2010

Literacy Memories, Definitions, Implications

Markisha Webster-Smith
Northern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Webster-Smith, Markisha (2010) "Literacy Memories, Definitions, Implications," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1007>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Markisha Webster-Smith

Literacy Memories, Definitions, Implications

I remember sitting in my grandmother's lap with an assortment of colorful books spread before me on the kitchen table. I had the difficult task of selecting which one she would read to me in the afternoons following lunch and preceding my dreaded nap time. I recall the melodic sounds of her voice as her intonations matched the characters and adventures taking place in the story. Her roar or cackle would put me a place and time where my imagination was everything. In these intimate moments, my love of literacy blossomed.

Fast-forward to my career as a public school high school English teacher. I read the likes of *Oliver Twist* with a passionate, albeit sub-par British accent, proclaimed the beauty of iambic pentameter during Shakespeare units, and often was cast as all the characters in dramas such

Although my love of literacy and the fond memories it evokes help maintain a passion for what I do each day, I am now more focused on what research says about the changing face of literacy and how this will impact the content area teachers I encounter each day.

as *Othello*, but I did it all with a love and respect for literacy. I wanted my students to appreciate and embrace a love of language, reading, and writing in ways that would impact their lives

for years to come. I soon realized this task would often be tedious; the way students received and processed information was a far cry from visiting the library, curling up in a corner to read, or even joining a book club. My students wanted the information quickly and easily. Often my fervor for literacy did not always translate to my students; many were more interested in other subject areas or simply other subjects. I had to reevaluate my understanding of literacy because the paradigm was rapidly shifting. As a result, my teaching strategies quickly adapted.

Now, as a teacher educator who is charged with impressing upon preservice teachers the importance of literacy across content areas, I am once again delighted to share my devotion to literacy. It is more often than not a challenge to convince a math or PE major that literacy will play an important role in their lesson planning process, student activities, and student outcomes. Therefore, I make it a point to start with the basics and

slowly reveal how literacy is interwoven throughout the fabric of even the simplest of tasks they might require students to accomplish. Further, I stress that the term literacy itself has evolved into varying definitions; although many of my students are fairly recent high school graduates, literacy has changed into something they barely recognize. Although my love of literacy and the fond memories it evokes help maintain a passion for what I do each day, I am now more focused on what research says about the changing face of literacy and how this will impact the content area teachers I encounter each day. Two questions seemed most pertinent to addressing my new role as a teacher educator:

- How has the definition of literacy evolved over the past few decades?
- What are the implications of these changes for content area teachers?

Defining Literacy

The definition of literacy has evolved over the past few decades to mean much more than simply reading and writing. There are various perspectives of literacy that have attempted to establish workable characteristics for not only those in the world of academia but for those in the world at large. Conventional literacy and functional literacy are a good starting point. The idea of conventional literacy is the basic ability to read and write. Historically, this term was used to describe an individual who was highly literate in our country. However, this does not help determine whether someone actually comprehends the information they are reading. It is more about the act than about the actual process. Functional literacy expanded the definition of conventional literacy to mean the ability of an individual to use reading, writing, and computational skills in everyday life situations. It was a term that first emerged during World War II when the U.S. Army sought individuals who had "the capability to understand written instructions necessary for conducting basic military functions and tasks...on a fifth-grade reading level" (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 1998). In the years to come, other perspectives of literacy including workplace literacy, the literacy needed for particular jobs; cultural literacy, defined as going beyond technical reading to embrace democratic ideals (Hirsch, 1989); and critical literacy, reading the

world versus reading the world (Freire, 1970), emerged. Currently, we live in a world of multiple literacies. The influence of technology has made it impossible to just rely on hard-cover or paperback books housed on library shelves. This new era of literacy requires the skills, strategies, and dispositions that allow individuals to use the Internet and other ICT's (Information Communication Technologies) effectively (McLaughlin, 2010). In addition to understanding the role technology plays in literacy, students must also know about information literacy, the process by which learners find, understand, evaluate, and use information in a variety of formats for a variety of purposes (Abilock, 2007). Media literacy, the ability to analyze a variety of media formats (Considine, 1995), and multicultural literacy, the ability to understand and appreciate the similarities and differences among cultures (NCREL, 2003), also play a vital role in preparing students to contribute to the current workforce.

Implications for Content Area Teachers

With all the definitions of literacy, I often find myself contemplating how content area teachers, who often only focus on the content, can create meaningful, well-rounded learning experiences for their students. According to McKenna and Robinson (1990), content literacy is the ability to use reading and writing for the acquisition of new content in a given discipline; therefore, students must possess general literacy skills, prior content knowledge, and content-specific literacy skills. This is often not an easy task, especially for learners who struggle or those who are English Language Learners. Because of the changes in the way literacy is viewed in education today, I have to constantly call to my students' attention the necessity to present material in a variety of formats with the knowledge that they must also allow students to produce learning "products" in a variety of formats. We have extensive discussions about the ever-evolving definition of literacy before taking the plunge into what this means for their futures as a content-area educators.

