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and the Needs of Adolescent
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Developing Literacy
and Identity Out of School**

Voices in Urban Education
Number 3, Winter/Spring 2004

Publisher

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
at Brown University
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Gilbert Design Associates, Inc.

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Voices in Urban Education is published quarterly at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Articles may be reproduced with appropriate credit to the Annenberg Institute. Single copies are \$8 each, including postage and handling. A discount is available on bulk orders. Call 401 863-2018 for further information.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform was established in 1993 at Brown University. Its mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools serving disadvantaged children. For program information, contact:

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The Literacy Needs of Adolescents: Going Deeper

Robert Rothman

While much of the public attention on literacy has focused on teaching early reading, educators increasingly recognize another critical issue that needs to be addressed: the literacy needs of adolescents. As educators know, high school students cannot learn *any* subject if they are unable to get more than basic information from texts and are unable to convey information skillfully. And students come to many high schools seriously deficient in literacy abilities.

The efforts under way in a number of cities to redesign high schools ought to provide an opportunity for educators and community members to come to grips with adolescent literacy issues. These efforts stem from the recognition that too many children have been ill served by traditional high school structures and instructional practice. In response, these cities are creating smaller schools (or breaking down large schools into smaller units) in order to establish environments that are more engaging and more conducive to learning.

While most of the large districts that are undertaking these reforms have succeeded in implementing *structural* changes, they are struggling to make the *instructional* changes that will improve teaching and learning. And few have succeeded at linking schools with community resources that will enhance their instructional capacity.

As the authors in this volume of *Voices in Urban Education* make clear, improving adolescent literacy will require major changes in instruction and substantial links to the community. It will not work for schools to continue to do the same thing, or even do the same

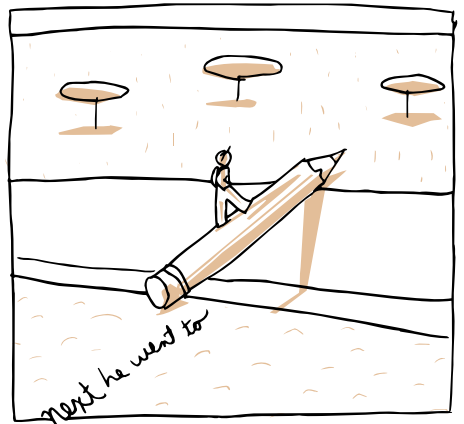
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thing a little better. Too many students will continue to graduate from high school, if they graduate at all, without the literacy skills they will need to succeed as adults.

Mary Neuman and Sanjiv Rao point out that the view of literacy in many high schools is too narrow. First, schools consider literacy – if they even consider it – as a matter of reading and writing *literature*, and consider developing literacy the job of English language arts teachers. In fact, though, literacy is much broader; it involves the ability to comprehend texts and other materials in *all* disciplines. Literacy is an essential learning element in any subject area and should be the responsibility of *all* teachers. Second, literacy is more than simply decoding texts; it also involves making meaning out of and engaging with texts and being able to document learning in a written, oral, or visual form.

Carol D. Lee also notes that literacy is rooted in disciplinary knowledge. And she argues that teachers have a responsibility to understand the structure of disciplines and expose them to students. Lee contends that teachers can do so for urban youths by drawing on students' own language forms – including rap lyrics and unconventional texts – as the foundation for disciplinary knowledge.

Donna Alvermann argues that, for many adolescents, there is a disconnect between in-school reading and out-of-school reading, and that this gap – which she refers to as *aliteracy* – poses a significant challenge for schools. Many youths, Alvermann notes, are quite capable of reading, and do so frequently and with enthusiasm outside of school – reading computer and video-game manuals, restaurant menus, and other materials with evident skill. Yet these same youths exhibit poor reading skills and resist reading in the classroom. Why? They do not consider what they do outside of school “reading,” because “reading” is what one does in school. And school reading, as it is taught and assigned to them, is completely unengaging to many youths. Only by making classroom texts more engaging, and by drawing on their ability to under-



stand narratives – an ability they exhibit every day outside of school – can teachers turn “aliterate” young people into literate adults.

The role of out-of-school agencies is a particularly critical one. As Glynda Hull and Jessica Zacher suggest, after-school programs have flexibility schools may not have (particularly now that schools face enormous pressure to raise scores on standardized tests) to engage students in exploring a broad form of literacy. Hull and Zacher describe a program in which students use multimedia approaches to learn new forms of communication. Graphic and visual images, in addition to text, are forms of literacy that young people today are immersed in, yet they are forms that schools seldom consider.

Significantly, the program that Hull and Zacher describe is not separate from school; it is connected to school in important ways. It is also connected to the community. Referring to one student’s project, a digital poem, the authors write:

The idea for the poem originated in an art class at school, where, in the wake of 9/11 and the most recent Iraq war, Asia created a collage. This artwork became the second image of Asia’s digital poem. In writing her poem she consciously drew on literary techniques that she had learned in school, including the use of alliteration and the repetition of words and ideas. She also relied on her knowledge of and concerns about her own community . . . as she developed her themes and selected her images. At [the after-school program] she acquired expertise in multimedia composing, and she found a social space that allowed her to bring her own interests center stage. Sharing her poem included taking it back to school, as well as sharing it among friends and family.

This seamless web of schools, community agencies, and families, while rare, represents an emerging trend in education. In Oakland (the site of the program Hull and Zacher describe), New York City, Los Angeles, and other cities, schools and community groups are teaming up to create what some are calling “local

education support networks,” or LESNs. These networks aim to combine the autonomy and entrepreneurial spirit of charter schools with the necessary support that a larger organization can provide. This support includes resources from the community.

Are LESNs, with their potential for linking in-school and out-of-school literacy, a viable strategy for helping adolescents develop the ability to read and write well? What needs to happen to ensure that they succeed? Are high schools organized to teach literacy, broadly conceived? Are teachers sufficiently capable to employ the cultural modeling approach Lee describes? Would such an approach work in a culturally diverse classroom? Will the approaches Alvermann discusses be engaging enough to draw the interest of youths when the texts used are less directly relevant to their lives? And how much can after-school programs take on, particularly when their budgets are stretched and they are beginning to face the same pressures schools face to show improvements on conventional measures of achievement?

We’d like to hear your opinion. *VUE* was created by the Annenberg Institute to bring together researchers, community organizers, educators, and public officials to present a range of perspectives on critical topics. We invite readers to join in the conversation as well. Our Web site, <www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE>, includes an on-line forum that enables readers to post messages for us and for other readers. We look forward to the dialogue.

Adolescent Literacy: Beyond English Class, Beyond Decoding Text

Mary Neuman and Sanjiv Rao

The literacy problem among adolescents is partly caused by the way high schools view literacy and their responsibility for developing it. By looking beyond simple decoding skills and by making sure that literacy is the responsibility of teachers in all subject areas, schools can help improve students' literacy skills.

A respected, highly skilled practitioner in a large urban school system recently shared her observations on adolescent literacy issues in her district: “Not many high schools are willing to look into the core work of teaching reading, writing, and other forms of literacy as part of the everyday life of the student and the school. Of those that do, most only seem willing to look at reading – and that’s not enough.”

There is little dispute that the state of adolescent literacy is a problem. As commentators in education journals and newspapers and on television and radio continue to point out, many schools and districts are failing to help all students become literate. Despite (or, some would argue, because of) the implementation of a bewildering variety of programs – many focused specifically on literacy – far too many students leave their educational experience disengaged and unprepared to meet the demands of higher education and the world of work, much less the loftier goals of education: to participate effectively in one’s community, make informed choices, and contribute to cultural well-being.

