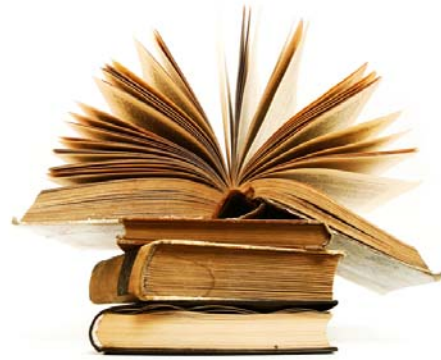


Chapter 1: Setting the Stage

In order to understand the problem with the way literacy is being taught, one must first look at a historical overview of literacy and how it has been handled in the schools. We will examine the different kinds of materials that have been available for reading, and compare and contrast them with the things children need to read today. Once we do, it will become evident that reading and writing today is significantly different than it was in our generation and our parents' and grandparents' generations. Different skills need to be developed for children to be able to respond to the changes favorably. Therefore, our strategies must change to accommodate the new skills that will make reading and writing more accessible to our students.



Literacy: a historical overview

When you look at your own children, you see that they have grown, and you know that they have changed, but the changes seem subtle. That is because you spend so much time with them. You are immersed in your family on a daily basis, so big changes over time seem small. However, to your relatives who haven't seen them in months or years, the changes seem enormous.

"...it will become evident that reading and writing today is significantly different than it was..."

Popular culture is similar in that we see changes in the world, but we don't perceive how big the changes are over our lifetime. Looking back, some of the most liberal, progressive minds of the 1960's were involved in the popular music culture of the time. Song writers like Bob Dylan and Arlo Guthrie were cutting-edge thinkers who

were challenging the established norms of their days. Yet, when you listen to some of the lyrics from the music of the sixties, you will find words from songs that are considered gender-biased, or racist today. Terms were used to describe gay people that the most narrow-minded thinkers of the twenty-first century would avoid. Conversely, there were references glorifying illegal drug use then in a way that the most progressive liberal thinkers would shy away from today. Both cases show major progress. Drug use is still prominent, but it is not advocated as fervently as it once was. Although racism, gender-bias, and homophobia still exist, the fact that the language has changed so drastically shows that our sensibilities have also changed. The changing of people's sensibilities is a huge step towards the acceptance of diversity in society and solving the problems related to drug and alcohol addiction.

“What has seemed like insignificant changes in literacy to educators are really enormous.”

Over long periods of time the same is true about literacy as it was about changes in our children or society. What has seemed like insignificant changes in literacy to educators are really enormous. I know of a high-school English/Humanities teacher who taught on Long Island in the late nineteen seventies. He was the considered by his students to be the epitome of literacy. He was knowledgeable in almost every area of intelligence and popular culture.

He also had great teaching instincts. Being on Long Island, where most students grew up to commute by the railroad to New York City for employment, the teacher taught his classes how to properly fold the New York Times by column, so that they would be able to read it while standing on a crowded train. Other lessons would often include topics from the *Times* or popular culture. He talked about his adventures with Jack Kerouak as a young man in New York City. His students always seemed engaged in the learning because he made learning relevant.

This teacher also had a weekly writing assignment where students were compelled to write an essay on any topic that interested them. If a student wrote about something that was important to him or her personally, the teacher would often show genuine interest in the subject. For example, once he visited a student at home to see an antique car that the student was helping his father restore. The student wrote an essay about it, and the teacher went on his own time the very next week to see the car. That event had an important impact on the student's interest in writing. He still writes regularly today. That student and many others considered him their inspiration to become literate.

This past year was the thirty-year reunion for the class of 1979 and that teacher was excited to be invited as the guest of honor. He is currently 87 years old and he lives in South Florida, so travelling back to Long Island for the reunion was an extreme hardship for him. Yet, he did for the love of his students. At the event he was happy to give his contact information to his former students. He encouraged them to call, write, or even visit. However, when he was asked if he had an e-mail address, this teacher, who inspired literacy, is still a wealth of knowledge, and was a master at student engagement, was forced to admit that he was not computer literate. He was unable to participate in the most common form of correspondence today.

