THE SCHOOL SUBJECT LITERATURE

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Literature as a school subject has been variously defined over the last century, but through those definitions certain constants have remained (Applebee, 1974; Beach & Marshall, 1991; Burton, 1964; Purves, 1971, 1975; Squire & Applebee, 1968). Although the emphases of the subject may vary, with a corresponding effect on student learning, they generally exist within a framework of content and behavior. In short, the literature curriculum consists of literary texts and information surrounding those texts, on the one hand, and various transactions related to reading the texts, talking about the reading, and writing about the reading, on the other. What texts? What information? What focus in the reading? What sort of talk? What sort of writing? These questions continue to mark controversy in the profession. The focus of this discussion will be on the secondary school curriculum. This is not meant to slight the central importance of literature in the elementary school; however, the issues surrounding literature and the language arts and initial reading instruction require separate consideration.

Teachers have traditionally limited the content of literature instruction to four areas: the literary works themselves, background information, literary terminology and theory, and cultural information. Some curricula have made a point of introducing a fifth area, the responses of the students (Cooper & Purves, 1973; Corcoran, Hayhoe, & Pradl, 1995; Langer, 1992; Tompkins, 1980), and taking such responses seriously have led others to argue for a reinterpretation of the work as content, because all that can be known is the work as it is perceived and responded to (Fish, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1994). In terms of behavior, the foci of the literature curriculum range from rote recognition and recall through higher level thinking operations of interpretation and evaluation to the affective categories of personal preferences and the exploration of values.

The shifts of emphasis along these continua depend on the purposes of the curriculum makers and their particular philosophical biases. In his review of European curricula, Van de Ven (1987) showed how the various influences of nationalism, scientism, pragmatism, and moralism have exerted themselves on the literature curriculum, and these influences have been parallel across national boundaries. His review strikingly resembled Applebee's (1974) depiction of the U.S. curriculum and the analysis of international curricula by Purves (1973b, 1975).

All these reviews suggest that literature instruction addresses in some manner three crucial dimensions: the skills of "reading" literary texts (response, analysis, and interpretation), the body of knowledge and the social and moral values to be acquired, and the personal evolutions and development of the learner. This triad of concerns, of course, typifies all literacy education and represents at its core the taxonomy outlined by Dixon (1967) in his report of the Anglo-American Conference held at Dartmouth in 1966: skills, cultural heritage, and personal growth. Each dimension addresses a separate question for the learner, but despite efforts to the contrary, no question can ever be free of the other two, just as all imply the potential for further modification and development: What can I do? (acting), With whom do I belong? (knowing), and Who am I? (being). How a student ends up reading in the presence of any given literary work very much relates to the patterns of meaning making that are modeled in the literature classroom. This in turn will shift depending on what reading selections are approved and how connections to the ongoing life of the reader are either encouraged or discouraged. Thus, as with other areas of the curriculum, literature instruction moves either closer to or farther from the student in relation to both how the purposes of reading literature are construed and who does the construing.
Curriculum approaches that emphasize skills and/or cultural heritage make reading selections from the canon, either focusing on the author or on the ostensible moral and social content of the text. Their major behavioral focus is compliant knowledge acquisition and valuation, rather than independent response, analysis, and interpretation. "Flow," enjoyment, and celebration are in short supply when the learning of literature ignores what the individual brings to each reading transaction (Rosenblatt, 1995), and simply serves as an occasion for assessing one's ability to recall information and perform scripted academic routines (whether they be New Critical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, deconstructive, or feminist) dictated by the teacher.

Because literary texts are "open" representations of what it means to be human, no other school subject has the capacity for exposing and consequently interrogating the values and beliefs of the society. Given our pluralistic democracy, this often makes the literature classroom a hotly contested arena, one in which all sorts of groups across the political spectrum argue for their view of truth and proper conduct. In an analysis of censorship attempts between 1965 and 1985, Burress (1989) found close to 500 titles under attack, and Jenkinson (1986) estimated that there are at least 2,000 organizations at all levels that in some way are seeking the banning of school texts. The continuing debate on "cultural literacy," for example, serves to highlight the dilemmas faced by every teacher of literature, for it raises sharply the conflicting positions concerning texts and activities surrounding texts, and because, perhaps more than any other phenomenon, it has served to turn the attention of the profession away from language and composition and back toward the neglected field of literature. Furthermore, as "educational standards" proliferate across the country the choice of text has become as much the crux of the curricular issue in literature education as the particular approach to meaning making that is being encouraged.