Yet, as the urban practitioner quoted above suggests, how schools view literacy – and how they view their

responsibility for developing it – go a long way toward explaining these results. Many students require significant support in order to develop their literacy skills, but often teachers do not feel competent or adequately prepared to address those needs. In fact, though the vast majority of educators have the best of intentions, some secondary educators still feel it is the responsibility of the English teachers alone to solve literacy problems; others believe literacy is irrelevant to teaching in the content areas.

Moreover, schools and school systems too often limit reform efforts to some version of “breaking the code of texts,” to the exclusion of the complex communicative, functional, and socially embedded characteristics of literacy. According to the groundbreaking work of Paulo Freire (1970), reading and speaking the *word* is inseparable from engaging with the *world*.

To be sure, this broader view of literacy frequently bumps up against the political, fiscal, and policy realities of classroom life. Traditional high schools are ill equipped to integrate literacy instruction across the curriculum or to address much beyond basic decoding skills. Fortunately, though, reform efforts are paying increasing attention to adolescent learners and moving toward

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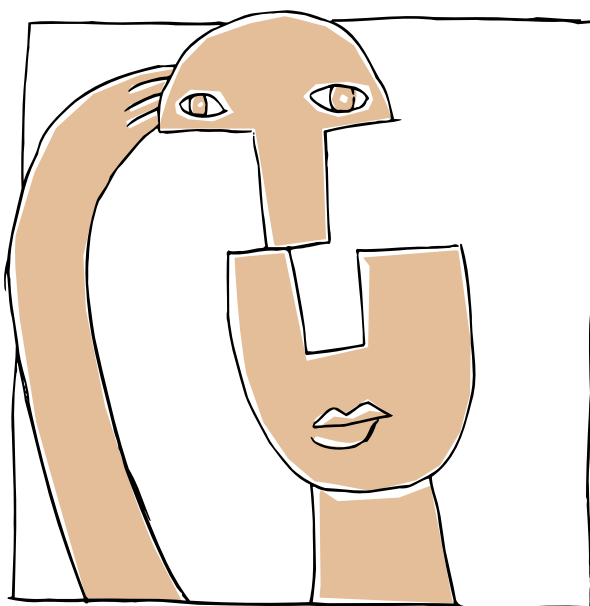
small schools and small learning communities in an effort to create relevant, rigorous, meaningful learning structures for students.

What Is Literacy?

What exactly do we mean when we talk about literacy? Should literacy be narrowly defined as being able to read (i.e., decode and comprehend) a text, thereby risking a restrictive definition that excludes many aspects and assets of disciplines, students, and communities? Or should literacy be broadly conceived so as to include communication, technological literacy, mathematical literacy, scientific literacy, and the like, thereby risking a dilution of the concept that diminishes its power? We contend that these varied notions are not mutually exclusive, but rather embedded in each other. Colin Lankshear (1998) has established a framework that views literacy in three interrelated dimensions: “operational,” or breaking the code of texts; “cultural,” or participating in the meaning of texts and using texts functionally; and “critical,” or critically analyzing and transforming texts.

In our view, effective literacy also involves engaging with and creating a range of texts, building on the languages, experiences, cultures, and other assets of students, and communicating and expressing understanding in multiple ways, both independently and with others.

The traditional view of literacy as decoding and comprehending texts is too limited. For one thing, it is difficult to separate these basic skills from the broader purposes of literacy; making meaning and engaging with texts is integral to comprehension. As one Southern California high school student put it: “I do my homework every night. I sit and read my English book, and I find

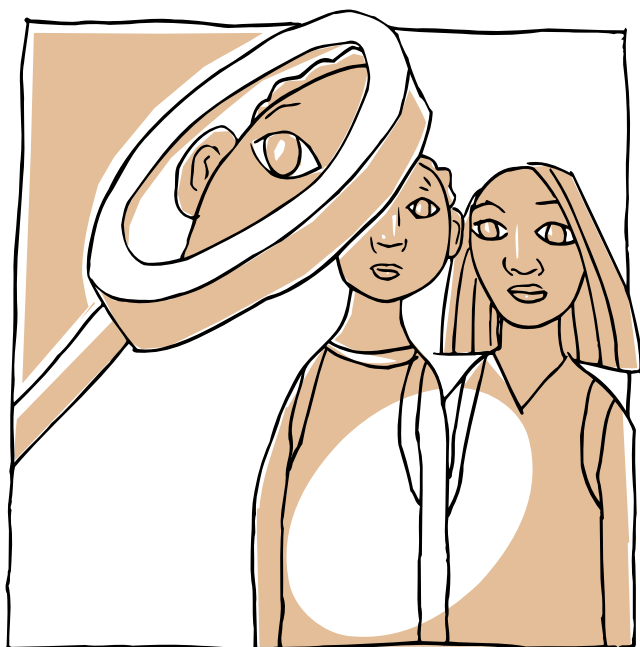


Traditional high schools are ill equipped to integrate literacy instruction across the curriculum or to address much beyond basic decoding skills.

myself drifting away from the story. I can read it – I just don't get it." Like many adolescents, this student needs to be taught overtly the necessary strategies to connect with and make sense of the text in order to comprehend it.

In addition, without acknowledging literacy as a complex set of skills and practices rooted in social contexts, culture, and language, schools fail to provide equitable learning opportunities for young people. The creation of meaning involves social and cultural practices that enable teachers to meet the needs of every student, regardless of background. Moreover, literacy is not an end in itself but a means to empower young people to analyze and create all kinds of texts. To paraphrase Freire, the value of literacy is realized not merely through the ability to read and write, but through an individual's ability to employ those skills in order to navigate, shape, and be an agent for his or her own life, as well as through the ability to change one's knowledge, self, and situation through the use of texts (EDC 2000).

Teaching literacy in this broad sense requires explicit instruction. In particular, metacognitive skills – the ability to analyze and think about our own thinking – help good readers construct meaning. These strategies might include rereading the paragraph, using context clues, predicting, summarizing, connecting the text to prior knowledge, discussing and interpreting texts in collaborative groups, and asking questions of ourselves and others about text content and the reading and writing process. For example, a teacher might read a passage aloud to her class, articulating the questions, thought processes, and connections to her prior knowledge she is thinking about as she reads. One student defined this process as helping him “see into the teacher's



mind.” In turn, students are able to monitor their own thinking as they engage with texts.

Literacy across the Curriculum

An appropriately broad view of literacy also recognizes that literacy is the province of all content areas, not just English language arts. Literacy development in the content areas is critical to students’ literacy development in high school. It helps students engage with contextualized, meaningful material that leads to learning to understand academic texts and navigate the situations they will find outside the classroom walls.

Students need to be explicitly taught how to strategically and critically read a science textbook, a primary document in history, a Shakespearean sonnet, and a word problem in mathematics. Each of these texts requires a different set of strategies for attacking the text. They are written in different genres, with specific vocabulary, and they all have their own pattern of discourse that needs to be unlocked and deconstructed for students.

Beyond this “breaking of the code,” however, students must also engage in doing the work of science, history, and mathematics and expressing their learning in oral, written, and visual forms. For example, a student of science learns how to inquire, investigate, construct, solve problems, and interpret. In reading a science text, students need to think like scientists by learning how to ask meaningful questions, determine what they know, develop questions to perform related investigations, construct and interpret data, and decide the difference between fact and fiction. These habits of mind need to be taught explicitly, simultaneously with the content.

“I am sick and tired of what we do in our ESL classes. We are always going shopping to the supermarket, as if all we did in life was eat.... I need to get ready for the other classes.”

