Creating the Conditions to Encourage Literate Thinking

Recent research has transformed our definition of literacy and now offers insights into how to create classroom communities of literate thinkers.

During International Literacy Year, when a worldwide effort is under way to raise literacy standards, it is more important than ever that we strive to be clear about our goals. What does it mean to be literate? How is literacy acquired? What are the educational conditions that most effectively promote this acquisition? In this paper I shall try to summarize some of the most important insights from recent research in the field of literacy by offering answers to these fundamental questions.

What Does It Mean to Be Literate?
During the last 20 years, traditional notions of literacy as the application by an individual of a set of skills for encoding or decoding any written text have undergone a fourfold transformation.

Different Texts for Different Purposes
First, and most important, we have come to recognize the wide variety of purposes that texts serve in our lives. Different purposes give rise to texts of different types, and these, in turn, require different modes of engagement with them (Kress 1985). Furthermore, the purposes for which people use texts vary from one culture to another, as do the values that we place on them. As a result, there are cultural differences in the competences considered central to literacy.

Although actual acts of reading and writing are necessarily individual, the context in which such acts occur is always inherently social, as are the purposes that texts are designed to serve.

In our own Western culture, the most frequently encountered types of text are those that are fairly directly linked to action, for example, the advertising copy that influences our choice of goods to purchase, the forms we fill in for a variety of bureaucratic purposes, or the notes we leave on the refrigerator reminding a family member to buy more milk. A second major category includes texts whose primary purpose is the transmission of what is taken to be factual information—reference books, work-related memos, instruction manuals, and so on. A third category includes texts that offer the author’s considered interpretation of some aspect of experience, either real or imaginary—expositions of scientific theory, history, and biography, as well as novels, poems, and plays.

Clearly, these different types of text call for different modes of engagement on the part of readers and writers. And each demands the use of different procedures for relating the symbolic representation of meaning in the text to the user’s knowledge of the world and his or her purposes for engaging with the text. The first type calls for strategies oriented toward effective action, the second toward information, and the third toward critical imagina-
To be fully literate is to have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, feeling, and thinking in the context of purposeful social activity.

The Collaborative Nature of Literacy
The final way in which our understanding of literacy has been transformed is through a growing awareness of its social, collaborative nature. Although actual acts of reading and writing are necessarily individual, the context in which such acts occur is always inherently social, as are the purposes that texts are designed to serve (Heap, in press). In the first place, texts are almost always written or otherwise produced in order to be read and interpreted by a reader. Furthermore, as with spoken messages, written texts are produced to further some interpersonal purpose: the enabling of another’s action, the transmission of information, or the sharing of understanding and emotion. But, equally important, the creation and interpretation of texts never occurs in a social vacuum: Every text exists in the context of all the other texts in the writer’s or reader’s cultural tradition that he or she draws upon, albeit usually unconsciously, in engaging with the present text. Where the text is of importance to the individual, too, he or she will probably discuss it with other people in order, as a reader, to calibrate his or her interpretation of it with interpretations of others. Likewise, as a writer, the individual will do so to obtain feedback on whether the piece of writing succeeds in achieving its intention.

With these insights in mind, we are now in a position to attempt to define literacy, at least as it is optimally practiced within Western literate society at this point in its cultural evolution. To be fully literate, I therefore suggest, is to have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, feeling, and thinking in the context of purposeful social activity.
The Acquisition of Literacy

Just as our understanding of the nature of literacy has been transformed by recent research, so has our understanding of how it is acquired. Most significant in this respect has been the spate of studies that, building on naturalistic studies of oral language development, have explored the emergence of literate behaviors and understanding in the preschool years before children have received any systematic literacy instruction. What follows is a brief summary of the findings from this research (for a comprehensive survey, see Hall 1987).

- Where children grow up in a literate culture, the representations they form of how written language works and of the purposes it serves are progressively constructed and modified as they actively make sense of the literacy events they experience. In broad outline, the processes in which they engage are very similar to those involved in learning to talk (Ferreiro 1986, Heath 1986).

- There is no particular age (such as age of school entry) nor a prerequisite state of "readiness" that must be reached before this learning can commence (Goodman 1984). Nor does the developmental process require the intervention of deliberate and systematic instruction. However, it does require opportunities for participation in joint literacy events with older, more mature members of the literate culture (Clark 1984).