CULTURAL LITERACY

Although the current embroilments surrounding cultural literacy stem from the article and book by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1983, 1987) and the measure of cultural knowledge in the National Assessment initiated by Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, Jr. (1987), the idea is far from new. The call for a precisely circumscribed curriculum goes back to the work of Eliot and Erskine in the early 20th century, the Lynch and Evans (1963) report on secondary literature in the late 1950s, and, more recently, to Mortimer Adler's (1982) Paideia proposal. The concept of "culture" goes back at least as far as Vico and Herder and may best be defined by Edward Said (1983) as all that an individual possesses and that possesses an individual. As Said wrote:

"[C]ulture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture comes into forceful play. (pp. 8-9)"

Anthropologists tend to see culture somewhat differently from literary people, but this root definition of possession and being possessed seems to apply both to those societies that operate through what might be called natural filiation (a system of intergenerational and familial relationships), and those that operate through affiliation to some arbitrarily instituted set of relationships. Current "American" culture is a culture of affiliation, whether it be the culture of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the culture of African American Studies, the culture of feminism, or the culture of punk.

Any culture serves to isolate its members from other cultures and any culture is elitist in some senses, as Said (1983) pointed out:

"What is more important in culture is that it is a system of values saturating downward almost everything within its purview; yet paradoxically culture dominates from above without at the same time being available to everyone and everything that it dominates. (p. 9)"

Cultures are exclusionary by definition; ensconced in their own culture, people tend to see others as outsiders and often as existing lower on what we perceive as some "natural" hierarchy. Certainly very few people transcend cultures or are full members of more than one culture, although they may be members of several subcultures, such as the subculture of reader response researchers in the United States, which has its body of shared knowledge, its sets of allegiances to I. A. Richards, Louise Rosenblatt, and James Squire, and its tendency to exclude those who, even though very well educated in other respects, fail to share certain knowledge and beliefs. The members of this subculture may also be members of such other subcultures as that of mycologists, joggers, or heavy-metal enthusiasts as well as of the broader culture of literate Americans. As social beings, humans are always searching for those with whom they feel they can belong, even as they seem to exclude others to make their "belonging" that much more precious.

With cultural membership comes a significant amount of knowledge, much of it tacit, concerning the culture: its rules, rituals, mores, heroes, gods, and demigods. Such knowledge sanctions individuals entering certain realms of experience and possibility, even while it simultaneously constrains them from realizing others. Dressed correctly might get one into a trendy club, just as the wrong dialect might spell some social disaster. Individuals explicitly make use of this cultural knowledge, which lies at the heart of cultural literacy, when they read and respond to a piece of literature that originates from their own culture. It is such knowledge that, in fact, enables people to read that literature, and it includes semantic knowledge, knowledge of text structures and models, and pragmatic knowledge or knowledge as to how to act before, during, and after reading a particular text in a given situation (Purves, 1987). Humans are wholly dependent on these forms of knowledge when they read and write as social beings. Indeed, it is the lack of such knowledge that keeps people outside, as witness the traveler who often suffers trivializing embarrassments or serious misunderstandings when visiting another culture."
LITERATURE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL COHESION

Kádár–Fülöp (1988) wrote that there are three major functions of the language curriculum in school. Basing her argument on a survey of curriculum goals in 15 countries, she found that these three functions accord with the earlier definitions of language functions proposed by Weinreich (1963). The first of these functions is the promotion of cultural communication (skills) so as to enable the individual to communicate with a wider circle than the home, the peers, or the village. Such a function clearly calls for the individual to learn the cultural norms of semantics, morphology, syntax, text structures, and pragmatics and some of the common metaphors and allusions particularly to folklore and legend as well as procedural routines so as to operate within those norms and be understood.

