

5-2018

What Literacy, and for Whom, Why?

P. L. Thomas
Furman University

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

Recommended Citation

Thomas, P. L. (2018) "What Literacy, and for Whom, Why?," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2193>

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.

What Literacy, and for Whom, Why?

P.L. THOMAS

Near the end of her century-plus life, Lou LaBrant sat at a typewriter and chronicled her long and impressive life—one that included a mostly ignored career as a powerful voice and practitioner of what she called teaching English. In that memoir that served as the basis of my biography of her (Thomas, 2001), LaBrant bristled at the back-to-basics movement she witnessed during the Reagan years; LaBrant noted she had worked and lived through several of these movements.

LaBrant's career and publications reflect an important question that faces everyone charged with teaching the literacy of any students, from pre-K through graduate school: What literacy, and for whom, why? Embedded in that question is a perennial problem as well—the historical and continuing arguments that teaching must remain neutral, somehow *not* political, and that literacy itself can be taught and learned as an objective human behavior.

A devoted Deweyan progressive, LaBrant recognized from the 1920s into the 1990s that literacy, in the teaching and the learning, is always political. LaBrant, I imagine, could never have anticipated the doubling-down of ever-new accountability, ever-new standards, and ever-new high-stakes testing that governs teaching and learning in public schools in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The tyranny of accountability, in fact, keeps teachers and students so focused on prescriptions and tests that the foundational question facing us—What literacy, and for whom, why?—is mostly rendered insignificant. None the less, we must confront that literacy runs along a spectrum—from decoding to comprehension to critical literacy—and that policy and practices dictate which literacy is expected of which students; and thus, “every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 2).

The Politics of Education Policy: Even More Beware the Technocrats

“Man Prefers Comic Books That Don't Insert Politics into Stories about Government-Engineered Agents of War” (2018, February 1, *The Onion*) includes a simple picture of a 31-year-old white male with the hint of a soon-to-be Van Dyke. The fictional “man,” Jeremy Land, explains:

“I'm tired of simply trying to enjoy escapist stories in which people are tortured and experimented upon at black sites run by authoritarian governments, only to have the creators cram political messages down my throat,” said Land, 31, who added that Marvel's recent additions of female, LGBTQ, and racially diverse characters to long-running story arcs about tyrannical regimes turning social outsiders into powerful killing machines felt like PC propaganda run amok. “Look, I get that politics is some people's thing, but I just want to read good stories about people whose position outside society makes them easy prey for tests run by amoral government scientists—without a heavy-handed allegory for the Tuskegee Study thrown in. Why can't comics be like they used to and just present worlds where superheroes and villains, who were clearly avatars for the values of capitalism, communism, or fascism, battle each other in narratives that explicitly mirrored the complex geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War?”

The satire here is the whitesplaining/mansplaining *inherent* in the politics of calling for no politics.

It strains the imagination only slightly to understand how this commentary on comic book fanboys also parallels the persistent combination in education of calling for no politics while using policy and a narrow definition of data and evidence to mask the racial and gender politics of formal schooling. In the context of what literacy we teach and to

whom, the issues of politics and objectivity cannot be ignored by policy makers as well as practitioners.

Let's imagine here, then, instead of the fictional Land an image of David Coleman (who transitioned from his Common Core advocacy into a prominent role as the head of the College Board) or John Hattie (he of the "poverty and class size do not matter" narratives that provide Hattie with a booming career as a consultant). Coleman, notably as a central architect of the ELA elements of Common Core, and Hattie as technocrats feed the systemic racism, classism, and sexism in formal education policy and practice by striking and perpetuating an objective and apolitical pose that serves as a veneer for the normalized politics of school and social culture in the U.S.

As Daniel E. Ferguson (2013/2014) examines, a central literacy concept in Coleman's Common Core, the rebranded traditional mis-use of New Criticism into "close reading," proposes:

Close reading, as it appears in the Common Core, requires readers to emphasize "what lies within the four corners of the text" and de-emphasize their own perspective, background, and biases in order to uncover the author's meaning in the text.

However, Ferguson adds:

Critical reading, in contrast, concerns itself with those very differences between what does and does not appear in the text. Critical reading includes close reading; critical reading is close reading of both what lies within and outside of the text. For Paulo Freire, critical reading means that "reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world."

And thus, close reading serves the efficiency of high-stakes standardized testing that depends on the claim that all texts have singular meanings that can be assessed in multiple-choice formats—a dynamic Ferguson (2013/2014) unmasks: "The story beyond the four corners of Coleman's video is one of a man whose agenda is served by teachers following a curriculum that requires students to read in a way assessable through standardized tests he oversees and profits from."