- With respect to their understanding of the written code, children's development follows a broadly common sequence of development. In the process, some of the hypotheses and strategies they form are, by adult standards, erroneous, however, with the benefit of further appropriate experiences, these hypotheses and strategies are ultimately superseded by more conventional and effective ones (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982).

- With respect to children's understanding of the uses of literacy, their development is more variable and is dependent on the range and frequency of their encounters with texts of different types and on the extent to which they are able to discover how these different texts are used within the events in which they occur (Heath 1983).

- Literate thinking is not dependent on the prior achievement of control of the written code. Texts in other media, such as pictures and commercial logos, can provide opportunities for critical and reflective thinking about the meanings represented (Harste et al. 1984), close attention to the "text" of spoken utterances can also perform a similar function (Heath 1986, Chang and Wells 1988).

The picture of literacy development that emerges from these studies is thus very much in accord with current theories of early learning more generally, which emphasize both the active and constructive nature of the child's intellectual development and its social basis. That is, children learn most effectively through participation in meaningful joint activities in which their performance is assisted and guided by a more competent member of the culture (Rogoff 1989, Tharp and Gallimore 1989). Such an "apprenticeship" model of learning is, of course, an extension of Vygotsky's theory of the relationship between learning and teaching. His theory emphasizes both the social origins of higher mental functions in the practices of the culture and the role of parents and teachers in providing opportunities for the learner to share in these practices and, through so doing, gradually to appropriate those mental functions through demonstration, guided participation, and task-related talk (Vygotsky 1978, Cole 1985).

The processes through which the mental functions associated with literacy are acquired—and in particular those required to be able to engage with texts in the mode referred to above as literate thinking—can be seen as a paradigm example of what Vygotsky (1978) called "learning in the zone of proximal development." For, although there are external behavioral aspects of reading and writing in relation to the physical text, which can perhaps be taught through traditional modes of instruction, the essential activities in which the reader or writer engages are predominantly mental in nature and hence not available to inspection. Unlike many other skillful performances, therefore, literate behavior cannot be learned simply by observation and practice, nor through the sort of "recitation script" (teacher-dominated lessons) observed by Dur...
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School Conditions That Support Literacy Learning

If we wish to achieve the goal of full literacy for all students in our society, therefore, whatever their cultural or socioeconomic background, the emphasis in school has to be placed on the use of media to empower action, thinking, and feeling in the context of purposeful social activity. What this requires is the creation of classroom communities of literate thinkers, in which students collaborate with each other in activities, chosen with teacher guidance, that involve the use of texts of all kinds—both as a resource for achieving understanding and as a means for communicating what has been understood to others, both inside and outside the classroom. Where the essentially social nature of literacy is emphasized, along with its power to facilitate thinking, talk about the texts that students are engaging with will occur quite spontaneously. And it is by participating in such talk, sometimes as an equal member of the group and sometimes as tutor, that the teacher can model and explain how to engage with texts in ways appropriate to the purpose at hand (Wells et al., in press).

How to create such classroom communities of literate thinkers is thus the challenge that faces us in the International Literacy Year and beyond. The answer will not be found in state-mandated programs, however well-founded they are in current thinking. Rather, the solution rests with the encouragement of teachers to act as literate thinkers themselves using the evidence from observations in their own classrooms as texts to empower their own planned curriculum change and development (Goswami and Perfman 1987, Pinnell and Martin 1989). It is, I believe, in the grass-roots movement among teachers who have discovered ways of putting this conception of literacy learning and teaching into practice in their classrooms that the best hope of raising standards of literacy is to be found.

References


Unesco has designated 1990 International Literacy Year, the first phase of a 10-year effort to eliminate illiteracy throughout the world. The organization will sponsor two conferences this year—the "World Conference on Education for All—Meeting Basic Educational Needs" in March in Bangkok, and the Forty-Second Session of the International Educational Conference (IEC) in September in Geneva. For more information, write Unesco, place de Fontenoy 75700 Paris, telephone international +33-1-45 68 10 00.

Limitations of space preclude the citing of particular examples here. However, journals such as *Language Arts* and publications of the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association increasingly contain articles by teachers who, through inquiries carried out in their own classrooms, are working to create classroom communities of literate thinkers. For other examples, see the articles in this issue by Julie Jensen and Nancy Roser, Linda Rief, and Dorothy Strickland, as well as Anne Meek's conversation with Eliot Wigginton.


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Gordon Wells is Professor of Education, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Department of Curriculum, 252 Bloor St., W., Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6

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