The second function is the promotion of cultural loyalty (cultural heritage) or the acceptance and valuing of those norms and the inculcation of a desire to have them remain. A culturally loyal literate would have certain expectations about how texts are to be written or to be read, as well as what they should look like, and would expect others in the culture to follow those same norms. Thus, it would offend, if not surprise, culturally literate Americans to hear someone call for the banning of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, though this might in turn commit them to the trials and tribulations of cultural pluralism. Finally, the third function of literacy education focuses on the development of individuality (personal growth); after one has learned to communicate within the culture and developed a loyalty to it, then one is able to responsibly express independence. For as Lev Vygotsky (1956) concluded: "In reality a child's thought progresses from the social to the individual from the individual to the socialized". The creativity involved in "rule breaking" only makes sense, from this perspective, when one has shown adequate command of the rules in the first place.

When critics such as Hirsch speak of cultural literacy they are echoing Eliot, Adler, among others, by advocating the first two goals set forth by Kádár–Fülöp (1988); they restrict the sense of the term to their literacy, which exists in a particular domain of high culture, such as F. R. Leavis "Great Tradition" in the English novel or that aspect of general education that is defined as "the humanities" or "American classics." From this tautological perspective cultural literacy is viewed as the "common" denomination that enables readers to read certain kinds of texts—notably texts that are shared by their group as defining "highly literate Americans." These would be people, for example, who read The New York Times with understanding and also frequent journals and books such as The Atlantic Monthly or Katherine Paterson's Jacob Have I Loved (1990).

The chief argument for this standard of cultural literacy was earlier used to support the Chicago Great Books Program, Harvard's General Education proposal, and Columbia's humanities program: Such literacy brings together a disparate immigrant population and helps the melting pot do its job (Bell, 1966). Such proposals carried forward the reasoning of critics from Arnold to Leavis and Eliot that a common culture, namely the Judeo-Christian tradition, forged society into unity through affiliation—yet not without cost, as Said (1983) pointed out:

When our students are taught such things as "the humanities" they are almost always taught that these classic texts embody, express, represent what is best in our, that is, the only, tradition. Moreover, they are taught that such fields as the humanities and such subfields as "literature" exist in a relatively neutral political element, that they are to be appreciated and venerated, that they define the limits of what is acceptable, appropriate, and legitimate as far as culture is concerned. (p. 21)

Other critics such as Eagleton (1996) and Tompkins (1980) concluded that Arnold's conservative polemics for literary culture ended with literature forming a secular religion, with the study of literature paralleling seminary training. To a great extent, Arnold's project has simply been recast by such writers as Randall Jarrell in the 1950s or by William Bennett (1983), whose dogmatic tracts scorn any attempt to broaden the canon.

A corollary to this argument (Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch & Finn, 1987) appears in a more pragmatic political form: A mobile school population needs stability for common communication and the schools can best provide this stability through the choosing of common texts. The literature curriculum apparently witnessed this stability only in the eleventh grade where traditionally American literature has been taught, though even here few common threads might be secured. This desire for some certainty of reference and experience beyond a modern tower of Babel is not easily discredited; however, who selects the unifying texts remains an insurmountable political issue. Still, a prior question exists: how did the idea of a cultural heritage come to disappear in our educational system? Why should Hirsch and associates have come to decry the lack of a cultural center?

During the middle third of the century, a number of groups coalesced to drive literature, and the notion of cultural literacy, from its former central position in the curriculum. These groups existed not just in the United States but in most of the European nations as well (Ball, 1984). The first is the group that advocated comprehensive secondary schools, the second promoted the dominance of a linguistic and cognitive perspective, the third is the functionalists, and the fourth includes literature teachers themselves. The sources for these arguments are many and diverse, but they constitute much of the theme of such documents as those of the Anglo-American conference (Dixon, 1967), the writing surrounding the student-centered curriculum of James Moffett (1968), the various articles and editorial stands in The English Journal beginning at the end of the 1960s and such books as the 1973 edition of How Porcupines Make Love (Purves, 1973a). Additionally, these forces had the curious side effect of drawing the attention of researchers, curriculum makers, and teacher educators away from literature and toward language and composition.