Simultaneously, of course, keeping students and teachers laser-focused on text only detracts them from the richer context of Martin Luther King Jr. and the broader implications of racism and classism informed by and informing King's radical agenda: calls for a minimum salary, protesting the Vietnam War, etc. *Simply stated, close reading is a political agenda embedded in the discourse of objectivity that whitewashes*

King and denies voice and agency to King, teachers, and students.

As a parallel example, John Hattie's mantra, "visible learning," serves the same political agenda: Nothing matters unless we can observe and quantify it (of course, conveniently omitting that this act itself determines *what is allowed to be seen*—not the impact of poverty or the consequences of inequity). Hattie's contested research and data (see Thomas, 2013, October 27) match the recent efforts in education reform to isolate student learning as the value added (VAM) by individual teachers, yet another off-spring of calls for efficiency manifested in high-stakes standardized testing. Literacy, in the context of visible learning and high-stakes testing, becomes reduced to decoding and comprehension, at best, but actively avoids critical literacy.

Ultimately, Coleman's and Hattie's agendas control what counts and what matters—the ultimate in political maneuvering—and thus are welcomed allies for those benefitting from inequity and wishing to keep everyone's gaze on anything except that inequity. And thus, if we return to *The Onion* commentary on comic book fanboys, a work of critical literacy itself, the misogyny and racism among comic book fanboys allows the sort of political ignorance reflected in the satirical news story. If we remain "within the four corners of the text" (Ferguson, 2013/2014) of Marvel's Captain America, for example, we are ignoring that "Captain America has always been a fascist. ... But ... Captain America has always been *our* fascist, and that is all that matters" (Thomas, 2016, June 3).

The politics of education policy seeks to point the accusatory finger at other people's politics, and that politics of policy is served by the technocrats, such as Coleman and Hattie, who feed and are fed by the propaganda of objectivity, the propaganda of no politics. This current culture of accountability, another version of back-to-basics, fits within a larger tradition, as well, one grounded in the use and mis-use of New Criticism.

New Criticism, Close Reading, and Failing Critical Literacy Again

When the Common Core and related standards debates drift toward advocacy or critiques of the standards themselves, I have refused, mostly, to engage with that conversation because I believe debating the quality of standards concedes too much—ignoring the larger debate about the futility of standards. I remain opposed to standards regardless of the quality because of the following reasons: (1) standards cannot

What Literacy, and for Whom, Why?

and will not be decoupled from the caustic influence of high-stakes testing, (2) all bureaucratic and mandated standards de-professionalize teaching, (3) accountability/standards/testing as a reform paradigm has failed and nothing about Common Core or any new iteration offers a different approach, and (4) there is absolutely nothing in the Common Core, for example, agenda that addresses social or educational inequities related to formal schooling broadly or literacy specifically.

Here, though, let me highlight that my primary field of teaching writing offers a powerful and disturbing parallel model of how the accountability/standards/testing movement supplanted and destroyed evidence-based pedagogy. The rise of best practice in the teaching of writing in the 1970s and 1980s was squelched by the accountability era begun in the 1980s (Bower & Thomas, 2016). As well, Applebee and Langer (2013) offer a chilling refrain of best practice in writing wilting under the weight of standards and testing in their *Writing Instruction That Works: Proven Methods for Middle and High School Classrooms*.

Reading instruction and reading experiences for children, we must acknowledge, will suffer the same negative consequences under any set of standards and the related high-stakes tests because there are no provisions for implementing either that change how standards and tests are implemented (often each round of standards and tests are simply infused into the current practices) and, in reality, Common Core



“Wheelbarrow” by Pixabay artist “Tama66” approaches, for example, to reading are new names for traditional (and flawed) reading practices.

Literacy standards always fail when viewed through the lens of critical literacy (Ferguson, 2013/2014; Rosenblatt, 1960; Singer, 2013). I want here, then, to add just a few more thoughts on why committing to standards and concepts such

as close reading erodes any gains we have made in understanding the complexity of responding to texts in the context of the words on the page, the intent and biography of the writer, the biography of the reader, and the multiple historical contexts that intersect when anyone reads any text. Let me start with an example.

I began my poetry unit always with “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams (1962):

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

My instructional goals with starting here are many, but in part, this poem was ideal to make a key point about how we respond to text. I would read the poem aloud and then ask students to close their eyes and envision a wheelbarrow. Then I would ask several to describe what they saw.

The exercise highlighted that many students pictured wheelbarrows in various positions. I always shared with students that I see any wheelbarrow turned up on its front edge, leaning against a tree because my father was adamant that a wheelbarrow must not sit with the body of the wheelbarrow turned so that it can gather water, which leads to rust forming. My interpretation of the poem is powerfully filtered through a working-class ethic about the world in which I was raised.