The challenge of developing literacy across the curriculum is particularly acute for English-language learners, who are learning a second language even as they learn different subject areas. Too often, school systems lack the appropriate structures, knowledge, and supports to meet the diverse educational needs of these students and understand the diverse educational and cultural contexts from which they come. The range of educational backgrounds and skills within a school or classroom among those learning to speak, read, and write English is immense. Some come from war-torn countries with little schooling while others are quite fluent and literate in their native tongue. Yet teachers often fail to capitalize on students’ backgrounds in order to teach them to be literate effectively. As one sixteen-year-old Salvadoran girl said:

I am sick and tired of what we do in our ESL classes. We are always going shopping to the supermarket, as if all we did in life was eat. . . . I need to get ready for the other classes. I am lost in World History, for example. Why can’t we study something like this in ESL?
(Walqui 2000, p. 87)

At the same time, teachers need to recognize that English-language learners’ struggles with English do not necessarily

reflect their understanding of the content. Consider this comment from a tenth-grader originally from Mexico:

Sometimes it is hard for me to do things because of my English. There are times when I feel a lot of pressure because I want to say something, but I don't know how to say it. There are many times when the teacher is asking questions; I know the answer, but I'm afraid that people might laugh at me. (Walqui 2000, p. 86)

Although many high schools have yet to take up the challenge of addressing literacy across the curriculum, some important efforts are under way. At one high school, for example, the principal presented to the entire school community an annual state-of-the-school report, including the school's literacy data. After the community examined the data, the principal asked all participants how they were going to increase the opportunities to engage in meaningful literacy tasks and the overall quality of the resulting work for their students. The expectation was that it was everyone's responsibility, and the solution was co-created by the staff and administration. The principal shared this data with all of her stakeholder groups, revisiting the data frequently. Teachers learned new strategies and shared them with department colleagues and, increasingly, in interdisciplinary teams. The school has begun to address the quality of the teaching and learning in all content areas.

Making Literacy Relevant to Students' Lives

Other schools are taking the instructional approach of connecting literacy to students' lives. All of us, as educators, know of students who have literacy skills but who lose interest in reading and other literacy tasks and have

difficulty engaging with the school-based curriculum. We recognize these struggling, disengaged readers and writers through their body language – bodies slumped down, hoods pulled over their heads, little eye contact. Well aware of their struggles, these students send us strong messages: “It doesn't matter!” or “This is boring.”

Teachers can help students overcome these attitudes by getting to know the students well and connecting their interests and experiences to appropriate texts. They can also draw connections between real-world situations and the literacy demands of particular courses. As young people struggle with issues of independence, autonomy, and identity, it is all the more important that school-based literacy activities in every discipline are relevant – and that the learning happens by doing the work, not just reading about it. This is not to say that interesting material is sufficient; while we help students to understand texts at their grade level, we must also provide the necessary supports – time and access to master readers, writers, and content specialists (i.e., their teachers) – for students and teachers to meet increasingly high standards.

Another approach involves learning what the students and families of a school community walk into the school building with. Students, particularly adolescents, navigate, are shaped by, and learn from the world of work, home, language, community, and youth culture on a daily basis. Teachers who ask the right questions, rather than simply look for the right answers, are the ones who truly learn what their students know, what they are learning and how well, and how to change their teaching practice to maximize their students' learning opportunities. Like other approaches, learning and taking



into account students' backgrounds requires the willingness on the part of educators to learn about, take stock of, and broaden the thinking about what counts as literacy learning and what it takes to support effective literacy development.

The efforts to engage students and their families need not be the sole responsibility of schools. After-school programs and learning outside of school nurture the academic and social development of youth. The structures and organization of such programs can help inform the ways in which teachers and schools rethink their own practice. Recent research by Kris Gutiérrez has shown the sophisticated ways literacy learning can take place in after-school settings, even for those students who typically struggle in school (Hull &

Schultz 2002). In addition, teachers can inform themselves about these structures and learning opportunities by visiting, observing, and thinking about the learning that students engage in every day in their jobs, in community centers, in athletics, and the like. Reflecting on our own experiences in such settings, we find it difficult to deny the real, rigorous, creative kinds of literacy – from communication to analysis to expression – that takes place in such settings.

A Community of Learners

To teach adolescents well and equitably, literacy development must be every teacher's responsibility. Some high school teachers do not see it as their responsibility, while others have not been taught how to teach reading com-



prehension, much less approaches to tap into students' rich linguistic, cultural, and community assets to create the bridge between what students already know and what they are expected to master in school.

The expectation that each adult on the campus is responsible for the literacy skills of all students needs to become part of every school's culture and norms.

Still, it is important to note that many teachers are learning how to use and teach a range of literacy approaches in their content areas. By becoming aware of the strategies they use to read difficult content and respond in multiple ways to a variety of texts in the workplace and in their own lives, teachers are learning how to teach students how to navigate hard-to-understand material. The expectation that each adult on the campus is responsible for the literacy skills of all students needs to become part of every school's culture and norms. No structural change can be successful unless the educators leading the efforts are continuously improving their own capacity to teach every student well and equitably.

Beyond instructional approaches and building knowledge, however, effective literacy teaching and learning requires sufficient time, appropriate physical space, sensible school structures, appropriate student placement and grouping patterns, attention to the habits of effective readers, writers, and thinkers, and actively committed, caring, adult learners who learn from, with, and about their students. For example, this may mean providing “intervention” classes in addition to grade-level classes. Students do not have enough time in a fifty-minute period to close their gaps in literacy. The additional class time could allow explicit teaching of strategies, which students could use to catch up with their peers in the regular class. Ideally, within a school setting, all teachers would be incorporating these strategies across the curriculum. But to make that happen, schools need supports at the classroom, school, district, and community level; a willingness to think creatively about how to organize and structure learning and its requisite supports; and a commitment to improvement at scale.

As educators, we can't fail *any* of our students. The approaches we describe may not be the only answers. But our challenge is to recognize the problem – and the role all of us play in its solution. Schools have an enormous role, and, at this point, schools have not done enough.

But important changes are under way. We hope we can look back in a few years and see that young people possess the skills, knowledge, and stamina necessary to become lifelong independent readers of, and actors in, the word and their world.

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Literacy in the Academic Disciplines and the Needs of Adolescent Struggling Readers

Carol D. Lee

“Disciplinary literacy” – the ability to understand, critique, and use knowledge from texts in content areas – is the primary conduit through which learning in the academic disciplines takes place. One way to develop this ability is to draw on the “cultural funds of knowledge” that youths already possess.

I wish to focus here on the demands on adolescents to develop the ability to understand, critique, and use knowledge from texts in a number of different academic content areas. I refer to these abilities as *disciplinary literacy* and I submit that they are the primary conduits through which learning in the academic disciplines takes place.

The work of the discipline of history, for example, consists of reconstructing acts of the past into a narrative that people from different perspectives can debate about. This work requires the careful and principled examination of a variety of primary source documents, the ability to both understand and critique the unexamined assumptions found in historical summaries such as those found in history textbooks, and the ability to communicate both orally and in writing one’s reconstruction of the past from such work (Wineburg 1991). Even in mathematics, not usually thought of as an arena in which reading and writing play key roles, research has described ways in which literacy serves important ends – such as allowing newspaper readers to understand the significance of statistics and numbers referred to in the news, rather than simply be dazzled by their presence (Paulos 1995; Borasi & Siegel 2000).

Despite the central role of literacy in learning all subjects, there is evidence that many high school students are struggling readers. Even students reading at grade level, on the whole, do not show proficiency in comprehending the complex texts they *should* be encountering in high school content area classes.

The Difficulty of Defining the Problem

Documenting and understanding the pervasive problem of high school students’ lack of reading skills is tricky. The best source for national data is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). On the most rigorous reading tasks of NAEP, very few seventeen-year-olds score at a proficient level. In 1999, 8 percent of Whites, 2 percent of Latino/as, and 1 percent of Blacks scored at or above proficiency (Campbell, Hombro & Mazzeo 2000).