The arguments of these groups against teaching a cultural heritage with a unified canon can be enumerated as follows:

1. With increasingly diverse groups passing through our comprehensive secondary school system, it is imperative to attend more directly to their cultural needs. The current canon
does not address these minority groups and it certainly does not address the concerns of women. This claim also acknowledged the world as multi-cultural and the need of students to learn a smattering about all cultures. A traditional cultural heritage strand appears to run counter to such concerns.

2. A mother-tongue education should be dominated by language study and the appropriate teaching of the functional and workplace uses of language, whether the focus is on a skills approach or on fostering the personal growth of the individual student; thus there is no time for the deliberate study of literature as such.

3. Many of the canonical works are simply too difficult for the “new” students and beyond their range of experience. Rather than bowdlerize them or present them in film, we should turn to the kinds of works that students can read, particularly adolescent and popular fiction. The curriculum in literature should echo Henry Ford’s “History is bunk,” and turn to immediate relevance as the only criterion for text selection. (Parves, 1973a)

The proponents of “cultural literacy,” who advocate our need for unification within a diverse nation through the study of “common” cultural texts and information, have not addressed such counterarguments, some of which are dubious at best. Still, the argument is not whether cultural literacy, for all literature curricula imply some body of works that constitute a de facto canon and thus serve to acculturate youth as does television and other nonschool phenomena. The argument continues to be, what should serve to define the operable culture or cultures of our society and who then will be responsible for the choices of texts to be read in our schools? (Guillory, 1993). Whatever the temporary “solutions,” it appears that those who have raised the “cultural literacy” issue have forced a whole generation of critics and educational researchers and planners to reconsider the importance of literature in the curriculum.

CULTURAL LITERACY AND READING

Although the continuing “cultural literacy” debate often appears locked in the struggle of whose texts and facts will predominate, Hirsch also supported his view with current research in reading, which has demonstrated that prior knowledge is a key factor in reading comprehension. Most of that research has looked at substantive knowledge of the material in the text, such as knowledge about automobiles with reference to a text concerning automobiles. It has not dealt with more literary or metaphorical schemata. This argument begins with the assertion that texts within a culture, particularly literary texts, build on each other, so that contemporary texts employ a complex web of allusion or metaphor building upon previous texts. Such metaphors control how writers think about their material, and writers trade on the cumulative nature of literary texts as well as commentaries on texts. Katherine Paterson’s Jacob Have I Loved alluded to the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, as she pointed out directly by quotation. But she also relies on the reader’s knowing something of the whole story of Jacob and Esau and the foundation of the tribes of Israel. The use of allusion was one of the bases of the Nebraska Curriculum of the 1960s (Olson, 1967, 1968). Most other contemporary novels, poems, and plays, not to mention cartoons and comic strips, build on other works in even more subtle ways.

Consider a typical piece in The New York Times:

Thirteen hundred years ago in Japan, three slender documents—letters? shopping lists? birth certificates?—were placed in a thin box which was then wrapped in brocade.

Over the centuries the box was put in three larger boxes each one of which was wrapped in cloth.

In 1660 the letter box was placed in yet another box and adorned with a covering note. Don’t open this, it read, unless you don’t mind being tossed out of the Horyuji, a temple in Nara containing the country’s oldest Buddhist compound. Eight-five years later the fourth box was put into a fifth, and the warning was repeated.

This week art scholars who had found the package on the temple grounds opened the fifth, fourth, third, second, and first boxes. But did they open the final box? Not on your life. Hadn’t the letters said that was a no-no? Instead they X-rayed it, which is how the world knows that it holds three documents.

That, then, is all the world will ever know about that box—and all it needs to know. In putting Pandora to shame, the Japanese have turned what may be three ordinary missives into three extraordinary mysteries. (“Pandora Shamed,” 1985)

Aside from the fact that the article dealt with a somewhat exotic topic, it is unexceptional to many readers. However, it used an allusion to Pandora and failed to provide any context to help the reader determine who Pandora is and why this action of Japanese scholars might put her (or possibly him or it) to shame. In articles on various topics, the pages of The New York Times frequently contain this sort of allusion to Greek and Old Testament mythology. The writers have a set of expectations about their readers, and the set clearly differs from that held by the editors of People or Field and Stream.

