

LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “WRITING” AND “WRITING DOWN”

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Recently Nathan, my ten-year-old, and his friend Scott took an acting class. The two boys agreed to create a play the class would perform, and they spent a sunny afternoon planning a ship-wreck scenario, describing a role for each class member to perform, and trying out different parts themselves. After a while I asked them, “Shouldn’t you write down the lines you want everyone to say?”

“No, Dad,” Nathan told me, clearly distressed at my ignorance. “We’re writing the play, not writing it down.”

Nathan’s comments seemed to drive home some ideas about literacy, ideas I had been working with for quite a while. His distinction between “writing,” an act of composing and of making sense, and “writing-down,” an act of encoding, were wise, it seemed to me. And within this distinction, I’ve figured a way to make sense of the discussions going on about literacy.

Several viewpoints appear wildly one-sided. For example, usage-mongers, as they’ve been called (Hartwell), are a visible group and their literacy definition is quite obvious: literacy is correct usage. Simon and Newman, for example, seem to believe that they’re literate because they know the rules of usage, and the rest of us are illiterate because our pronouns have

unclear antecedents or we occasionally fail to distinguish between “affect” and “effect.”

That “literacy is correct usage” definition is, of course, silly. Linguists agree that all language is logical and competent, that usage is a matter of social mores; standard English is not intrinsically superior to any other pattern of language. So these usage-mongers base their definition on personal taste and pass it off as divine definition. This hardly seems fair.

But the public is well aware of this usage-monger stance (that’s why people, mumbling about watching their language, back away from us English teachers at parties), and indeed, many English teachers have done their part in promoting such a view. But the stance is self-serving. Those who subscribe to it are essentially saying that “literacy is what I have and all literate people are like me.”

Nathan and Scott are, by this definition, illiterates. As they worked, they used “good” as an adverb and talked in sentence fragments. Sometimes their verbs agreed with the objects of prepositions. It is not important, these usage mongers tell us, that the boys fully understood both the actors and the audience for their play. But I disagree: I think the boys knew what was important for them to “write” their play.

The public is also aware of another definition, one encouraged by literacy projects which want everyone to be able to write checks and read want ads: literacy is a functional skill. But capability alone, no matter what the level, does not assure performance. The ability to read, therefore—whether it be the classifieds or the classics—does not alone make us literate. Just because we can “write it down,” as Nathan says, doesn’t mean we can “write,” and just because we can “read words” doesn’t mean we can “read ideas.” “Aliterate” accurately describes those who have the tools of literacy but don’t or won’t use them (Gere 122).

Literacy theorists such as Farrell begin with a similar approach, claiming that literacy is technology. According to them language is a tool, and people cannot think in complex ways unless they can read and write tools. Farrell claims that until we can completely use the tools of language—including all the forms of the verb “to be”—we cannot think in sophisticated ways. But this claim says that those who speak in nonstandard ways have

nonstandard thinking abilities, implying that virtually all minorities who speak nonstandard forms of English are incapable of the same complex thought patterns as members of the white middle class who speak standard English.

This definition, too, is faulty. Vygotsky has shown pretty conclusively that even simple languages are capable of expressing complex ideas. And Cole and Scribner have shown that non-literate people are capable of complex thought. Refer again to Nathan and Scott: their sense of “writing,” of being literate, does not even include the tools of reading and writing. That, the boys clearly imply, is something else, something distinctly separate from literacy.

So if literacy isn’t usage or skill or technology, what is it? Scholars such as E. D. Hirsch, author of a recent bestseller, claim that literacy is being familiar with the “right” cultural artifacts. To be literate, Hirsch claims, we need to be familiar with a specific set of texts and ideas. I’m afraid, however, that this cultural literacy idea is just an extension of the elitist dogma that has dominated English departments for decades. It sees literacy and knowledge as something “out there,” something “in the text,” something we get at through close examination.

This definition goes against most current theories of teaching: knowledge and literacy are something “in here,” something “in the learner,” something we get at by discovering our positions through group discussion. Nathan and Scott know this; their knowledge and literacy both come from the situation they’re dealing with, an acting class, and they negotiate their positions within that social situation.

