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Final Thoughts:

Teaching Reading, Teaching Readers

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One of the most poignant moments of my own teaching career came about ten years ago when I taught literature and composition courses at a Michigan community college. In one course we examined the Great Depression, using John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as a cultural document. Joe, one of my non-traditional students, pulled me aside after class, and made the statement that stays with me today: "This is the first book I ever read cover to cover...I always got away with looking at the book cover or getting some of the basics from others in class." I have often wondered...What made reading this book matter so much? Why did he feel valued as a reader? Something clicked for Joe in the context of that class.

As I write this essay, I reflect upon the ways that "literacy" encompasses so much more than the often-stereotyped notion of "reading" as interpreting words on a page. I am reminded of the complex nature of literacy itself, which is evident in the words of authors in this journal. One way that I have personally conceptualized this complexity is through Gallego and Hollingsworth's (2000) focus on *multiple literacies*. They emphasize wholeheartedly the need to integrate the literacy acquisition in schools with the life experiences of students. Three initial goals of literacy they establish are:

1. To live successfully in the dominant society
2. To live successfully in minority communities and cultures
3. To live successfully in chosen and personal identities (p. 1).

Based on these three original goals for literacy, Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) have formulated three categories that define the many dimensions of multiple literacies:

- ⟨ *school literacies*—the learning of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school and other dominant language contexts, and the use or practice of those processes in order to gain a conceptual understanding of school subjects
- ⟨ *community literacies*—the appreciation, understanding, and/or use of interpretive and communicative traditions of culture and community, which sometimes stand as critiques of school literacies
- ⟨ *personal literacies*—the critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of historical or experiential and gender-specific backgrounds in school and community language settings, which sometimes stands as critique of both school literacies and community literacies. (p. 5, italics in original)

The authors further explain that these categories are not hierarchical, but rather to be used as "placeholders to make a complex argument for change" (p. 5).

Galindo (2000) explains that the attainment of *community literacies* assumes a strong relationship "between literacy, culture, and identity" (p. 268). Galindo explains further, "As educators, an important lesson to be communicated to our students is that literacy is more than a technology to be mastered; it can also be central to who we are and how we became social beings" (p. 269).

Literacy is, indeed, central to our being as both educators and learners. Some aspect of that text and the community of that particular class enabled my student Joe to gain literacy abilities spanning all three categories: school, community, and personal. Joe and I never discussed the details of what he attained in each of these areas, but I often wonder about the specifics.

I find some obvious possibilities in the narratives of the authors of this journal edition.

Multiple perspectives are examined: the power and joy of reading, the infinite possibilities of teaching literature and reading, the unique challenges facing college learners, and the resources to be tapped. And these multiple perspectives span school, community, and personal literacies. Every author in this issue of LAJM has tapped into those multiple perspectives; I have selected only some for inclusion in this reflection due to space limitations. This issue, however, is one of those rare times when the intersection of school, community, and personal literacies is not muddled by tangential, secondary roads. It provides real possibility and direction for crossing a “border into reading land,” (p. 10) the starting point for authentic literacy—rather literacies—in the truest sense.

Multiple Literacies Foster the Love of Reading

Zsuzsanna Palmer’s title “for the Love of Reading” expresses a focal undercurrent of this issue: How do we inspire that love of reading in our students despite all the challenges facing teachers in classrooms today? The narrative describes the relationships gained by her students as they conquered the hurdle of having to read 500 pages. Palmer’s students “passed the border into reading land” (p. 10) through her choice of allowing free choice and response to literary works, an option not available or chosen by these individuals in the past. How many of our students pass through our educational system acquiring the basic skills of reading, having an ability to comprehend for life purposes, but without that ability to find identity and solace in the printed page?