A study conducted by Broudy (1982) shed light on what he referred to as the uses of learning. Using several passages from The New York Times, as well as a poem, he asked 1st-year graduate students to read them, commenting as they read. Broudy selected students on the basis of their backgrounds, including an artist; a dancer; and a student each in the humanities, engineering, law, business, social studies, and physical sciences. The results showed that some of the students had trouble with passages like “Pandora Shamed”; they did not know how to respond and so shut themselves off from it, primarily because they did not have the specific piece of information that allowed them to understand the passage. In some cases the allusion was to mythology; in other cases it was to “general knowledge” from science, the arts, economics, or history.

Given the reading dynamics that Broudy documented, it is not surprising that writers of all sorts presume a certain fund of knowledge on the part of their prospective readers and that writers for a publication like The New York Times presume a level of general knowledge similar to that possessed by someone who has had an undergraduate program in general education—say, two semesters each in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. In short, the editors assume, as does a critic like Hirsch, that their readers are culturally literate to the level of Mortimer Adler’s Great Books. Such an assumption may
be elitist—it may be seen as opposed to the liberation literacy of a Jonathan Kozol or a Richard Ohmann (both of whom possess exactly the sort of cultural literacy they decry, which makes it easy for them to decry it)—but it is simply a fact of the world of media in current times. The New York Times assumes a lesser body of knowledge than did Anne Bradstreet or Margaret Fuller, Edith Wharton or Emma Goldman, but it assumes more than is covered in the curriculum of many elementary and secondary schools in this country.

Broudy’s four “uses of learning” (replicative, applicative, interpretive, and associative) provided one way of mapping the complexity of the activities and tasks that constitute the teaching of literature in secondary schools. The replicative and applicative uses are those he found to be most frequently addressed: that is, students are to give back what they learn or apply it directly to a new situation. The interpretive use, where the individual at some later point takes what has been learned in order to come to an understanding of a phenomenon that may or may not be directly related to the item learned, can be seen in the ways by which a reader is expected to use knowledge about the legend of Pandora in construing the brief article or the knowledge about Jacob and Esau in construing Paterson’s novel. The associative use of learning occurs when something in the new phenomenon elicits an indirect connection with an item previously learned. This sort of learning is displayed in reading and response to literature, when a reader makes a connection between Shakespeare’s story of Hamlet and Homer’s Odysseus. No explicit connection exists, but for a reader steeped in Greek drama, the implicit connections appear present.

The dividing line between explicit and implicit connections among texts is not a clear one. Some poets, such as Keats, Shelley, or T. S. Eliot, use a great deal of overt allusion to various earlier literatures, and in the case of the first two appear to have expected their readers to share the world of allusion, while the last often provided appropriate glosses, something that Ezra Pound did not. A writer like Faulkner tends to be somewhat less explicit in his use of allusion in a story such as “The Bear,” (1942) and one like Carl Sandburg appears to have virtually no explicit literary allusions, so each reader infers whatever connections are adduced. Thus, there seems to be a continuum of texts based on their apparent dependency on prior texts and therefore the amount of shared cultural knowledge assumed by the writer. This dimension differs from the dimension of topicality, which distinguishes a writer like Swift, who continually referred to events of his day, from a writer like Emily Brontë, who, if not otherworldly, created a self-contained world outside of history.

Broudy’s study, with its focus on prior knowledge, goes directly to the imaginative recreation that might be initiated in “open” acts of reading literature. Given the various sorts of allusions contained in texts, successful reading will be marked by a reader’s ability to interconnect accumulating knowledge and experience, often in unpredictable ways. The reading transaction (Rosenblatt, 1994), in other words, never occurs in a vacuum; student readers are continually filling in gaps, moving from the given to the new, just as readers are expected to know the referents of metaphoric language as in a phrase such as “I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet, / Yet still thou run’st more hobbling than is meet.” However, as Broudy confirmed, when readers find they haven’t that knowledge, they “stop” reading or responding to the text. Thus, the challenge for the literature teacher, both in terms of content and process, is to find ways to encourage students to continue their reading journeys and conversations. How can students be helped to remain “hooked on books” and so accumulate the “information” that makes each subsequent reading encounter that much richer? Hoarding the “interconnection” imperative, effective literature teachers do not consider works in isolation, but are forever concerned with chains, patterns, and sequences. This in turn will occasion various combinations of pleasure and discipline—a major difficulty, being to remember that the reading experience will not be the same for every student.

