldian and Bakhtinian approaches to discourse. I then wondered if critical discourse analysis was included or excluded. I discovered that these approaches *are* discussed in some chapters. Of course I could be wrong in my assumption of the scholarship the editors considered discourse studies, but this seemed another instance of some discrepancy between the editors' emphasis on what counts as discourse processes and what is included in the individual chapters. These differences likely represent debate in the field about what *should* count and how discourse processes *should* attempt to distinguish itself from other forms of discourse study. Those debates are important in any field and they are productively explored throughout the Handbook of Discourse Processes. This volume is an important resource for those engaged in the study of discourse, no matter our methods or what we choose to call ourselves.