

# Literacy for What?

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We owe young people the open doors and expanded possibilities that only literacy can provide. Teaching for literacy conceives of learning not as behavior but as action — of process, of restlessness of quest. To encounter the arts and other subjects in a mood of discovery and mindfulness and rational passion is to have experiences that exclude inertness. Literacy empowers people; it is a beginning, a becoming — not an end in itself.

We hear about declining literacy; it has become a fact of life — a drab presence, simply there. We look for scapegoats: teachers, of course; disintegrating families; shiftless children; colleges rotted by relativism and relevance; ubiquitous television. We read William Safire and chorle to ourselves. After all, we reassure our cultivated friends, he speaks for us. We listen to the Underground Grammarian and wag admonishing fingers at our very own colleagues. Naturally, he is not referring to thee and me; his irony and acerbity are meant for “them.” And, as we so often do in America, we go in search of the quick fix, a sure way of instilling in students what we have agreed to call “competencies” (“competence” and “capacity” no longer serve), an efficient mode of training in the basic skills. But will intense concentration on the “basics” insure what William Safire purportedly wants to hear and see? Will “competencies” bring the Grammarian above ground at last and send him on his way? What *do* we mean by literacy? What is it for?

Half a century ago John Dewey expressed the need for an articulate public and linked its emergence to a “subtle, delicate, vivid, and responsive art of communication.”<sup>1</sup> Only when we have achieved such communication, he said, will democracy come into its own, “for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion . . . It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.” Thirty years later Hannah Arendt wrote of humans as acting and speaking beings, disclosing themselves as subjects through their acts and words. When they speak directly *to* each other, she said, they create an “in-between” or a web of relationships.<sup>2</sup> Only when such a web is formed is there likely to be what she called a “public space,” a space where freedom might finally appear. Jurgen Habermas, writing in the last decade, emphasized inter-

subjectivity and mutual understanding when he described “communicative competence,” which contrasts with purely technical talk geared to control.<sup>3</sup>

Each of these thinkers has linked communication (surely an expression of literacy) to the existence of a free society. Each has recognized the importance of authentic speaking and writing — the kind of speaking and writing that allows people to reveal themselves to others as they try to make sense of their world. When I read Dewey, Arendt, Habermas, and the many others who have probed the meanings of literacy and thought of new modes of communication and new kinds of literacy, I cannot but ponder existing instances of wordlessness and experiences of powerlessness. I cannot but ponder the *kinds* of speechlessness that occur in these times of proliferating messages and bombarding sounds: the constrained or elliptical talk of so many of the young; the technical talk of so many in the professions (including ours); the hollow kind of public utterance we hear from our nation’s capital. And I remember how much language has to do with thinking, how listening to certain kinds of language can stop thinking, how difficult it is to think if one lacks appropriate words. My mind fixes on stock responses, on euphemisms and evasions, on monosyllables, on “Jordache jeans” and “Have a nice day,” on the pendulum swings between gobbledygook and the solemn, impenetrable language of what often passes as expertise.

Then, for some reason, I remember Herman Melville’s Billy Budd, who stutters when he is agitated. Billy can find no words to answer the evil Claggart’s charge of treason, and so he strikes out at his accuser. Claggart falls to the ground, hits his head, and dies. Billy, you recall, is charged with murder and sentenced to hang from the yardarm.<sup>4</sup> Remembering this tale, I am compelled once more to ponder the connections between speechlessness and alienation and violence. Billy was innocent and handsome and illiterate; his shipmates loved him. But the warship, the *Indomitable*, was an exemplar of organized society, in which people were not supposed to listen to their hearts but to words; so Billy, wordless, had to die. I remember, too, another kind of death in Paul Nizan’s novel, *Antoine Bloyé*. It is the existential death of a locomotive engineer in France, a man who spent most of his life as a middle manager on the railroad system:

Like many men, he was impelled by demands, ideas, decisions connected with his job. . . . There was no opportunity to think about himself, to meditate, to know himself and know the world. He did no reading; he did not keep himself *au courant*. Every evening, before going to sleep, he opened his *Life of George Stephenson* and, having

read through two pages, which he had got to know by heart, he fell asleep. He glanced at newspapers casually. The events they told of belonged to another planet and did not concern him. The only publications he took a vital interest in were the technical magazines with their descriptions of engines. For a space of fourteen or fifteen years, there was no man less conscious of himself and his own life, less informed on the world than Antoine Bloyé. He was alive, no doubt; who is not alive? To go through the motions of life all you need is a well-fed body. He, Antoine, moved and acted, but the springs of his life, and the drive of his actions were not within himself.<sup>5</sup>

And the narrator asks, "Will man never be more than a fragment of a man, alienated, mutilated, a stranger to himself?" And I think about naming the world and making sense of it; about the place of literacy in reflective and tonic living, in overcoming automatism, wordlessness, and passivity.

Of course fundamental skills are needed: knacks, know-how, *modi operandi*. But I want to see the means of achieving literacy made continuous with the end-in-view, and I would also remind teachers that *literacy ought to be conceived as an opening, a becoming, never a fixed end*. I believe, with Dewey and Gilbert Ryle, that fundamental skills are only the foundation, the first level, and that learning does not actually begin until people begin teaching themselves. Ryle talks about the importance of advancing beyond low-level skills and employing them in higher-level tasks that cannot be done without thinking. He talks of an ordinary, "unbrilliant, unstupid boy" learning to read:

He learns to spell and read monosyllables like "bat," "bad," "at," "ring," "sing," etc., and some two-syllable words like "running," "dagger," and a few others. He has not been taught, say, the word "batting"; yet soon he is reading and spelling unhesitatingly the word "batting"; and he may say, if asked, that he learned from himself how the word looks in print, how to write it down, and how to spell it out loud. In a sense, he has taught the word to himself without yet knowing it.<sup>6</sup>

His teacher had taught him how to read monosyllables and some longer words. Thus the teacher had empowered him to make some independent moves on his own, to make specific applications himself, in the hope that eventually he would transform what he had learned into a personal method of operating by his own "self-criticized practice." Another point is that the boy will learn untaught things if he needs them somewhere, if they respond to questions he is provoked to ask for himself. Ryle says that teaching ought to open gates, not close them; people only begin to learn when they go beyond what they are taught

and begin teaching themselves. This is teaching, in my view: creating situations that impel people to reach beyond themselves, to act on their own initiatives. And teaching, too, includes enabling persons to perceive alternative realities, more desirable orders of things. Only when they can see things as if they could be otherwise, are they free in any meaningful sense. Only as they can imagine a better condition of life, are they able to perceive what is lacking in their present moments and to reach forward, to go beyond.

This view of teaching is very much at odds with the approach taken in many classrooms today, especially in those which concentrate on competencies. Teachers are schooled to think of students as reactive creatures, behaving organisms. Overaffected by the technical ethos, they are likely to focus on measurable or observable performance or to function according to what Ryle calls a “crude, semi-surgical picture of teaching as the forcible insertion into the pupil’s memory of strings of officially approved propositions. . . .”<sup>7</sup> When the reward system of a school is geared toward guaranteeing certain predefined performances or the mastery of discrete skills, teachers too often become trainers — drilling, imposing, inserting, testing, and controlling. They are too distanced from their students to talk with them or to them. Instead, they talk *at* them, work *on* them very often, but not *with* them. Teachers who conceive their students as some plastic raw material, or some sort of resistant medium, cannot think of empowering students to learn how to learn, to articulate, to be with one another, or to develop an “in-between.”

Teaching for literacy conceives learning as action rather than behavior. The notion of action involves the reflective taking of trying out what has been learned by rote, acting on the so-called competencies. This is in contrast to an unreflective, semi-automatic movement through predefined sequences of what is sometimes optimistically called “mastery.” A concern for beginnings, for action rather than behavior, is different from a preoccupation with end points, with predetermined objectives. Indeed, once teachers approach their students as novices, as newcomers<sup>8</sup> to a learning community extending back through time and ahead into a future, they may well open themselves (as well as their students) to all sorts of untapped experiential possibilities.