STALKING THE ILLUSORY CANON

The various efforts to codify and enforce educational standards, whether at the state or national level, have often included lists of recommended literature readings. These lists, however, are eclectic at best and certainly in no way ensure that all students will have access to the common literary culture that the likes of Hirsch, Bennett, and Cheney have in mind. New York City’s Performance Standards (Rizzio, 1997), for instance, stated that students should read at least 25 books each year, while including titles of 32 novels ranging from academic “classics” such as The Scarlet Letter, For Whom the Bell Tolls, The Invisible Man, and 1984 to the tried-and-true school novels A Separate Peace and To Kill a Mocking Bird. There is no rhyme or reason here except a good will attempt to be fair and representative. Thus, we find The Bluest Eye, Down These Mean Streets, and Black Elk Speaks alongside Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Also, El Bronx Remembered, The Joy Luck Club, and Woman Warrior. One can of course compile any number of equally circumspect lists, but with completely different titles included. This suggests that such top-down efforts to influence what texts are actually read in high school English classrooms will continue to have little effect.

Nationally, it is difficult to determine finally what works are actually taught to how many students where. Educators do not know whether there is an adolescent literature canon, an anthology canon, or a Harlequin romance canon in the schools of the United States. Applebee’s (1989) replication of a study completed 20 years earlier (Anderson, 1964) showed little change. Based on a questionnaire sent to several hundred secondary schools, it showed that the list of most frequently taught long works continues to be headed by Shakespeare; the only woman to make the top 10 is Harper Lee. No African Americans or other minorities are among the most read authors. This study only included “full-length works”—short stories, short plays, and poems were not mentioned. The schools say they are teaching the classics and have not admitted a multicultural and double-gendered culture, but one is unsure whether they have omitted the more popular works such as adolescent or young-adult fiction, because they do not “teach” it or because this appears more frequently in “reading programs.”

Curricula also appear dominated by anthologies, which thus can lay claims to being a more formidable influence than the College Entrance Examination Board or other educational
governing organizations. The publishers who put together these collections, including those trade or reprint houses that cater to the schools and school libraries, seek in different ways to create a canon or canons so as to sell their merchandise. One group works at "watering down" the classics with bowdlerized versions, which raises the question as to whether these watered-down versions considered appropriate for high school students or nonreaders can provide the same experience as the original no matter how difficult. There have also been some attempts by publishers to make the classics available without watering them down; the most notable example is the series of "comic book" versions of Shakespeare done by distinguished British illustrators and using the uncut Quarto texts without footnotes.

Another group within publishing, abetted by such authors' lobbies as the Children's Book Council and the Adolescent Literature Assembly, touted the latest trade book and the latest writer and had virtually no interest in any culture but the culture of the present. This group helped expand the market for the adolescent novel in school classes as well as out of them and worked to have what was essentially spare-time reading incorporated into the new canon. Even A Catcher in the Rye is old hat to the adolescent literature lobby and who would want to read The Adventures of Tom Sawyer? Stocking the bookstores and school libraries does not provide sufficient sales, particular when library budgets have to include computer software. The classroom book budget thus becomes a useful source of income.

This group views with the anthology publishers, often from the text division of the same house. The latter are more than willing to have the older writers in their texts because, being dead, they do not request reprint fees. They are also less controversial than the living writers, and the publishers need to appeal to the large adoptions states which attract the most censors. Anthologies are good moneymakers particularly if they seldom have authors who receive royalties. Even a cursory glance at current anthologies leads one to conclude see that the presence of contemporary literature and literature by minorities and women is hardly on the upswing.