The new age of literacy means that content teachers have to put aside the notion that the teaching of reading and writing is the English teacher's job (Alvermann, Phelps, & Gillis, 2010); content teachers have to be trained and ultimately comfortable uses literacy strategies in their classrooms that will increase learning across the curriculum. After completing my course, I find that many students are shocked at how important literacy is to their content area objectives and teaching. For example, one student in my most recent course commented, "The course made me aware of the absolute necessity of teaching literacy in the content area classroom. This idea was not something I had considered before the course. Now, I intend to incorporate

literacy strategies into every element of my teaching."

The various definitions of literacy means that content teachers must limit their lecture time and boost the time students have to engage in meaningful discussion and critical analysis.

In addition, content area teachers have to be willing to find resources outside of just textbooks, pulling in material from the media, the Internet, and from culturally diverse perspectives. I

find myself in the role of a saleswoman—convincing math, science, art, PE, music, and industrial tech majors that literacy must be an important part of their lesson planning, teaching, and student outcomes. It is, however, always rewarding when my students make comments at the end of the semester that validate my belief in literacy across content areas. One student noted in the winter semester, "A lot of the information presented in this class is going to be beneficial to both me and my students. I never realized how you can teach through text in any subject." Of course, this "hard sale" has meant a shift in the assignments I give my preservice teachers; I place a heavy emphasis on projects that require them to evaluate literacy strategies within the context of their content areas and projects that require them to research current trends and resources in content literacy. The new age of literacy means content teachers have to take responsibility for more than just the content material; they have to take responsibility for assuring that students can use appropriate literacy skills in both academic and social situations.

I believe the multitude of definitions for literacy and the obvious manifestation of more complex perspectives of what it means to be literate is a scary yet beautiful change. My love of literacy now translates into a determination to make sure the preservice teachers who are in my charge are armed with a toolbox of usable literacy strategies. I encourage them to follow sound research, be cautious of literacy trends, and to frequently remind themselves that being a content teacher does not just mean teaching the content; it means teaching students to become not only content literate but also skilled in multiple literacies, those forms of literacy that are diverse, multidimensional, and learned in different ways (McLaughlin, 2010). And, whenever I experience even the slightest feeling of discouragement, for my responsibility to the future content teachers of this country looms large, I crawl back onto the memory of my grandmother's lap and it all makes sense.

The new age of literacy means content teachers have to take responsibility for more than just the content material; they have to take responsibility for assuring that students can use appropriate literacy skills in both academic and social situations.

References

- Abilock, D. (2007). Building blocks of research: Overview of design, process, and outcomes. Retrieved July 1, 2010. <http://www.noddletools.com/debbie/literacies/information/lover/Infolit1.htm/>
- Alvermann, D., Phelps, S., & Gillis, V. (2010). *Content area reading and literacy: Succeeding in today's diverse classrooms*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Considine, D. (1995). An introduction to media literacy: The what, why, and how to. Retrieved July 1, 2010. <http://www.ced.appstate.edu/departments/ci/programs/edmedia/media/it/article/htm/>
- Hirsch, E.D., Jr., Kett, J.F., & Trefil, J. (1993). *The dictionary of cultural literacy*, 2nd Ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- McKenna, M.C., & Robinson, R.D. (1990). Content literacy: A definition and implications. *Journal of Reading*, 34, 184-186.
- McLaughlin, M. (2010). *Content area reading: Teaching and learning in an age of multiple literacies*. Boston: Pearson.
- Northwest Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) and MetiriGroup. (2003). 21st century Skills: Literacy in the digital age. <http://www.metiri.com/features.html>. Downloaded July 2, 2010.
- Tozer, S.E., Violas, P.C., & Senese, G. (1998). *School and society: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.

Markisha Webster-Smith is an Assistant Professor of Education at Northern Michigan University. Prior to her career in higher education, she was a secondary English teacher. While she primarily teaches content literacy and diversity courses, her first love will always be English/Language Arts.

Teachers for the Dream Has Been a Dream for MCTE

What is the *Teachers for the Dream* program? It is an MCTE initiative providing professional development opportunities for English or Language Arts (K-16) teachers/instructors and students of color. The MCTE Urban/Diversity Chair administers the program.

The intent of the “Dream” is to prepare participants for MCTE conference presentations, publication submissions, and/or leadership roles. Also, it intends to expand the participants’ knowledge bases, enrich their teaching experiences, and increase their opportunities for networking. To experience what MCTE has to offer, participants are granted free MCTE membership and subsidized attendance at an MCTE conference. Then, in consultation with mentors, usually college professors/instructors, participants prepare conference presentations and/or articles for publication. That is: after being involved in the initiative for six months to a year, participants are expected to consult with their mentors and submit either a presentation proposal for an upcoming conference or an article for publication in MCTE’s *The Language Arts Journal of Michigan* or *The Michigan English Teacher* or in other professional publications. The presentations or articles may be born out of course work. Even if the submissions are not accepted, the experience of having prepared a presentation or an article serves as an education in and of itself—a basis for future efforts.

Participants are encouraged to continue their association with MCTE, through any combination of the following: membership, conference attendance, presentation or article submissions, and/or assumption of service or leadership roles (for example, volunteering to work at conferences or to serve on the MCTE Executive Board).

All who are interested should contact Dr. Julie Mix-Thibault, 313-577-6766, or j.mix@wayne.edu.