

Performative Literacy: The Habits of Mind of Highly Literate Readers

Definitions of literacy change in changing historical and educational contexts, and may even change from one administration to another in federal and state governments. Miles Myers (1996) identified five conceptions of literacy that have dominated American educational thought in different periods from colonial times to the present.

“Signature literacy,” knowing how to sign one’s name, was the conventional standard for literacy in the American Colonies until the Revolutionary War. From the Revolutionary War to the Civil War, the prevailing standard was that of “recording literacy,” which was generally defined by legible penmanship in copying short documents and the ability to read and spell simple words. From the Civil War to the time of the First World War, the standard was “recitational literacy,” demonstrated by memorizing and reciting patriotic speeches and pieces of canonical literature.

In the period from about 1916 to 1985, schooling became directed at producing students who had achieved “analytic literacy,” a standard that entailed a shift from oral reading to silent reading and from memorization to comprehension and analysis. This typically required readers in junior and senior high schools to study a common body of texts and engage in such activities as identifying main ideas and themes, recognizing technical features like point of view and figures of speech, and describing literary elements like plot, character, and setting.

The fifth and latest form of literacy, which has been called “critical literacy,” or what I call “disciplined literacy,” requires students to become more active, responsible, and responsive readers than ever before—readers who may be trusted to select many of the texts they will read in school, who are invited to produce their own interpretations of texts (rather than merely accept the interpretations of their teachers), and who are frequently expected to recognize, criticize, and even resist the values and vision of the world advanced by or inscribed in literary and nonliterary texts. Such a disciplined literacy, the principal features of which are now reflected in most national and state standards documents in the English language arts (Woodward and Halbrook, 1999), represents a new ambition for public schooling, but it is the kind of literacy that has always been possessed by the intellectual and literary elite of every culture. To aspire to such a literacy for all students is to aspire to full participation in civic and economic life for all citizens in a democratic republic (Blau, 2001).

What Skills or Knowledge Does Disciplined Literacy Require?

If students are actually to exercise such a complex and thoughtful form of contemporary literacy, they will have to simultaneously acquire what amounts to three different kinds of foundational literacy beyond those that may have traditionally and explicitly been taught in school under the heading of literacy. I define these as *textual literacy*, *intertextual literacy*, and *performative literacy* (Blau 2003).

Textual literacy refers to the procedural knowledge that allows a reader to move from summarizing or retelling the plot of a story, to constructing a plausible interpretation, to reflecting critically on a text. This set of moves is governed largely by the rules of evidentiary reasoning and entails a process of thinking that is parallel to what we usually mean by critical thinking.

Intertextual literacy is akin to what E. D. Hirsh (1987) calls cultural literacy. Reading specialists have frequently described this as prior conceptual and informational knowledge that readers need to make sense of what they read, beyond what they would understand merely by pronouncing and decoding the words of a text. A reader reading a phrase that refers to Joseph's coat of many colors may know all the individual words and understand the possessive and descriptive signifiers and still not have any idea what the phrase refers to. What that reader may be missing is a familiarity with the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Exodus.

Performative literacy can be identified as an enabling knowledge—knowledge that enables readers to activate and use all the other forms of knowledge that are required for the exercise of anything like a critical or disciplined literacy. It also represents a set of literate practices without which readers cannot continue to grow in knowledge and literary competence through their reading experience. This enabling form of knowledge—performative literacy—is essential to functioning as a fully enfranchised reader in 21st century schools.

Performative Literacy in Action

I have identified seven traits as constitutive of performative literacy, each one associated with actions and dispositions that distinguish more competent from less competent readers.

1. A capacity for sustained focused attention. This attribute may seem so obviously required for the reading of difficult texts that it hardly needs to be mentioned. However, when students fail to give close, sustained attention to

texts, their complaint of not understanding the text is often interpreted as an inability to comprehend. When simple lack of appropriate effort is treated—as it often is—as a symptom of insufficient mastery of some sub-skill of reading, students are likely to be offered forms of instructional assistance that support inattention and confirm the students' own mistaken notion that they lack some specialized body of knowledge or reading skills that distinguish them from their teachers.