LITERATURE LEARNING: A PROCESS LEADING TO UNDERSTANDING

The domain of school literature is usually seen as one of the four language arts: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Because literature involves text that people read or write, and because students often write about the literature they have read, literature is often seen as simply a subset of reading and writing, with an occasional nod to speaking and listening. However, those who take literature seriously as a way of thinking and knowing separate from the discursive parts of the curriculum (Langer, 1998) are uneasy with this subordinate status. They become more uneasy when they look at the world of tests and see that literature is simply a vehicle for measuring reading comprehension or writing proficiency. There must be something more than recall and recognition, for literature uses allusion and builds on itself at a "deeper" level than simply that of naming. Robbin's West Side Story, for example, is a complex retelling of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and requires a knowledge not simply of names, but of character relationships, scenes, and images. To define the literature curriculum as merely a subset of reading and writing neglects a number of the acts that go on within the activity of a vital literature education.

Some would define literature as a school subject that has its own body of knowledge. Initially, this includes the information associated with a particular set of texts: authors, characters, plots, and themes. From there it expands to critical terms like metaphor and simile as well as genres, schools or styles of writing, and whole critical approaches. Others emphasize the uniqueness of literature according to how it is read. Rosenblatt (1994) called this kind of reading "aesthetic," as opposed to "effort" reading, what one does with informational texts such as those of social studies and science. Britton (1982) labeled it "poetic," or the use of language in the spectator role, and contrasted it to our pragmatic uses of language in the participant role. From this perspective, literature education involves the development of what one might call preferences or imaginative judgments, which is to say habits of mind in reading and writing. In addition, literature education is intended to foster something called "taste" or appreciation (which most literature teachers hope will lead to the love of "good literature"). Thus, literature education goes well beyond the mechanics of reading and writing by inculcating specific habits of reading and patterns of critical response and valuation.

It is also important to recognize that the category "literature" itself remains in dispute, for its meaning has shifted over the past 200 years (Williams, 1985). Currently, it appears straightforward to fit poetry, drama, and fiction under its domain. However, even this last term sparks quarrels about the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, as genres evolve and all dogmatic theories purporting to set the boundaries of fantasy, reality, and history become less convincing. Similarly, the essay with its unique tradition of combining "fact" and "opinion" might be included under literature. Once the door is ajar, however, advocates of "critical literacy," who attack any privileged status for so-called literary artifacts, would widen the subject literature to include a range of cultural studies and thus not limit any text from potential examination in the English classroom (Eagleton, 1996).

Despite its contested nature, dividing the domain of school literature into three aspects—practice, knowledge/understanding, and preference—encourages educators to appreciate the complex interrelationships among them: Educators use and explore knowledge in the various acts that constitute their practice and preferences, and their practices and preferences serve to shape and extend our understanding of literature. At the same time one can separate them for the purposes of curriculum planning and assessment. These three subdomains may be schematized, as shown in Table 62.1, and each may be associated with its corollary dimension of each student's literary quest: What can I do? With whom do I belong? Who am I?

Unfortunately, as a comprehensive study by Brody DeMilo, and Purves (1989) demonstrated, the current tests of literature available through the orthology series and the proprietary testing companies treat literature as little more than fodder for reading scores. Even the university entrance groups (except for the Advanced Placement Examination of the College Entrance
Examination Board) neglect the aesthetic dimension entirely. Literature testing thus appears to construe cultural literacy as knowledge of particulars and vocabulary in the style of a reading test. Knowledge of the canon is measured as superficial, trivial pursuit knowledge if at all. There is relatively little application or interpretation. Only where there are writing measures attached to the objective tests does there seem to be any tapping of generalizing or interpreting and occasionally evaluating.

This dismal picture of literature assessment contrasts starkly with the important investigations carried out by the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning during its 8 years of funding beginning in 1987. Through their extensive case studies of individual literature classrooms, these researchers decisively established:

Literature is a discipline like mathematics and science. It has a content to be learned but also a way of reasoning underlying it. It involves a way of thinking about things and solving problems that is useful not only in the understanding of literature but also in academic learning and daily living—when we are engaged in discourse with others and when we are thinking alone. Although literary reasoning is both creative and imaginative, it is also highly intellectual in a particular kind of way. (Langer, 1995, p. 158)

Clearly teachers are capable of moving literature learning beyond the narrow confines of transmitted information when they construe it as an opportunity for provoking thoughts rather than giving answers. By employing complete texts rather than anthologized fragments, by working through multiple perspectives and encouraging what (Langer) called “envisionment” or “horizons-of-possibilities thinking” (p.), the literature classroom offers students a significant “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991). Here students might engage conflicting views of reality and explore the consequences of alternative value systems, even while experiencing the trust of a safe haven.