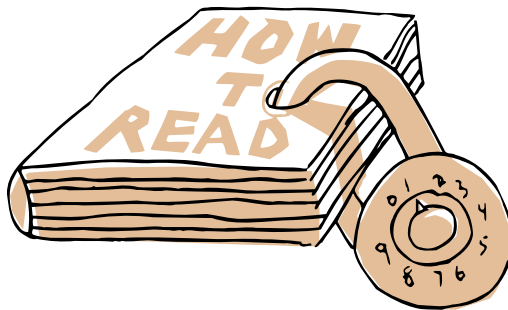
These findings have been critiqued, based on the claim that students have no vested interest in completing or doing well on NAEP exams, as there are no personal consequences for their levels of performance. Yet, there are no other standardized instruments used widely at the high school level that capture the demands of reading literary, historical, or scientific texts according to the dis-

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tinctive norms of each discipline.¹ This deficiency may be a testimony to the nation's fundamental lack of interest in or commitment to this level of literate competence among its citizens.

Although the literacy problem may be pervasive, we lack the ability to diagnose the problem effectively and deal with it. Too often, policy responses to low test scores are based on the assumption that the trouble is students' ability to decode or recognize words. But a study by Marsha Buly and Sheila Valencia (2003) suggests that these assumptions may be erroneous. The researchers followed up the reports of low achievement scores in reading on the fourth-grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning with diagnostic assessments of individual children. They found the source of students' problems in reading could be traced to six sets of factors, only a small portion of which reflect problems in decoding.

The challenge of understanding the needs of struggling readers at the high school level is even thornier because of the pervasive lack of knowledge about reading in most high schools, particularly those that have significant numbers of struggling students. High school content area teachers are trained in pedagogies associated directly with their disciplines. They often view a kind of generic reading competence (something they assume students acquire in elementary and middle school) as a prerequisite to including challenging



disciplinary texts (beyond the textbook) as part of their instruction.

Content area teachers also face confusing and sometimes conflicting demands for accountability. These demands may be viewed as pitting attention to concepts (e.g., in physics, how friction interacts with force) and declarative knowledge (e.g., in biology, the parts of the cell) in the disciplines against helping students learn how to read and/or to write.

As a result of these challenges and deficiencies, we have problems clearly defining what high school students should know and be able to do through reading in the disciplines. These issues are not well articulated in any of the national standards in reading, social

Although the literacy problem may be pervasive, we lack the ability to diagnose the problem effectively and deal with it.

¹ Not all experts within each discipline agree about norms for reading texts, and different professional contexts may place specialized demands on comprehension. However, I argue that each discipline has a widely recognized common set of discipline-specific strategies that novice readers need to master as preparation for future college and professional reading.

studies/history, or science. We have little knowledge about reading as a process in our high schools. And we have limited resources for diagnosing the needs of adolescent struggling readers or for documenting students' competencies in disciplinary literacy.

The Unique Characteristics of Adolescent Readers

Adolescents who enter high school as struggling readers differ from their younger counterparts in many ways. They are older and know more about the world than six- or seven-year-olds. They have a broader experience with the language of their homes and communities – which may be different from the standard academic English they encounter in school. These languages may be social or regional dialects (e.g., African American English, Appalachian English) or national languages (e.g., Spanish, Hmong).

The older students have been in school much longer and have been at least exposed to content knowledge in the disciplines. They have relatively long histories of participation (albeit not deeply engaged) in this place called school and, as a result, have learned subtle ways of negotiating both engagement and resistance. Findings by developmental psychologists (Spencer 1999; Spencer, Dupree & Hartmann 1997; Steele 1997) suggest that these adoles-

cents have internalized criteria by which they decide if a particular context or face-to-face interaction is threatening or poses risks to them and that they have developed patterned ways of responding to their perceptions of threat or risk.

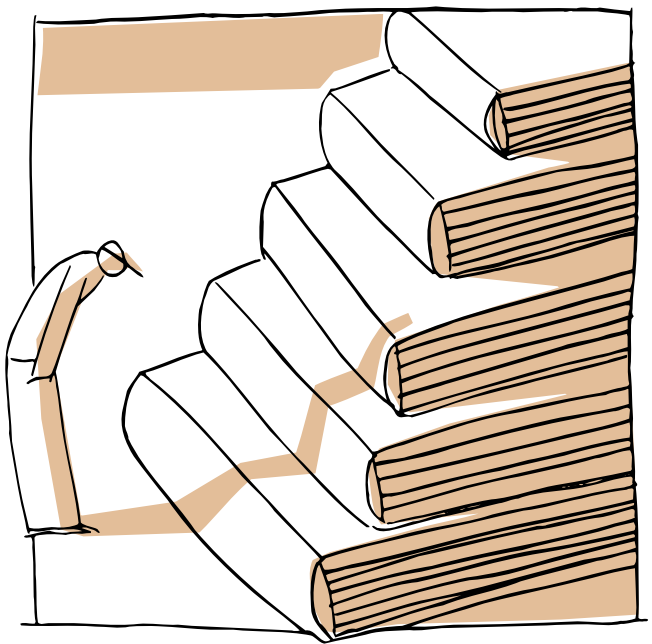
Adolescents are at an important developmental crossroads, sitting squarely (or, sometimes, not so squarely) between the worlds of late childhood and early adulthood. Linda Burton and her colleagues (Burton, Allison & Obeidallah 1995) have documented how some African American teenagers in the neighborhood they studied took on adult-like roles as parents, caregivers to siblings, and sources of needed economic support for their families; at the same time, in school they were often treated as though they were children. This kind of disconnect between the demands for participation in one life setting and another is always difficult to maneuver in, particularly for youths from stigmatized groups (e.g., youths who are Black or poor; South American, Asian, or African immigrants; or Black or Latino males).

Margaret Beale Spencer (1999) notes that in addition to grappling with a myriad of tasks both inside and outside of school, students who are members of stigmatized groups also face additional sources of threat or risk imposed by institutional structures,

I have never met a student who explicitly says, “My goal in life is to fail courses. My greatest desire is to flunk out of high school.”

gatekeeping functions within these institutions, and limited resources (social networks, economic resources, health support, stable housing). A. Wade Boykin (1994) calls this the triple quandary (race, economic status, and gender) that too many of our youth face.

The challenges confronting adolescents add to the difficulty of acquiring school-based disciplinary literacy – particularly in schools with histories of low academic achievement, high turnover of teaching staff, significant proportions of teachers who are not credentialed in their fields, high student mobility, and a location in neighborhoods with high levels of crime and violence. These conditions make it harder for students to achieve, even when they want to – and many *do* want to achieve. Much survey data shows evidence that low-income African American students and their families regularly articulate very high expectations for success, even when achievement data undermine those expectations. I often say that in my many years of working in and around high schools, I have never met a student who explicitly says, “My goal in life is to fail courses. My greatest desire is to flunk out of high school.”



Cultural Modeling: A New Approach

The reading struggles of urban high school students, particularly low-income African American and Latino students and low-income immigrants, are real; but our typical responses to this challenge are weak. We have yet, in any systematic manner, to find ways to draw on the complex worldly experiences of these students to support rigorous disciplinary literacy.

To demonstrate what is possible, I will illustrate one approach that does explicitly structure ways to “scaffold”

students' linguistic and real world experiences in service of rigorous disciplinary literacy. The *cultural modeling* framework (Lee 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2000, 2001) provides a structure for conceptualizing connections between what Luis Moll and Norma González (forthcoming) call *cultural funds of knowledge* and *disciplinary literacy*. The ability to build these connections depends on two crucial tasks.