2. Willingness to suspend closure—to entertain problems rather than avoid them.

Again, the difference between expert and less than expert readers seems to reside in the operation of the will rather than in the wit. It's not that expert readers immediately apprehend meaning in a text and do so with a sharper vision than less skilled readers, but that they are more willing to endure and even to embrace the disorientation of not seeing clearly, of being temporarily lost. The most productive readers will even sacrifice whatever comfort they may find in a coherent and apparently complete reading to notice discontinuities or possible contradictions in their understanding of a text. Instead of ignoring or rushing in to plug up such gaps with weak evidence or rationalizations, they will probe them, opening up the possibility that their own formerly comfortable reading will collapse or require reconstruction.

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3. Willingness to take risks—to offer interpretive hypotheses, to respond honestly, to challenge texts, to challenge normative readings. This characteristic is closely related to a willingness to entertain problems, and both of them are functions of what we might more globally identify as intellectual courage. First, we want to note that any time a reader offers an independent interpretation of a text in a classroom or community of other readers, a risk and

a responsibility are both concomitantly undertaken. The responsibility is to make the case (Rex & McEachen, 1999) in support of the proffered interpretation through a process of evidentiary reasoning. The risk is that the case won't stand up to interrogation by other readers or even to the reasoning process necessary to demonstrate its plausibility.

Intellectual courage may also be required when readers feel called upon by their own experience and knowledge to offer readings that might be socially stigmatized or deemed unacceptable by particular communities of readers. Such readings and such courage may be particularly appropriate, however, in the most tradi-

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tional English classrooms where literature is sometimes offered up by teachers in what they may see as their obligatory role as the high priests of the canonical culture—a role that many parents and school boards continue to think appropriate for teachers—and where all texts taught seem to demand reverence as the only acceptable response, a reverence that often requires the deadening of perceptiveness and critical inquisitiveness rather than their quickening.

If we want our students to be engaged readers, likely to notice what they notice in the course of their reading and to record it for later reflection, we will probably value their literary irreverence as much as their sense of literary awe. Students need at least enough lack of reverence—or, more positively, a sufficient sense of the value of their responses and their right to talk back to texts—to be willing to recognize when a text speaks against them as well as for them, when it represents an ideology that they might prefer to resist rather than admire.

4. Tolerance for failure—a willingness to re-read and re-read again. This attribute is

probably related to intellectual courage and is surely related to a capacity for sustained attention, but it refers more specifically to a reader's possession of a kind of faith in the process of reading and faith in one's self as a reader that allows a reader to read a text a second time after feeling bewildered or blank in a first reading, and then to re-read again when the second reading is hardly more satisfying than the first.

How much re-reading and frustration can a competent reader tolerate? More than an incompetent reader can. In fact, one of the principal differences between expert readers and those who appear less skilled is that the more accomplished have a greater capacity for failure. They are at least willing to experience failure more often, framing their failure not so much as failure but as a part of the difficulty that comes with the territory of reading difficult texts.

5. Tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty. Closely related to an ability to suspend closure, this tolerance is less a matter of patience and faith in one's capacity to solve problems than one of accepting the limitations and developmental nature of our understanding and the paradoxical, ambiguous, and provisional condition of most human knowledge at any moment. The least competent readers tend to confuse intellectual sufficiency with certainty and completed knowledge, and are inclined to equate uncertainty with ignorance, and ambiguity or paradox with confusion. Readers who read texts looking for secure and certain answers to their questions may also read the world with a similar passion for certainty and with a similar intolerance for the moral complexity and ambiguity that resist simplistic formulations.