The changes in society over the past thirty years seem small to us because we have been immersed in them. Seeing a snapshot of how things were back then, and comparing them to how they are now, one can begin to see that we live in a world that is significantly different than the recent past. What was considered literate then has changed by today's standards. The teacher in the example above wouldn't be able to fill out a simple job application today, because most companies require applications and resumes to be submitted

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online or at a kiosk located in the store. If he were computer literate, shopping could be easier for him. He could order merchandise online to be delivered to his home. He could get news and information from a wider range of sources and find opinions from across the world. He could even participate in writing blogs to continue sharing his vast knowledge, or chronicle his adventures as a teacher for the rest of the world to learn from. Although this teacher is clearly literate, it is easy to see that he doesn't have the literacy skills that a young person today needs to function in society.

“...it is important for literacy curriculum in school to reflect the changes in society.”

Recognizing that, it is important for literacy curriculum in school to reflect the changes in society. There is an urgent need for those changes to happen quickly. Schools should be providing professional development classes that will equip the teachers to handle the growing need for computer literacy. Yet, literacy education has lacked significant change. Teachers today are using most of the same methods that have been used for the last half of the twentieth century with little upgrade. There has been an elevated emphasis placed on intervention today, mostly because states are federally mandated to graduate students with minimal literacy standards, but otherwise teaching literacy is the same as it was thirty years ago.

Most jobs that today's students will be competing for when they become adults will require them to have basic computer skills. This is even true of people enter the service industry, and it will become more true as we move farther into the twenty-first century. In a recent article in the *New York Times* Tom Vanderark writes:

Technology has transformed communications, increased the efficiency of retailing and helped elect a president. But because education is largely protected from incentives and consequences, it lags in embracing technology....This must and will change.

(MM34)

Educators must respond to the need for change and include computer literacy as an integral part of their literacy program.

Literacy is. Although the meaning of the word “literacy” is academic proficiency in any subject, traditionally it has been mostly applied to knowledge about reading and writing. Someone who can read and write well is called literate. The converse has also been true; people who cannot read or write well are called illiterate. These same people can be experts in a wide range of subjects, and therefore literate in those areas, but their lack of reading strength has labeled them as illiterate. Educators have traditionally embraced literacy as the ability to read and write.

According to James Collins, “The study of literacy has often presumed dichotomies such as literate vs. illiterate, written vs. spoken, educated vs. uneducated, and modern vs. traditional.” (Collins 75) In the past this set of dichotomies has helped define student’s literacy levels and the methods used to teach literacy. However, these notions are being challenged today. There is a wide range of literacy abilities that students need to acquire, and many ways that schools need to address literacy issues in the classroom. For example, today approximately 4 percent of American high school students are learning online at home. (Vanderark MM34) The state of Florida has as a part of their school choice program the ability for students to access the curriculum from the public schools over the Internet, and many parents of k-12 students have chosen that method for educating their children. Most colleges have online and hybrid classes that require students to have a certain amount of computer literacy. In the future most students will be doing almost all of their learning via electronic media. Therefore, students can no longer be looked at as literate or illiterate based solely on whether they can read from traditional books or write with a pencil and paper. The dichotomy of liter-

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ate vs. illiterate has changed and schools need to change with it. Literacy needs to be thought of as the sum total of the skills that a student will need to have proficiency in so that they can become successful college students and workers.

Engagement. Part of the problem that teachers have encountered over the years is finding materials that are high-interest so that they keep the students engaged in the learning process. Children have a natural inclination to create, explore, and learn. Finding methods for teaching that exploit their natural tendencies is an effective way of helping them feel attached to the information in the lesson plan.