First, teachers must use a deep understanding of the discipline to determine the most important kinds of problems to be tackled. In any discipline, the topics, concepts, and procedures that should be addressed are those that are *generative*: that is, those that facilitate a wide range of problem solving. One must understand how these topics,

concepts, and procedures relate to one another and what naïve understandings and misconceptions students may have about them. Based on this model, a teacher can make decisions about what – in students' experiences and ways of using language and in and across various settings – may provide important opportunities for connections.

It has been the absence of such an initial analysis of the demands of a domain that has lead researchers, teachers, and curriculum designers to dismiss particular cultural funds of knowledge as resources and to emphasize students' deficits in knowledge. For example, researchers in emergent literacy have often claimed that young students entering school whose parents have not read storybooks to them or who do not recognize the alphabet are ill prepared to learn to read. This claim is based on the idea that, for most students, learning to recognize the alphabet, to read from left to right, or to hold a book correctly are among the simplest of the tasks students face in learning to read. But this deficit position does not take into account the stories children hear, the rhetorical strategies they learn to get the floor in face-to-face conversations (Champion 2003; Heath 1983), the metalinguistic resources they develop in translating for their parents (Orellana 2001; Valdes 2003), etc. All of these resources – these cultural funds of knowledge – can be tapped.

The second task in cultural modeling is to investigate carefully the range of routine practices and ways of using language that students engage in outside of school. Sometimes this can be done through involvement with parents and neighborhood activities, as is the case with teachers in the Funds of Knowledge Project (Moll & González, forthcoming), often with Mexican immi-



The habits of mind that value language play as an aesthetically pleasing end in itself and the strategies required to understand and to produce literary tropes like symbolism are routinely employed by those who participate in practices such as signifying.

grant and Mexican American families. Particularly with adolescents, this can be accomplished by direct conversations with them, as partners in learning. The goal in such discussions is to understand the similarities in the kinds of problems tackled and in the modes of reasoning used between the academic disciplines and out-of-school experiences. These explorations can also identify experiences from students' lives outside school that either might provide useful analogies as students are exposed to disciplinary knowledge or that might be sources of confusion (i.e., misconceptions or naïve understandings).

In the cultural modeling approach, these two sources of knowledge – *disciplinary knowledge* of topics, concepts, modes of reasoning, or habits of mind, along with *cultural funds of knowledge* acquired by students through participation in routine cultural practices – come together over time through investigations of what we call *cultural data sets*. Cultural data sets pose problems of interpretation to the student that are analogous to a target problem in an academic discipline.

To date, most of the work in cultural modeling has involved the study of literature, although we are currently developing the approach in history and science. The target audience has been African American students, particularly those who speak African American English Vernacular.

Among the routine problems readers will face in tackling canonical works of literature are symbolism, irony, satire, and the use of unreliable narration. Speakers of African American English routinely produce and interpret each of these tropes, particularly as they participate in the language games of a genre of talk called *signifying*. Signifying is a form of ritual insult, a language game played across generations within the African American community (Mitchell-Kernan 1981; Smitherman 1977). The habits of mind that value language play as an aesthetically pleasing end in itself and the strategies required to understand and to produce literary tropes like symbolism are routinely employed by those who participate in these practices (Lee 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2000). This knowledge,

however, is tacit. Youth who routinely listen to rap music are also interpreting similar tropes. Again, this knowledge is largely tacit.

In cultural modeling, everyday texts such as signifying dialogues or rap lyrics are used as cultural data sets. One goal of selecting and sequencing the analysis of such cultural data sets is to make public the strategies and habits of mind that students already use in other contexts. A second goal is to provide supports for students to make connections between how they reason in an out-of-school context and the demands of the academic work they will be doing.

Students move from analyzing cultural data sets to analyzing canonical works of literature. Canonical works are sequenced so that if the target of instruction is *understanding symbolism*, students will have repeated opportunities to apply their evolving understanding of how symbolism works in literature. In this way, what cultural modeling does is to make the academic game explicit for students. We have found that students with histories of low achievement in reading become intensely engaged in literary analysis (Lee 2003). They produce interpretations that are quite often profound. They learn to play the game of literary criticism in ways that capture the most rigorous norms of the discipline.

Instruction based on cultural modeling highlights the generative role of cultural funds of knowledge. I will illustrate with a unit on symbolism. For this unit, we selected rap lyrics, rap videos, and short films or film clips in which symbolism was central to understanding the text and with which students would be very familiar. One example is “The Mask” by the Fugees. In each stanza of this rap, a character is wearing

a mask. No student thinks the masks worn are literal. All listeners understand the masks represent something; in other words, the masks are symbolic. The discussion focuses on what sense students make of the symbolism, what evidence supports their claims, and what strategies students employ to construct their interpretations. In the transcript below, Janetta, a senior, offers an interpretation of one stanza. A majority of students in this class and in the school where this intervention took place had reading achievement scores well below grade level.²

From “The Mask” by the Fugees

I used to work at Burger King.

A king taking orders.

Punching my clock. Now I'm wanted
by the manager.

Soupin me up sayin “You're a nice
worker,

How would you like a quarter raise,
move up the register

Large in charge, but cha gotta be
my spy,

Come back and tell me who's baggin
my fries,

Getting high on company time.”

Hell no sirree, wrong M. C.

Why should I be a spy, when you
spying me,

And you see whatcha thought ya saw
but never seen.

Ya missed ya last move, Checkmate!
Crown me King.

² The transcript and data in this example are based on a three-year intervention at an under-achieving urban high school. A literature and composition curriculum based on the cultural modeling framework was instituted across the English Language Arts program schoolwide. As part of that project, I taught one class each year of the intervention along with the other members of the English department. The transcript data is from one of the classes I taught. Test-score data are taken from classes taught by other teachers in the department.

Janetta deconstructs the symbolism of the mask as follows:

JANETTA: Oh, I think . . .
[*Class is noisy*].

PROFESSOR LEE: Shh. Okay, quiet down.

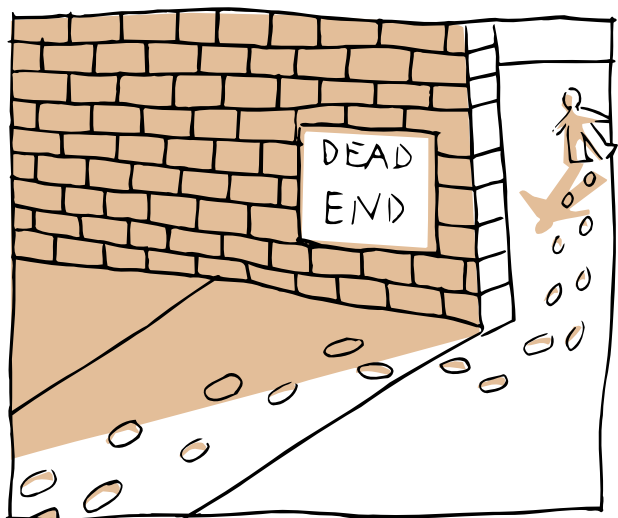
JANETTA: I'm saying, I think he had a mask on when he was fighting, when he beat him up, because in order for him to have the mask on, he was spyin' on that person. He was spying on somebody. I don't know who he was spying on. But in order for him to realize that the man was spying on him, he had to take off his mask. In order to realize that the man was saying . . . I don't know, shoot
[*laughter from class*].

PROFESSOR LEE: Let me try to break this out a little bit. Janetta, give me the words. You're saying . . .

JANETTA: I'm saying that the man, in order for him to realize that the other man was spying on him, that he had to take off his mask.

Janetta offers an interpretation that is highly literary in quality. She argues that both the Burger King worker and the manager are each wearing a mask; the worker, a "king," assumes a mask of civility, and the manager does not announce his intention to manipulate the worker. She recognizes that these are metaphorical masks, but also argues that they are dynamic and related to the relationship between the individuals. In order for the king wearing the mask of civility to recognize the masked intentions of the manager, the king must throw off his mask.