“Passing the border” is, indeed, what happened to Tara Autry and a class of fifth graders. The students entered a book talk café where orange juice and bagels flowed as freely as the discussion about books. The alternative option of creating “Star Books Café” enabled students to engage with text in a realistic way that makes them “intrinsically motivated to step inside English Language Arts content starts and engage in the discourse of benchmarks that will make them stronger readers, writers, and ultimately, learners” (14). Tomlinson is

another who describes literacy practices that make authenticity a key factor. She states, “The universal concept is that students want to read authentic text, ... to talk about books with group members that they choose, ...to choose their own books to read, and ...lots of time to read in class”(18). Such opportunities would enable readers of all ages to merge their school and community literacies in the development of critical personal literacies. Personal literacies are crucial in the study of literary works.

Infinite Possibilities Abound with Teaching Literature and Reading

“Living the Story” of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is described by Carl A. Young and Allyson B. Young as a way of leading readers from an efferent to an aesthetic stance in navigating this novel. By wearing personal symbols of shame, students vicariously experienced the emotions of character Hester Prynne. By exposure to this one alternative, aesthetic moment in their classroom, students have a sense of relation to their own lives and the potential for new perspectives as they study new literary works.

Authentic conversations are so crucial to literacy attainment. A model dialog is presented by Kia Jane Richmond and Johanna Delory about the mutual learning of an educator and student when multiple intelligences are used in the teaching process. Both examined the process of how the line between teacher and student can be blurred as both learn from collaborative effort and consideration of multiple intelligences. School, community, and personal literacies are inherently evident here, as Delory states, “While it is important for Language Arts educators to acknowledge and embrace our commitment to language and to the wonderful literature that can be created through its use, we should also remember that words are only one way to think, to create, to respond to or to make sense of texts” (p. 28). Reading literature becomes so much more than words on a page.

Words on the screen become all important to the students described by Gretchen Ruhmour-Voskuil and C. J. Gilbert who present an alternative way to

view literature, by initiating an online discussion board for students studying Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Relative anonymity allowed reluctant students to participate in discussions about the literary work, thus solidifying their engagement with the text. The authors emphasize that this online discussion did not supplant class discussions, but rather served as an alternative pathway to understanding, expression, and interpretation by students who may learn in different ways. Pam B. Cole presents ways that young adult literature can help younger adolescents with some of the more difficult issues in their lives; her focus reflects the integration of school, community, and personal literacies in a profound and poignant way.

Solid Resources Are Key for Literacy Attainment

Resources abound in every work of this issue. Strategies to make learning authentic and real are discussed by Julie Ann Mix who describes the ways that she makes connections for her students: "[C]onnecting students with readings through deliberate strategies promotes richer conceptualization and improved language awareness and, hence, more rewarding student writing experiences" (p. 41). Ways of tapping into background knowledge and pre-reading strategies are key elements of her repertoire. Authentic development of study guides to facilitate meaning in texts is described by Candace C. Hollingsead, Raymond J. Ostrander, and Julie Schilling. Dawn Dolly describes the value of modeling think-alouds for college-level students as a tool for making meaning of their texts and worlds. Michelle Devereaux and Amanda Otto provide an invaluable bibliography of references for teachers of literacy across disciplines.

The resources in this issues of LAJM have both personal and professional meaning for me. I find divergent perspectives that merge into literacy attainment—a broadly-define deep literacy that meshes school, community, and personal literacies. The authors here have given me reason to reflect upon my own reasons for becoming a university educator. Joe represents many students I have met

along the way. In his case, however, I am without closure, and there is a void, though, because I never probed further as to why *The Grapes of Wrath* meant so much to him. Today these questions have become a catalyst for the ongoing reframing of my own notions of literacy. In my methods courses, I take pre-service teachers into inner-city classrooms where they will apply theoretical precepts in real ways with children. I ask my students to consider complex dimensions of language and culture and how these influence the ways they instruct children. I ask them to choose authentic, diverse literature and to encourage multiple interpretations.

Even more importantly, I ask myself to do the same, to consider complexities of diversity and socioeconomics, to keep abreast of new literary works, and to teach in a relevant way encompassing the local and larger community. My own growth as an educator meshes with the concurrent growth of the learners in my class. Yes, I teach reading and how to teach reading. But more importantly, I teach readers...learners who are literate on multiple levels...school, community, and personal.

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