6. Intellectual generosity and fallibility: willingness to change one's mind, to appreciate alternative visions, and to engage in methodological believing as well as doubting (Elbow, 1986). This characteristic refers to a constellation of related traits that allow readers to learn from and be influenced by texts and discourse about texts. The strongest readers will

generally argue persuasively for their own readings of texts and be able to demonstrate the deficiencies of arguments for alternative readings. But they also show a capacity to experiment with—to try on and, as it were, to believe—alternative perspectives and to recognize the possibilities of alternative or multiple constructions of meaning. In this process, they also show themselves to be fallibilists—persons capable of changing their minds, capable of learning from their encounter with other readings to look in a new way, and therefore to adopt a perspective that is more comprehensive than their own former vision.

7. A capacity to monitor and direct one's own reading process: metacognitive awareness. As any attentive teacher knows, and as a growing body of formal research studies have shown us (see summaries of research in Schoenbach et. al., 1999; Beers 2002; Olson, 2002), a major difference between strong and weak readers has to do with the way strong readers monitor the progress of their understanding as they move through a text, self-correcting as necessary and recognizing when they need to re-read or re-focus their attention or take some other step to assist themselves in understanding what they are reading. Readers who are used to monitoring their reading are less likely to feel defeated by difficult texts because they are aware of the difference between understanding and not understanding and recognize their own resources for focusing or re-directing their attention in precisely the ways I have been describing under the other dimensions of performative literacy.

Fostering Performative Literacy in Classrooms

Performative literacy can be developed in students when literature is taught in a way that recognizes that reading, like writing, is a process of text construction—a process through which meaning is made in the head of the reader (and later reconstructed and made more visible, perhaps, through

writing) through the reader's encounter or transactions with words on a page and in the course of conversations with other readers. To recognize that reading is a process of meaning making or text construction is to recognize that it is a process very much like writing, involving the same false starts; the same vision and re-vision, drafting and redrafting; and all the same perils, opportunities (including opportunities for collaboration and consultation), and recursiveness of writing.

To see reading as such a process of composition will not only link the teaching of reading with the teaching of writing, it will also foster in students the kind of respect and capacity for tentativeness, for confusion, for sustained attention, for failure, for metacognitive awareness, particularly if what is foregrounded and honored in the course of instruction is the efficacy of the reading process rather than any predetermined product or content knowledge that a teacher feels obligated to transmit. In short, instruction directed toward fostering performative literacy must focus on the processes of reading and re-reading, placing an equal or greater emphasis (yet not an exclusive emphasis) on what student readers learn about their own capacity as readers in their transactions with difficult texts as on any established body of knowledge about those texts. A number of instructional approaches meet this criterion, including the following:

- Assignments that make reading processes visible. These might include double-entry journals where students record lines with responses and reflections on them from each reading and re-reading of a text; or simpler reading logs that ask students to keep track of their questions and other responses with each reading and re-reading.
- Assignments that not only honor but encourage students to identify what they

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don't understand. The point is to move away from assignments that identify comprehension as a product and instead help students see comprehension as a process (Beers, 2002). Examples include having students use sticky notes to flag what they didn't understand as they are reading; having students underline specific words or phrases that caused confusion; having students write about how they came to understand a particular text.

- Cold reading (what my colleagues in the South Coast Writing Project and Literature Institute for Teachers call “pants-down reading”) that involves working with students on a poem or short story that the teacher has never read before and with which the teacher is likely to experience difficulties in understanding—difficulties that will enable the teacher to collaborate authentically with students in the construction of meaning and to exemplify the traits and actions that constitute performative literacy.

Finally, just as the teaching of writing as a process has been found to thrive most successfully in a culture of instruction that supports collaboration, tentativeness, risk taking, collegiality, and opportunities to publish written work for an identifiable community of readers, so will classrooms seeking to enable students as fully functioning readers need to become communities of practice in which performative literacy is culturally valued and honored in both theory and practice. When we accomplish that, then we'll be nurturing a literacy that really matters in the 21st century.

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