This is precisely the quality of interpretation that teachers hope students will make of symbolism in canonical literary works. Several important observations must be made. Janetta offers this interpretation without any preparation from the teacher. Because she recognizes that we are playing a game that



requires close attention to language, to responding to the aesthetic dimensions of how language is used, and because she has deep knowledge of the author (in this case, the rappers the Fugees), of the genre, and of the social codes that inform the internal states of characters, she is able to construct very literary responses relatively independently (her peers are offering similarly complex interpretations).

In addition, the students have greater prior knowledge of the text than the teachers, a typical situation in cultural modeling. Therefore, the culture of investigations in which students' voices are as authoritative as those of teachers becomes prominent right away.

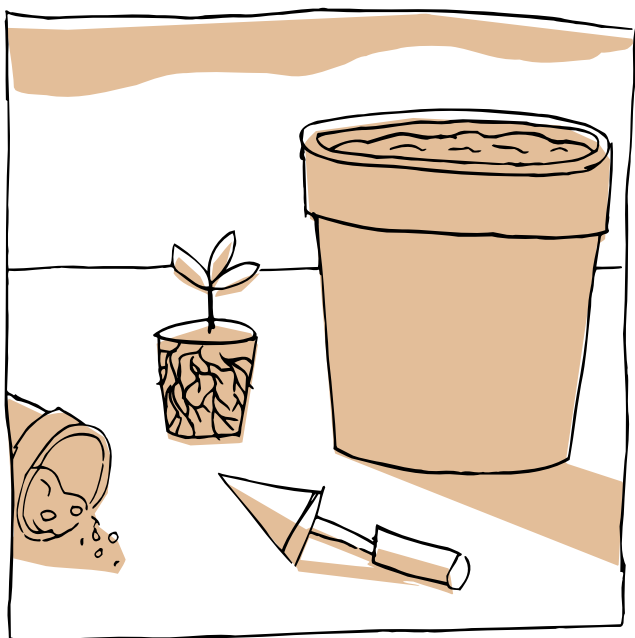
Our research project has examined a large body of transcripts and video tapes of modeling, both in my classrooms and those of other teachers in the department, and have documented that this quality of literary reasoning appears from the very beginning of instruction (Lee & Majors 2000).

After examinations of cultural data sets, students read a series of canonical works in which symbolism is central. Texts are sequenced so that students first read canonical literature to which they bring greater prior knowledge of the social codes that influence internal states of characters. With our population of African American students, this

meant African American literary works were read first, followed by texts from other traditions. The logic of the sequencing is that students begin to take forms of problem solving and habits of mind that had previously been tacit and make them public – first, through examination of cultural data sets and then through examination of culturally more familiar canonical texts. As they become more competent in the flexible deployment of strategies, they begin to attack texts for which they have less prior social knowledge.

The opening text was Toni Morrison’s award-winning novel *Beloved*, followed by short stories by William Faulkner, Amy Tan, and Sandra Cisneros; poems by Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickinson, and Dante; then Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*; and, finally, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. This sequence gives students repeated experience in detecting and making sense of a generative interpretive problem, the mastery of which gives them access to a wide range of literatures and genres. Our assumption is that even though these students, on the whole, had low reading scores and would be perceived by others as struggling readers, they needed tools for unlocking the problems such texts posed. Thus, a major focus of instructional discussion was always on what students understood about the text and how they went about figuring that out. Mini-lessons on deconstructing syntax were also part of the instruction.

In the unit on *Beloved*, students developed complex interpretations of the many symbols we meet in the book: the tree, the turtle, the rooster, the dough, *Beloved* herself. It was not uncommon for students to articulate interpretations that the teachers had never conceived. This is the case in the



following exchange, in which Victor interprets the significance of the unknown young woman who mysteriously emerges from the water at the opening of the fifth chapter:

VICTOR: When she came out of the water, she sat in on the tree all day and night, resting her head on the trunk.

PROFESSOR LEE: Heeeeey Ahhhh. [*The class says that at the same time.*] Wow.

ANOTHER STUDENT: What did he say?

DAVID: He put something under the tree.

ANOTHER STUDENT: Beloved is a tree?

PROFESSOR LEE: Victor. [*Students are all talking at the same time.*] Hold up. Victor, please explain that. That's powerful.

[*Overlap*]

VICTOR: Let me find it exactly. [*Victor opens the book to locate his evidence.*]

PROFESSOR LEE: All right, Victor. Tell us the page.

VICTOR: Walk down to the water, lean against the mulberry tree, all day and night, [*reading directly from the novel*] "All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat."

PROFESSOR LEE: She's not only resting on a tree but she seemed to be abandoned on this tree. Oooh, this is good. [*David raises his hand.*] Now, so, all right, David, a little bit louder so everybody can hear you. Charles Johnson, are you listening? David, a little louder.

DAVID: This book is connected to trees. Like tree is sweet home, tree on her back, tree in her back yard.

PROFESSOR LEE: Ahhh.

DAVID: Tree on this, tree on that.

It is evident that other students in the class value Victor's unique interpretation. I had read the novel twice at that point but had paid no attention to the fact that this woman was sitting on a tree. Victor cites textual evidence to

warrant his claim without prompting from the teacher. David goes on to make links among other images of the tree across the novel – again, unsolicited by the teacher.

The tree is a complex symbol in the novel, linking Sethe, Beloved, and Paul D. with the tragedies and ironies of African enslavement. Victor's association of the woman coming out of the water with the pervasive image of the tree is one of the subtle hints that the woman is the baby that Sethe had killed; the students in the class had recognized early on that this young woman was the baby Beloved, returned.

The students paid close attention to details in the text. They looked for patterns across details. They recognized signals to reject literal interpretations. The game they played quite seriously was literary in nature, situated squarely in norms for reasoning in the discipline.

In addition to analyses of transcripts across classrooms and time, we developed assessments of comprehension at the end of each unit of instruction. Students were given short stories that posed problems comparable to those they had met in the instructional

In the unit on *Beloved*, students developed complex interpretations of the many symbols we meet in the book. It was not uncommon for students to articulate interpretations that the teachers had never conceived.

Disciplinary literacy is the civil right of the twenty-first century.

unit, but which they had not read in class before. This was our attempt to capture the quality of transfer. Could students interpret problems of literal and figurative interpretations of complex stories they had not been taught in class?

Figure 1 below represents results from senior class students after the unit on symbolism. The story they had read was a very complicated story by the nineteenth-century Italian writer Giovanni Verga called “She-Wolf.” Using a question taxonomy developed by Hillocks (1980), we tested students for key details (LIT-KD), simple implied relationships (SIR), and complex implied relationships (CIR). Differences are shown by teacher. These results were typical across grades.

I use the example of cultural modeling to illustrate how it is possible to address generic needs of high school struggling readers and, at the same time, engage them in rigorous problems in the disciplines. Until we approach literacy problems in our high schools by emphasizing strategies for mastering complex disciplinary reading instead of generic reading abilities, most students will continue to fall behind their more affluent peers.

Robert Moses, founder of the Algebra Project, argues that mathematical literacy is the civil right of the twenty-first century (Moses & Cobb 2001). I would extend Dr. Moses’s call to say that disciplinary literacy is the civil right of the twenty-first century. Disciplinary literacy provides access to learning in all subject matters and, by so doing, opens up an array of life opportunities for young people.