The notion of the aesthetic and the importance of the humanities unite in moving people to learn how to learn in this way. “Rooted in language and dependent in particular on writing,” writes the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities, “the humanities are inescapably bound to literacy.”<sup>9</sup> And, a few lines later: “In literature and the arts,

the imagination gives public expression to private experience." When we work to promote what is called aesthetic literacy, an informed awareness of works of art or works in the humanities, we start with the assumption that the more a person can come to know, the more he or she will come to see and hear, certainly where works of art are concerned. We start, too, with the idea that there is no way to realize a work of art, to make it live in a person's experience, if that person is not actively involved with it. It is important to recognize that every encounter with a work of art represents a new beginning, even if the work is moderately familiar and has been encountered before. Every time we become present, say, to a Cézanne painting or an Emily Dickinson poem, we are—whether consciously or not—about to experience something new. Whoever we are, we are at a particular point in our life history; we are different from what we have been, even a day before. (And I want to stress the great importance of feeling oneself to be in process, to be on the way, to be *en route* to what is not yet.)

It may be that we have learned more, over time, about what it signifies to look at a painting, to attend to its forms, to see its contours emerging, to engage with its thrust of color or illusions of space. Having thought about it, having questioned it (and ourselves, perhaps), we shall be able to see differently, to see more. And, strangely, we may discover—if we allow ourselves to do so—that every time we come to a Cézanne painting or an Emily Dickinson poem, there is always more to be seen, if we are willing to think about it, to think about our own thinking with respect to it. We can never exhaust it, never use it up. To enter into it imaginatively, to shape the materials of our experience in accord with it, is to find something in our memory, in our consciousness, even in our lived situations that we might never have found were it not for the painting or the poem and our changing awareness of it. It can never be wholly absorbed; it can never be complete. There is always, always more.

I emphasize all this not simply because I believe that the arts should play a central role in the schools. It happens that I *do* believe this passionately, knowing as I do that aesthetic experiences are not only affective and intuitive, knowing that they involve persons perceptually and cognitively as much as they do emotionally, knowing that they provoke people to wide-awakeness and to posing questions and pondering their worlds. To be able to attend to the shapes of things and their qualities, to pay heed to sounds, to be in touch with the rhythms of the world: All of this is to be more alive, more open, more resistant to stasis and to all that stands in the way of literacy. But my emphasis on the connections between the arts and literacy also suggests so many things about how

teaching in many realms might proceed. I mean the kind of teaching that moves young people to search, to reach out, to think (as Dewey often said) prospectively and as participants. I mean the kind of teaching that enables persons to be observant and imaginative and careful, awake to their own lived worlds and what is deficient about them.

To encounter the arts and other subjects in a mood of discovery and mindfulness and rational passion is to have experiences that exclude inertness. Students experience inertness when they are confronted with information that is solidified, packaged, and in some way dead: pieces of what is incorrectly called knowledge, something students are expected to insert into their minds. Such a barren approach to teaching or to communication can only discourage thinking and mindfulness. (I anticipate with some horror the advent of videodiscs and additional cable networks if we cannot countervail against this.) After all, the value of what we come to know is subordinate to its use in thinking; and inert ideas all too often stop thinking in its tracks.<sup>10</sup> All of us can recall people (not only children) who say, "I know, I know," meaning that they do not want to think about something. All of us are familiar with the kind of certainty that makes people feel there is no more need to think, and we are familiar with the numbing effect of packaged media messages and categorized "information."

In an encounter with a work of art, the *point* of knowing something about form and color or imagery and meter is to allow what is being attended to to grow in our experience. Simply to store a piece of information about Cézanne's effort to restore structure to the visible world is not to come to know or to learn; nor is it to heighten understanding or to enable oneself to see. The discipline required and the rigor involved are what make freedom in the quest for meanings possible. The point is to nurture the thinking process, the sense-making process — not to move people to say, "I know, I know" and switch the dials or turn off the set.