Don’t get me wrong: a few sensible literacy definitions are available. Pattison, for example, claims that we cannot learn to read and write, to use the technology of language, until we are already literate. According to this view, literacy occurs when language users become aware of their own language and thought processes. This self-awareness begins when children become participants in their community’s language customs, whether those customs are oral or written, and it precedes the ability to read and write.

My own definition of literacy builds on this last idea and attempts to go beyond it. I believe literacy is our ability to make productive use of language—oral as well as written—to under-

stand who we are and what place we assume in the world. This ability comes from and interacts with a variety of cultural, social, physical, political, interpersonal, institutional, and motivational phenomena. Literacy, then, is our ability to make sense, and that ability is affected by a variety of internal and external influences.

Once we begin to see literacy from this perspective, we must also begin to alter both the content and the methods of our teaching. We can no longer concentrate on “grammar” books and usage drills, for these are the tools of the usage-monger. And we can no longer focus on reading as the ability to decipher words, for this is a technological concept. And we can no longer justify studying standard pieces of literature at the expense of student-produced texts, because those standard pieces represent a culturally elitist attitude.

We must, in fact, provide our students with the opportunities to be literate, to “write” their own plays, and not solely with the opportunities to practice their literacy tools, to “write down” their words. But how do we go about this?

First, we need to teach our students about standard English, what it is and what it isn’t, what it can do for its users and what it can’t. Nathan and Scott, at ten years old, can distinguish between the language they use while speaking with friends and the language they use while writing for teachers, even though they don’t yet understand that they have different languages. It is imperative that students, at an early age, begin to understand the differences between language forms. We must not teach them that standard English is “right” and all other forms “wrong”; we must show them that they select language forms according to the situation, just as they select different clothing for different weather and different occasions.

Second, we need to understand that “knowing how” is quite different from “knowing about,” that “writing” is quite different from “writing down.” We need to be more concerned with our students’ ability to apply their literacy skills and less concerned with their ability to recite rules of usage. We need to allow them the space to explore their own literacies on their own terms, and then help them discover how to mold their concepts of literacy to affect others’ concepts, how to “write down” in audience-appropriate forms what they’ve already “written.”

Third, we need to apply our literacy lessons to real-world situations in order to assure that our students do not become aliterates later in life. Too often students see literacy as a classroom artifact and not as something to enrich and empower their lives. Instead of concentrating on texts and teacher talk, we need to concentrate on cultivating our students' abilities to make sense out of a text and to apply the text to their own lives. We need to demonstrate that writing is an instrument that wins hearts and arguments and jobs. Literacy, we must show them, extends far beyond the classroom.

Fourth, we need to see technological advances as tools which might add to literacy. Computers, with their ever-more-sophisticated editing programs, can become tools that liberate students from the tediousness of "writing down," freeing them to "write" more and more complex ideas. We must show our students that television exists as more than a drug for couch potatoes, that its programs can contain the same textual complexities as written literature. Instead of teaching students the depths of traditional literature, we must teach them to be critics of the literate world that surrounds them.

Fifth, we need to talk about rhetoric, how realities are constructed by language, its senders, and its receivers. Language, we must demonstrate, is never fixed nor beyond negotiation; it is, in fact, constantly renegotiated. Literacy is the ability of a message-sender to "write" ideas in her head, then carefully to "write down" the ideas so that a message-receiver has a chance to "write" the same ideas in his own head.

This concept of literacy would significantly affect our teaching methods and attitudes. We would, for example, have to give our students more room to plan their own objectives within our own well-defined frameworks. We would also have to quit believing that students learn only what we teach them, and we would have to start believing that we can gain as much from our students as they from us.

Given the chance to compose an original play, two ten-year-olds learned to shape their composition to fit the shape of the world at hand; learned to differentiate between "writing" and "writing down," a concept no teacher taught them; and taught this English teacher more than a little about literacy. Significant learning can sneak up on us all.

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