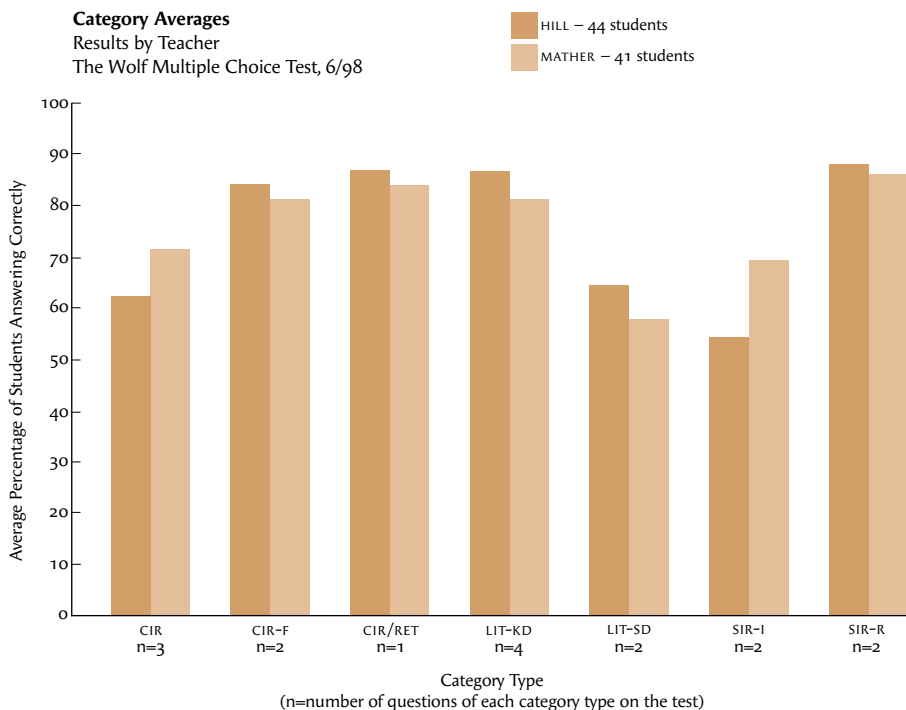


Figure 1. Senior test scores at end of unit on symbolism

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Adolescent Aliteracy: Are Schools Causing It?

Donna E. Alvermann

Many young people are capable of reading and read frequently and well outside of school, but they choose not to do so in class. By making reading more engaging and relevant to their lives, schools can motivate these “aliterate” youths.

“**Y**ou can’t fix what you can’t face,” remarked Dr. Jeanne Pryor, assistant superintendent of schools in Montclair, New Jersey, in a recent interview conducted by Debra Nussbaum (2003) of the *New York Times*. Nussbaum was on assignment gathering data about the Montclair “Prep for Prep” program, one of several such programs established in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and elsewhere to close a persistent academic achievement gap that separates Black and Hispanic students from their White peers. In making this remark, Pryor was referring to a decision made by Montclair educators and parents to end their earlier reluctance to discuss a minority achievement gap and, instead, to work toward a blueprint for improvement.

When I reflected on Pryor’s comment, I was reminded of a similar conclusion I had come to recently as I considered what I had learned in two decades of research involving adolescents and their in-school and out-of-school literacy. I know from my own work – now, as a researcher, and earlier, as a classroom teacher for thirteen years in Texas and New York – that, as educators, we can’t expect to fix what we can’t face. Specifically, we cannot improve adolescents’ motivation to read in school unless we face the fact that, for some

young people, this kind of reading is perceived as uninteresting and even irrelevant. For these students, *aliteracy* – not illiteracy – is the bigger challenge. They have the ability to read but choose not to do so – perhaps, in part, because certain aspects of schooling sap their motivation and give them reasons to believe they are not readers.

In Their Own Words

“It’s boring, just tellin’ back what we read in our textbooks. It’s like, why bother, you know?” Jimmy’s assessment of what occurs almost daily in his high school is reflective of an all too common model of instruction in the United States – the teacher-centered transmission model of instruction – which treats texts as repositories of information to be memorized and regurgitated. A transcript of one of several video-taped observations that I conducted in Jimmy’s general science class captures the transmission model in action (all names are fictitious):

TEACHER: What is the frequency of a wave, Jimmy?

JIMMY: The number of waves passin’ through a surface point.

TEACHER: Okay. The number of waves that pass the surface point in a given amount of time. What determines how many waves pass that point? Uh, Stephanie?

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STEPHANIE: The number of vibrations.

TEACHER: Okay. That's true, but that's in sound . . . and I'm asking you: What part of a wave would I want to look at to figure out how many are going by? Leroy?

LEROY: The wavelength.

TEACHER: [*writes on board*] The wavelength [*draws several wavelengths on board*]. So we have large wavelengths. Are my waves real spread out or are they packed together?

STUDENTS: [*in unison*] Spread out.

TEACHER: They're spread out. So, if my waves are spread out, are they coming by very quickly?

STUDENTS: [*in unison*] No.

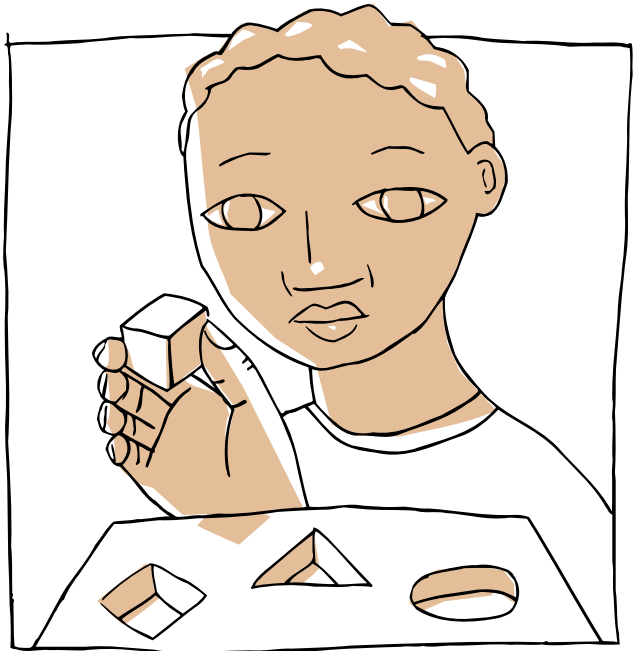
TEACHER: No. So, a large wavelength will have what kind of frequency?

STUDENTS: [*several speaking at once*] A high one. A low one. A short one. A low one.

TEACHER: A low one. So I'm gonna write down here [*writes on board*] low frequency, [*repeats herself*] low frequency.

In classrooms such as this one, the emphasis is on learning facts and covering content. One frequently cited justification for adhering to the transmission model of instruction is the need to address pressures coming from outside the classroom (e.g., accountability for meeting curriculum standards and the need to prepare students for high-stakes assessments). However, pressures within the classroom to maintain order, regulate socialization patterns, and meet the constraints on time and resources also contribute to the model's longstanding use among teachers.

Over time, some students who are exposed to this type of instruction develop an indifference to schooling that can lead to aliteracy or, even worse, dropping out of school. Others act out their indifference in more hostile ways. Such is the case in Rico's eleventh-



grade U.S. history class. According to Rico: “A lot of these students, you know, they got that ‘gangsta’ type thing to them, so it’s like they come in there and it’s like ‘What’s up?’ you know, and they’re hard guys. But you know, a lot of them you can see right through it, you know.”

“Reading is something you do in school, not out of school”

When I ask fourteen-year-old Lavon to tell me why he thinks that “reading” only takes place in school, he explains, “Like reading the *TV Guide* and video game magazines – that don’t count as reading.” His mom, who is a participant

“Reading the *TV Guide* and video game magazines – that don’t count as reading.”

in my study of an after-school media club with Lavon, signals her agreement by shaking her head, commenting, “I don’t see reading the *TV Guide* as reading, either.”