In those instances when literature teaching/learning broke through to “envisionment,” Langer (1995) found four crucial principles to be operating. First, there is respect, continuity, and stability: Students are treated as lifelong envisionment builders. Second, the excitement of solving open-ended problems animates the social space: Questions are treated as part of the literary experience. Third, discussions are reciprocal and dynamic, providing a space to work through possible meanings. Class meetings are a time to develop understandings (which are fluid and changing). Fourth, the literary quest is never for a single or final conclusion: Multiple perspectives are used to enrich interpretation (pp. 57-59). By convening rich social processes of reading, the literature classroom can be a spellbinding place where aesthetic response and puzzlement provide a way to deepen human insight and understanding.

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<th><strong>TABLE 62.1. School Literature</strong></th>
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**LITERATURE TEACHING AS A MIRROR ON SOCIETY**

Regardless of what lens is finally used to view the school subject literature, two last considerations must not be overlooked. First, we must realize that the teaching of literature is always embedded in a particular social system, in our case democracy (Pradl, 1991, 1996). The social relationships within which literature is read inevitably inform teachers’ practices. Desiring these relationships to be democratic commits educators to shaping conversational encounters in the classroom, not extended monologues. In an extensive study of classroom talk in 112 eighth- and ninth-grade English classes, Nystrand (1997) documented that students learn literature best when they are engaged in free response and dialogue. Through the use of "dialogism," literature teachers, as Nystrand showed, can encourage a rich, holistic context that serves as a way for students to connect to and make sense of literary texts.

By focusing on overarching correspondences rather than addressing the sea of fragmented trivia that confronts students in classrooms that are typically teacher centered, a democratic teacher brings reading into the realm of the authentic. Also, as Langer’s (1998) research confirmed, knowledge of literature is not neglected when student understanding is of primary concern; instead, “literary concepts and language become part of the fabric of ongoing thought and communication” (p. 21). When teachers ensure that all students have the right to their own reading responses as part of a continuing social conversation, they help keep the democratic experience alive.

What matters most about the reading of literature in a democracy is not what the text actually means, because this is a constantly fleeting chimera. Instead, the emphasis must be on how, together, teacher and student go about making it mean whatever it does. Inadequate meanings might be winnowed out when each individual a say in relation to the other.
Second, teachers must refuse to oversimplify the profoundly paradoxical nature of teaching what in the end are value driven and indeterminate texts. As Hynds' (1997) research confirmed, teachers own reading and learning styles affect their teaching, but often teachers are unaware of how their prejudices come into play, of how the literature lesson is often about struggles over control and authority. Although it may be easy to acknowledge the openness of any given work of literature, it is far more difficult to let go of being the expert, to risk not knowing the answer and thus reveal vulnerability and inadequacy.

Still, in the attempt to model democratic relationships, educators must listen attentively to the contradictions and confusions embedded in adolescent student questioning and not deny the many ways such questioning may correspond to that of the educators themselves. Even as students seek answers to what they can do, with whom they belong, and, ultimately, who they are, literature teachers must try to keep their perspectives permeable and charged with possibility. When teachers and curriculum makers take seriously the complex, and often perplexing, social roles embedded in the collaborative negotiation of knowledge and understanding that can take place in the literature classroom, they become witnesses for the importance to a democracy of sharing and learning from each other's interpretations. In this way, students add confidence to their developing competence as aesthetic readers of the world. Because of these efforts to fuel a renewed interest in the school subject literature, the profession of English teaching has an important dynamic and standard to offer educational policymakers in the classroom and at the state and national levels.

References

Olson, P. (1967). A curriculum study center in English. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.


