

What Do We Mean by Literacy Now?

Every now and then we really do have breakthroughs in our understanding of literacy. Two of the most recent insights are “multiple literacies” and “literacy as social practice.” Instead of one literacy, there are multiple literacies (Street, 1995). In addition to language, humans have developed a variety of ways to mean (art, music, movement, etc.). This is what the humanities are all about as well as why malls have background music. It is also why visual-text literacies (e.g., electronic computer games) are so appealing and compelling to our young.

The notion of multiple literacies has several implications for how we think about literacy. Different cultural groups have different ways of making meaning. This is what we find fascinating about travel. How many of us have not been fascinated with totem poles in Alaska or the hula in Hawaii? Even further, different cultural groups induct their children into literacy in different ways. Literacy means different things to different groups. Closer to home, school literacy may be very different from “everyday literacy” or even literacy as the parents of your students may be thinking about it.

Instead of thinking about literacy as an entity (something you either have or don’t have), thinking about literacy as social practice can be revolutionary. When coupled with the notion of multiple literacies, literacy can be thought of as a particu-

lar set of social practices that a particular set of people value. In order to change anyone’s definition of literacy, the social practices that keep a particular (and often older) definition of literacy in place have to change.

In terms of your classroom, it is important to ask, What kinds of social practices are in place and, as a result, how is literacy being defined? Who benefits from this definition of literacy? Who is put at jeopardy? What social practices would I have to put in place to make the everyday literacies that students bring with them to school legitimate? What kinds of things would I have to do to show that I honor the home literacies that students bring with them to school? What would I have to do to expand what it means to be literate in the 21st century?

This is not a matter of walking away from what we already know. A good language arts program for the 21st century continues to be comprised of three components—meaning making, language study, and inquiry-based learning, *but* (and this is a big *but*) the emphasis is different.

Meaning-Making

M. A. K. Halliday (1975) taught us that language did not develop because of one language user but rather because of two, and they wanted to communicate. Language is first and foremost a social meaning-making process. Most of what we know about language we have learned from being in the presence of others (Wells, 1986).

What this means for the 21st-century classroom is that students are going to continue to have lots and lots of opportunities to mean, not only in the form of reading and writing, but also in the

form of visual-text literacies. I maintain that writing begins in voice. If you can get students to write “what is on their minds,” the rest may not take care of itself, but you will have come a long way toward creating a potentially great literacy program. Barbara Kamler and Michelle Fine (2001) argue that we have to help students “relocate the personal,” by which they mean that once students have expressed what is on their minds, we need to help them see how “the social”—meaning social, historical, and cultural forces—have been at play to position them in particular ways. These are the new social practices that need to be added to our process writing program. I like this position as it acknowledges what we teachers of writing already know: No one can write from nowhere.

In reading, we must continue to have “grand conversations” over literature (Peterson and Eeds, 1990). Literature study and literature discussion are cultural practices that an important segment of our society values and that, more likely than not, we as English language arts educators are mandated to pass on to future generations. Nonetheless, it is now obvious that we need to expand the canon so that all participants can see themselves in the literature, not as “other” but as the main character. This is why the use of multicultural literature is so important as well as why the use of literature that raises important social issues is key to making reading relevant (Harste, et al., 2000; Leland, et al., 2002).

While what materials we read is an issue, even more of an issue is what social practices we institute around our discussion of books. I like to think of it as opening up spaces in the curriculum for starting some much needed new conversations. We need to teach in such a way that students enjoy literature and at the same time come to see that language is never innocent. “Whose story is this?” “What would the story look like if it had been told by someone very different (in terms of race, gender, age, etc.) from the current author?” “What is being taken for granted and what other ways are there to think about this thing being discussed?”

Hilary Janks (2002), in her keynote address at the Annual Convention of the National Council

of Teachers of English, pulled a text off the Web and showed how easy it can be to create those spaces that encourage conversation about social practices. It was a poster developed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2002) entitled, “Spot the Refugee.” It was meant to change people’s attitudes towards refugees. The poster showed 40 Lego dolls all in different dress, with the following text:

SPOT THE REFUGEE

There he is. Fourth row, second from the left. The one with the moustache. Obvious really. Maybe not. The unsavory-looking character you’re looking at is more likely to be your average neighborhood slob with a grubby vest and a weekend’s stubble on his chin. And the real refugee could just as easily be the clean-cut fellow on his left. You see, refugees are just like you and me. Except for one thing. Everything they once had has been left behind. Home, family, possessions, all gone. They have nothing. And nothing is all they’ll ever have unless we all extend a helping hand . . .” (UNHCR Lego poster, p. 1).¹

On a first reading with students, a teacher might want to explore what connections the students are making with the text and what meanings they are getting out of the text. I would do this with the strategy, “One Observation, One Connection, One Surprise, One Question” (Short, Harste w/ Burke, 1996). Figure 1 explains this strategy. On a second reading, let students begin to interrogate the text by building from what students have said.

For instance, students might discuss how the authors of the poster have, probably unwittingly, paired refugees with “unsavory-looking characters” or described them as “slobs” who “wear grubby vests” and have “a weekend’s stubble on their chin.” Students might count the number of male and female dolls in the poster to find that three-fourths of them are male, leaving the impression that refugees are mainly unsavory men

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¹As of this writing, you can view this poster at <http://www.longman.com.au/atlas/compweb/016/intlinks/figure 13.jpg>.

**One Observation, One Connection, One Surprise,
One Question**

1. Give 4 sticky notes to each student.
2. On separate sticky notes, students are asked to jot down one observation, one connection, one surprise, and one question they have as a result of reading the text being studied.
3. Once students have their sticky notes, have them get in groups of 4 or 5 to share.