This activity allowed us to discuss what readers can say about the text of a piece (the demands of close reading or New Criticism), distinguish that from their personal responses (the text says nothing of how the wheelbarrow is sitting, but dictates that it is red, for example), and tease out how writer intent, text, and reader affect create the possibility of dozens of credible, although different, responses and interpretations. From there we began to confront what counts as “right,” as well as *who decides what is “right” as an interpretation*.

I made certain my students understood how to conduct a New Criticism analysis (and would do the same with close reading today) and stressed that school, teachers, and many

testing situations (notably Advanced Placement) honor only such approaches to text. Next, however, we challenged that dynamic and began exploring how each student's empowerment and autonomy rested on having a broad set of lens through which to engage with text, through which to unmask power dynamics embedded in authoritative interpretations of text.

This, of course, is the province of critical literacy.

Ironically, if we use a critical reading of standards and calls for close reading, we discover that "close reading" (and the move by Coleman from writing Common Core to leading College Board, where AP and SAT tests are spawned) is simply a repackaging of text-only approaches to text embraced by New Criticism (Thomas, 2012). Like the mechanistic and reductive ways in which New Criticism has been implemented in formal schooling in order to control and measure objectively how students respond to text, standards and the focus on close reading serve efficiency models of high-stakes testing while also failing students who need and deserve the complex and challenging tools afforded with critical literacy.

Close reading—if we wade into debates about the quality of the standards—is nothing new, in fact. Advocates of standards are ironically proving why instead of close reading we need critical reading.

Context matters.

"[L]anguage is our basic means of being human," LaBrant (1941) argued, adding, "that words are a part of our very tissues; and that our life as a democratic society is dependent upon understandings which must be wrought through language" (p. 204). LaBrant advocated for free-reading, writing by choice, and the importance of the "honest use of language and an understanding of its relation to life" over teaching primarily correctness (p. 206).

This was a call for critical literacy in the era of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Eight decades later, we have failed this call as it rings as true today: What literacy, for whom, and why?

References

- Applebee, A.N., & Langer, J.A. (2013). *Writing instruction that works: Proven methods for middle and high school classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Bower, J., & Thomas, P.L. (2016). *De-testing and de-grading schools: Authentic alternatives to accountability and standardization*. Revised ed. New York, NY: Peter Lang USA.
- Ferguson, D.E. (2013/2014, Winter). Martin Luther King Jr. and the Common Core: A critical reading of close reading. *Rethinking Schools*, 28(2). Retrieved from <https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/martin-luther-king-jr-and-the-common-core>
- Kincheloe, J.L. (2005). *Critical pedagogy primer*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Peter Lang USA.
- LaBrant, L. (1941). English in the American scene. *The English Journal*, 30(3), 203–209.
- Man prefers comic books that don't insert politics into stories about government-engineered agents of war. (2018, February 1). *The Onion*. Retrieved from <https://local.theonion.com/man-prefers-comic-books-that-don-t-insert-politics-into-1822632404>
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (May, 1960). Literature: The reader's role. *The English Journal*, 49(5), 304-310, 315-316.
- Singer, A. (2013, November 22). Reading without understanding -- Common Core versus Abraham Lincoln [Web log]. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-singer/reading-without-understan_b_4323239.html
- Thomas, P.L. (2001). *Lou LaBrant: A woman's life, a teacher's life*. Huntington, NY: Nova Science publishers, Inc.
- Thomas, P.L. (2016, June 3). O Captain America! Our Captain America! [Web log]. *Radical Eyes for Equity*. Retrieved from <https://radicalschoolarship.wordpress.com/2016/06/03/o-captain-america-our-captain-america/>
- Thomas, P.L. (2012, January). "A richer, not a narrower, aesthetic"—The rise of New Criticism in *English Journal*. *English Journal*, 101(3), 52-57.
- Thomas, P.L. (2013, October 27). Teacher quality, Wiggins and Hattie: More doing the wrong things the right ways [Web log]. *Radical Eyes for Equity*. Retrieved from <https://radicalschoolarship.wordpress.com/2013/10/27/teacher-quality-wiggins-and-hattie-more-doing-the-wrong-things-the-right-ways/>
- Williams, W.C. (1962). The red wheelbarrow. *Poets.org*. Retrieved from <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/red-wheelbarrow>
- P. L. Thomas** is a Professor of Education (Furman University), who taught high school English for 18 years in South Carolina before moving to teacher education. He has been a column editor/co-editor for *English Journal* (National Council of Teachers of English) under two editorships and is author of *Beware the Roadbuilders* and *Trumplandia!* (Garn Press). Follow his work at <http://radicalschoolarship.wordpress.com/> and @plthomasEdD.