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Reading has been taught essentially in one of two ways, the more traditional method of phonics based reading, or the newer, still controversial method called whole word reading. In the phonics method, students are taught the basic sounds of vowels, consonants, and the rules for combining them. Students see letter combinations and use the rules to sound them out. However, the English language is a hybrid of many other languages, which sometimes makes the phonics rules inconsistent. Students need to learn all of the exceptions to the rules for sounding out letter combinations. It is estimated that only about half of the words in the English language can be properly pronounced by using the rules of phonics. This makes phonics based a reading difficult task for children from English speaking countries.

Whole word reading, on the other hand, ignores teaching the phonics rules and focuses the student on memorizing entire words and common phrases. Children are exposed to the same words or groups of words with enough frequency that they begin to memorize how they look without worrying about the difficulties of sounding them out. This method seems to have an advantage in that

phonics rules have been relegated as a small part of teaching reading. Rather the emphasis of whole word reading is on the meaning of the text and memorization of vocabulary. Yet, neither method takes into account the child's natural tendencies. Either children are faced with a difficult task with irregular rules or they are bored by constant repetition. Educators need to find ways of teaching reading that exploit the students' curious, creative nature.

Regardless of the method, once the students can read, educators have traditionally used a combination of classic literature, including novels, biographies, plays, and poetry, and practical reading such as newspaper, and magazine stories to inspire children to read with comprehension and fluency, and to use as a model for learning to write using clear language, with proper spelling and grammar skills. The hope has been that by providing several kinds of reading, students may find some of the topics interesting, and thereby practice more. Writing assignments have often been narrowly focused on academic reports with the same target audience, the teacher. Occasionally, teachers have creative assignments that make children consider an audience outside the classroom, and those are often the most engaging writing assignments, but they are only a small percentage of the students' writing projects. The most common writing in school is skill-based writing, which is often dry and contrived. The stress is on grammar and spelling rules, which often run counter to the creative process that students naturally have.

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The prevailing thought is that through reading and writing often, children's skills become better and they find the tasks less burdensome, and more enjoyable. The more enjoyable it is to read or write, then the more the child practices, and overtime he or she becomes literate. The problem is that this model ignores what young people today truly find engaging: the computer and technology.

“...when a teacher introduces materials that excite students about reading, then comprehension and fluency improve.”

Like in other areas of education, student engagement is necessary to ensure that the child becoming literate. If a student fails to engage in a reading lesson, he or she is easily distracted and feels disconnected to the lesson. The student comes away with very little. However, when a teacher introduces materials that excite students about reading, then comprehension and fluency improve. This is not only true of the subject matter; the format the material is presented on may also peak a student’s curiosity and help them engage in the learning. Internet reading is a multimedia event that is more likely to interest students than reading materials from a textbook.

Like reading, writing is also easier to teach when the students are given the latitude to engage with the content they are writing about. Additionally, students need to feel connected with their audience in order to produce writing that clearly expresses what they intend to say. Writing prompts, for example, that include a description of the students’ target audience will help them decide how they want to present the materials. As a result they feel engaged in the project as they try to present their information to a specific person or group. Another example would be a pen pal assignment. Students often write better to a pen pal, even someone they don’t know well, because they can focus on what they are trying to say.

Like reading, use of electronic media may also enhance the writing experience, and help the student’s engagement in a writing assignment. For some students with dysgraphia or other occupational therapy needs, writing with a pen or pencil is difficult mechanically. Since the method of writing challenges them, they may lose sight of the project. Using a computer or an alpha-smart word processor might help them overcome their difficulties and present their ideas because the focus is taken away from the mechanics of writing. Also writing in blogs or e-mail is a method of communication many

of your students are already using at home. Allowing them into the classroom allows them to use a forum for writing that they already find engaging.

Setting the stage. The stage has been set. We looked at the definition of literacy and saw that it can no longer be just about reading and writing. In order to become literate, students need to learn all of the skills that will make them viable citizens of the twenty-first century. Those skills must be presented in a manner that students find engaging, so they will find the materials relevant. The rest of this book will break down specific areas of literacy, and discuss how they need to be taught in schools to today's students.

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