Note: As a variation, the sticky notes containing questions can be collected and run off on a single sheet of paper. In new groups, students can come together to discuss and answer the questions that have been generated by classmates. A whole class discussion should follow.

**Credit for this strategy is given to Jennifer Story (seventh-grade teacher, Dole Middle School, Honolulu, Hawaii) and Lee Heffernan (second-grade teacher, Childs Elementary School, Bloomington, Indiana).

Figure 1.

who are poor and need a helping hand. Certainly the impression given is that they are not skilled.

Discussions of this sort represent a new set of practices around what it means to be a reader. What I would argue is that students in the 21st century are going to have to be able to interrogate text for purposes of understanding how authors position readers. To be literate is to be able to elect what identity one wants to take on as well as what position one wants to take relative to the issues raised in texts.

Language Study

Too often in the past we have reduced the study of language to phonics in reading, and spelling and grammar in the area of writing. I would argue that has never been good enough, but even more so when it comes to preparing 21st-century literate beings.

Rather than think in terms of phonics, spelling, and grammar, I believe it is helpful to think about what kinds of literacy one needs in order to read things critically. Bill Green (in Comber & Green, 1998) calls this “instrumental literacy.”

Instrumental literacy is made up of all of those proficiencies one needs in order to be able to access a text and understand what it is doing to readers. In the case of our “Spot the Refugee” text, a reader not only has to be able to decode the text but understand how the authors use language to get certain work done. To make this concrete, notice their use of “he.” The use of “he” reinforces the notion that refugees are men. Notice also how refugees become “they.” All of a sudden, refugees are “othered.” They may look like us, but they are a very different group of people; if not grubby, then certainly helpless. In this instance, the author uses pronouns to do the work. In other texts, other devices may be used, such as “Iraq Bombed,” as if there were no agent involved in the bombing and hence no one has to take responsibility.

I think most of what is exciting about language falls well above the phoneme and grapheme level of text, and yet we do very little to help students understand how language works. Students need to be invited to become linguistic detectives as well as encouraged to practice writing texts that do different kinds of work. It is especially important that “everyday texts” be an integral part of our language arts program as this is where literacy is occurring in the lives of students. Many people, in fact, argue that today’s youth learn more about literacy and what it means to be literate *outside* of school than they do in school (Nixon, 1998; Manning, 1999; Vasquez, 2000). In school, students can learn to examine the literacies that operate on them outside of school and how they might position and reposition themselves differently in the outside world. Critical literacy, Hilary Janks says (2001), is about language and power, language and access, diversity, and redesign. No matter how it is said, literacy in the 21st century is not a spectator sport.

Inquiry-Based Learning

Probably the one thing we can be sure of is that we are handing tomorrow’s adults problems of some magnitude—poverty, homelessness, pollution, over-utilization of our natural resources . . .

the list goes on. There are no magic answers to these problems, nor is it likely that such problems will be solved simply or single-handedly. Given this “reading” of our times, it should surprise no one that I am an advocate of inquiry-based collaborative learning (Harste, 1990, 1993).

What I want to see in curriculum is lots and lots of opportunities for students to explore their own inquiry questions using reading, writing, and other sign systems as tools and toys for learning. For the 21st century, I want to produce learners who know how to use art, music, drama, etc., to reposition themselves, gather information, change perspectives, re-theorize issues, and take thoughtful new social action.

Curriculum has historically been organized around the disciplines. Students move through the school day by going from English to social studies to science to any number of other disciplinary studies. Donald Graves (1994) called this “the cha-cha-cha curriculum.” Students tick off subjects like it is a checklist: “Taken earth science; done with that.” Even in college, they say: “Taken women’s studies; done with that.” Rather than invite students to use earth science or gender as a lens to examine their world, we’ve inadvertently reinforced the notion that they are “done with that.” This is why, in part, the redesign of curriculum begins with reflexivity; the self-reflective interrogation and critique of what it is we have been doing. Rest assured, we have all had our hand in the cookie jar.

Don’t get me wrong. I think the disciplines are important. But they are only important in relationship to the inquiry questions of learners. It is for this reason that I want curriculum to begin with what is on students’ minds; with what makes them itch; with what questions they have. Disciplines can and should be introduced as perspectives that students can take in unpacking and understanding issues. The same is true of the arts. Curricular invitations to explore what something looks like in art or in music can be absolutely illuminating.

If we return to “Stop the Refugee,” all kinds of questions might be pursued. How many refugees are really men as opposed to women? If one does one’s homework, what one finds is that 80 percent of all refugees are women rather than men. So who, we might ask, is being served by the visual text in this poster? Clearly not men. They are already seen as wolves after little gullible girls from our fairy tales. This poster only reinforces such stereotypical thinking.

Conclusion

If asked to critique education, I would argue that too often in the past our English language arts curricula have focused on meaning making with a half hour of phonics thrown in. For the most part, studying language in terms of what work it does and how it does it has been left out, as has providing daily opportunities to inquire into problems of personal and social relevance to learners. No wonder, then, that students learn more about literacy on the streets than they do at the chalkface. This has to change. The real question that each of us has to ask is, “What kind of literate being should inhabit the 21st century?” Asked differently, “What kind of lives do we want to live and what kind of people do we want to be?” For my part, I want critically literate beings who know how language works and can use it to make meaning and reposition themselves in the world in a more democratically thoughtful and equitable manner.

Students in the 21st century are going to have to be able to interrogate text for purposes of understanding how authors position readers.

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