The notion of literacy of which I am speaking is a notion of process, of restlessness, of quest, I recall Virginia Woolf writing about how much of her childhood contained what she called "a large proportion of cotton wool," meaning that much of it was not lived consciously. But she also writes about "exceptional moments." She remembers looking at a flower and suddenly seeing the flower as part flower and part earth; and she put away that thought to save. She captured an elusive insight in the net of language. It is the pleasure to be found in making new connections, the insight to be gained in discovering the relations between what is perceived or understood and what follows from it. It is, as Woolf said, the "token of some real thing behind appearances; and I

make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole. . . ."<sup>11</sup> It is the significance of discovering an interest, a concern that links one human being to another. All of these cannot but illuminate ongoing experience and expand the spheres of potential meaning.

Surely there are flowers and the equivalents of flowers in the sensed and perceived worlds lived by students: flowers and faces and city streets and burned-out storefronts and other people — phenomena to be attended to as Virginia Woolf attended to what was happening in her world. There are *lived actualities* that raise questions not now answerable, thoughts to be put away in the mind, to be reconceived and reexamined and, later on, explained. Let me emphasize my concern for consciousness and the linking of consciousness to thinking and explaining. To feel passive or powerless is to be open to the despair and horror most of us (including our children) know all too well, perhaps particularly in the cities, but actually across our entire nation.

One of the important contributions to be made to the initiation into articulateness, into literacy, is the overcoming of this sense of powerlessness. Virginia Woolf did this by putting her experiences into words, but I do not think it necessary to be a writer to do so. We must do all we can to enable the young to articulate, to express what they see and hear. They need to be empowered to give voice to what horrifies them, what dulls and deadens them — by telling their stories aloud, writing logs, keeping journals, inventing fictions, creating poetry, editing newsletters, or even rendering what they perceive through paint or gesture or sound. To speak through one of these several languages is not only a way of overcoming passivity; it is a way of being free along with others, because to speak or to express is to give public form to private awareness, to communicate what is known. It is to develop the power Virginia Woolf talks about: the power against nonbeing and loneliness — the “nondescript cotton wool” that obscures so much of life.

Yes, the silence and the powerlessness must somehow be overcome, if literacy is to be achieved. The teacher of literacy, to be authentic and effective, must be inquirer, discoverer, critic, sometimes loved one. He or she must be someone who cares, someone who is ready to engage a subject matter or a created form as an always open possibility. The true teacher of literacy is not the kind who comes to class having “done” *Romeo and Juliet* or the history of the Civil War or the science of genetics — with all questions answered and the subject turned into an object ready to be consumed. Rather, he or she must be prepared to think critically, giving good reasons for the claims made and even the demands, encouraging students to look critically upon the perform-



ances in which they are asked to engage, participating in discussions with the students, making explicit the norms that govern their being together, keeping the enterprise open, allowing for possibility. Of course it is a burden for the teacher; but meaningful literacy is most unlikely if teachers do not display, against all odds, the modes of being (and of foresight and integrity) they wish students to choose for themselves.

Our task is to move young people to be able to educate themselves and to create the kinds of classroom situations that stimulate them to do just that. Doing so, they may find themselves in a position to discover and use certain of the concepts that enable literate human beings to impose order and meaning on inchoate experience. Concepts are perspectives of a sort; they are clusters of meaning. They empower persons to organize experience in order to interpret it, to have some power over it, to see and, yes, to say. To achieve literacy is, in part, to learn how to think conceptually, to structure experience, to look through wider and more diverse perspectives at the lived world.

Obviously, in many schools the public emphasis is on literacy, basic skills, and test results, and there are administrators throughout the U.S. who care mainly about numbers and what is finally quantifiable. And there are abstracted faces in classrooms, young people for whom school is far less important than television or pop music or life on the streets. It is certainly true that, for children who look at television six hours a day, school cannot be interesting or relevant. For one thing, school makes demands that TV does not; it makes people feel inferior, as TV seldom does; it does not seem concerned with "real" things.

It seems evident that, if the school's primary function is to counter-vail against all of this, the literacy it attempts to make possible must be linked to critical reflectiveness, to wide-awakeness. Indeed, I insist that no other institution or agency in society has that particular responsibility. If we in education do not succeed in accomplishing this mission, we shall (as most of us are quite aware) leave a population passive, stunned, and literally thoughtless in front of television or with miniature speakers in their ears. They will become increasingly fearful in the face of what they see happening in "the world," increasingly confused by the idea of a movie actor playing President, increasingly numb to terms like "El Salvador" and "budget" and "defense." Horror, despair, passivity, and nondescript cotton wool. We have only to offer the power that comes with the ability to explain, to locate, to conceptualize, to perceive possibilities. That, as I see it, signifies literacy.

Let me conclude with a section from Ntozake Shange's choreodrama, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, because it deals with the theme of this article and because it suggests so very much.



de library waz right down from de trolly tracks  
cross from de laundry-mat  
thru de big shinin floors & granite pillars  
ol' st. louis is famous for  
i found toussaint  
but not til after months uv  
cajun katie/ pippi longstockin  
christopher robin/ eddie heyward and a pooh bear  
in the children's room  
only pioneer girls & magic rabbits  
& big city white boys  
i knew i wazn't sposedta  
but i ran into the ADULT READING ROOM  
& came across  
TOUSSAINT  
my first blk man  
(i never counted george washington carver  
cuz i didn't like peanuts)  
still

Toussaint waz a blk man a negro like my mama say  
who refused to be a slave  
& he spoke french  
& didn't low no white man to tell him nothin  
not napolean  
not maximilien  
not robespierre  
TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE  
was the beginning uv reality for me  
in the summer contest for  
who colored child can read  
15 books in three weeks  
I won and raved abt TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE  
at the afternoon ceremony  
waz disqualified  
cuz Toussaint  
belonged in the ADULT READING ROOM<sup>12</sup>

It did not matter. She loved Toussaint. She took him home, and he became her imaginary friend. And she walked with him and explored with him and talked to him, until finally she met a boy named Toussaint Jones who turned out to be not too different from her Toussaint; but this one spoke English and ate apples and was all right with her: "no tellin what all spirits we cd move down by the river." And the section ends, "hey wait."

Would such a person *not* master the basics, with the Adult Reading Room in sight? I ask myself how we can create situations that might

release persons to take the kind of leap that girl took — away from the magic rabbits of the children's room to the Adult Reading Room. No one could have predicted that that child would find Toussaint; but I want to believe that there is *always* a Toussaint waiting there ahead, if we dare to think in terms of beginnings, to see from the vantage point of the beginner, the seeker — instead of seeing from the vantage point of the system or the bureaucracy or the framework. What supervisor, principal, testmaker, or other functionary could possibly predict a little girl's making that run into the Adult Reading Room and finding the beginning of her reality that way, making connections, reading 15 books in three weeks? But, from the vantage point of that 8-year-old, why not? And when she says, "hey wait," we know she has that sense of incompleteness that will impel her on, and we know no measurement scale can grasp that either. But think what she will have thought. Think about her gains in literacy.

We owe young people that sort of discontent, as we owe them visions of Adult Reading Rooms. We owe them the sight of open doors and open possibilities. We need to replace the drab presence of declining literacy with images of flowers and new realities. Literacy, after all, ought to be a leap.

1. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), p. 164.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 183.
3. Jurgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 26-29.
4. Herman Melville, "Billy Budd, Sailor," in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 317-409.
5. Paul Nizan, *Antoine Bloyé* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 113.
6. Gilbert Ryle, "Teaching and Training," in R.S. Peters, ed., *The Concept of Education* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), pp. 105, 106.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
8. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 185.
9. *The Humanities in American Life*, Report of the Commission on the Humanities (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1980), p. 69.
10. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 1, 2, 20-23.
11. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, Jeanne Schulkind, ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), p. 72.
12. New York: Macmillan, 1977, pp. 25, 26.

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