A friend of Lavon’s, Grady, who is in the lower twenty-fifth percentile of his class, is adamant that he can’t read. Grady says he would prefer that “magazines have only pictures,” and yet, each week in an after-school media club, I find him deeply absorbed in a Pokémon game book that offers players strategies for advancing to different levels of proficiency. Grady’s goal is to become a trainer – a player who is capable of bringing Pokémon characters back to consciousness after they have fainted in battle (a mild form of warfare, much different from the violence-packed Metal Gear, which Grady also plays).

In an interview with Grady’s father, I mention a conversation I had earlier with Grady about what counts as reading.

DONNA: You know, Grady, you read a lot. You say you read signs going down the road and you go to McDonald’s and order something off the menu – that’s reading.

GRADY: Yeah, but that don’t really count as reading.

Grady’s father, Mr. Brown, comments:

MR. BROWN: Yes, it does. Well, see, Grady is the type – you can leave him in the house all day – you know, I’m just saying this as an example, which I’m not going to do that, but you can leave him in the house all day. As long as he got something to eat and video games, you don’t have to worry about him.

DONNA: I believe it.

MR. BROWN: And you know, you leave him right there playing, and when you come back, he be right there playing. And see, that’s good that he’s real focused on that. But just think if he took that and put it toward reading.

**A Focus:
Seemingly So Simple, Yet . . .**

Grady’s father, like his teachers, wishes that Grady would focus on reading his schoolbooks, not books about video games (or, even worse, the games themselves). This is understandable. Yet it is going to take more than wishing to focus Grady’s attention on academic literacy, a kind of reading and writing that requires long-term and in-depth engagement with subject matter texts in science, history, mathematics, literature, and other content areas. Without such engagement, students begin to fall behind in their studies. The effect is cumulative, and soon they lack even the most rudimentary background

knowledge for comprehending their assigned readings.

Grady, of course, is not alone in this regard. Recent estimates by the Carnegie Corporation of New York reveal that close to 50 percent of the incoming ninth-graders in this country's comprehensive public high schools cannot comprehend the texts that their teachers assign (Rava 2001). Given this staggering percentage, it is little wonder that a search is currently under way for instructional approaches that can improve students' academic literacy. However, if found, will such approaches work for the Jimmys and Gradys among us who can read but choose not to? Perhaps; but to achieve this success, adolescents mired in aliteracy will need to see a *purpose* for engaging in school-related literacy tasks, and they will also need to believe in their *ability* to perform such tasks successfully.

In addition to a sense of purpose and a sense of self-efficacy, which are necessary but not sufficient markers of an engaged reader, students need skill in comprehending academic texts. Not surprisingly, instructional approaches aimed at improving students' comprehension of complex subject matter texts are distinct from those found in beginning reading instruction. An oft-repeated reason for this difference in approach is that students must "learn to read before they can read to learn."

Despite its pervasiveness, the notion of learning to read before reading to learn has outlived its usefulness. Separating the act of reading from one of its major functions – reading in order to learn *something* – makes little sense. Developmentally, beginning readers are different from skilled readers – but the difference lies more in the content or subject matter materials used than in the purpose for reading. Furthermore, even if a compelling purpose is evident, it will take a great deal of effort on everyone's part to build disengaged adolescents' confidence in their ability to read, especially given that they discount much of what they do as readers outside of school.

Readers by Another Name?

"They don't write the words down?" D'Erica asks, as she peruses a CD jacket looking specifically for words to the songs of a favorite artist. Watching her friend throw down the jacket in exasperation, Meme answers, "Some do, some don't. That's why I find them on the Internet." Huddled in front of one of the few computers with Internet access in the young adult wing of their city's public library, Lisa and Jocelyn are focused on Meme, who has a folder full of rap lyrics. These are lyrics that she printed only moments ago with Katrice's help. By pooling their money, the girls take full advantage of the library's only

The notion of learning to read before reading to learn has outlived its usefulness. Separating the act of reading from one of its major functions – reading in order to learn *something* – makes little sense.

The youth librarian states, “They *do* read,” but, when queried, the girls claim, “It’s not the kind of reading that counts.” To them, reading is what they studiously avoid in school.

printer. At five cents a copy, the lyrics are not given to just anybody, however. One has to be a friend of Meme and Katrice to share in their wealth.

Like Jimmy and Grady, the girls in this friendship group say they don’t like to read because they’re not good at it, a fact borne out by their low scores on the districtwide achievement test. In their classes, the girls slip notes to one another to “pass the time” and to beat a system they describe as “boring and not very useful in real life.” Their teachers think of them as indifferent to school and largely disengaged with what goes on academically around them.

Yet in the young adult section of the public library, these same self-proclaimed nonreaders engage in a wide range of literate activities. In addition to knowing how to break through protective firewalls in search of Web sites thought to contain lyrics that are off-limits because of profanity or other objectionable content, they e-mail their friends, read magazines, and occasionally check out books that they need to complete a homework assignment. The youth librarian states, “They *do* read,” but, when queried, the girls claim, “It’s not the kind of reading that counts.” To them, reading is what they studiously avoid in school. Still, in the brief scenario that follows, one is hard pressed to find a better name for what they are doing:

In the computer section of the young adult wing, Katrice accesses www.songbot.com and searches for music by the Hot Boys (Lil Wayne). As the lyrics appear on the screen, she attends closely to the content, rereads to make note of the videos that accompany certain CDs, and then calls over a friend to share her findings. Together, they discuss in detail what Katrice has just learned. At a nearby computer, Meme looks up information on Destiny’s Child and prints the group’s picture along with six pages of lyrics. Then she checks her three active e-mail accounts: Yahoo, Old Navy, and one that I have set up through the University of Georgia as a discussion listserv for the media club. Later, as Meme shares the print-outs of Destiny’s Child with Katrice, Jocelyn, D’Erica, and Lisa, the girls take turns reading aloud. Meme turns the pages and corrects her friends when they occasionally stumble over a word or lose their place.

And what do Katrice’s guardian (Mrs. Smith) and Meme’s grandmother (Mrs. Canfield) think of the girls’ search for lyrics?

MRS. SMITH: It’s a lot of things that you can learn from it. I think that all around, it’s constructive when they hear and read the songs. If they learn how to write raps, it’s fine. They’ll learn how to spell the words. It’s not all that negative . . . Katrice always talks real excitedly about everything when she come home [from the library]. And usually kids don’t talk about things so much unless they’re really, really interested.

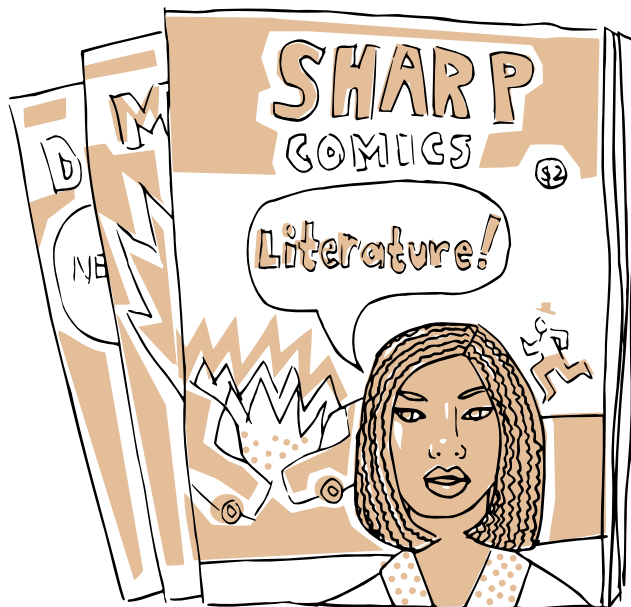
MRS. CANFIELD: Meme got a lot of papers, a lot of reading stuff she took off the computer. Stuff she had wrote. She done a lot of work, too. She don’t watch television like she used to. I notice that. I tell her there are other things to do beside watch television – like read and study other things. You need to think about what you want to be when you grow up.

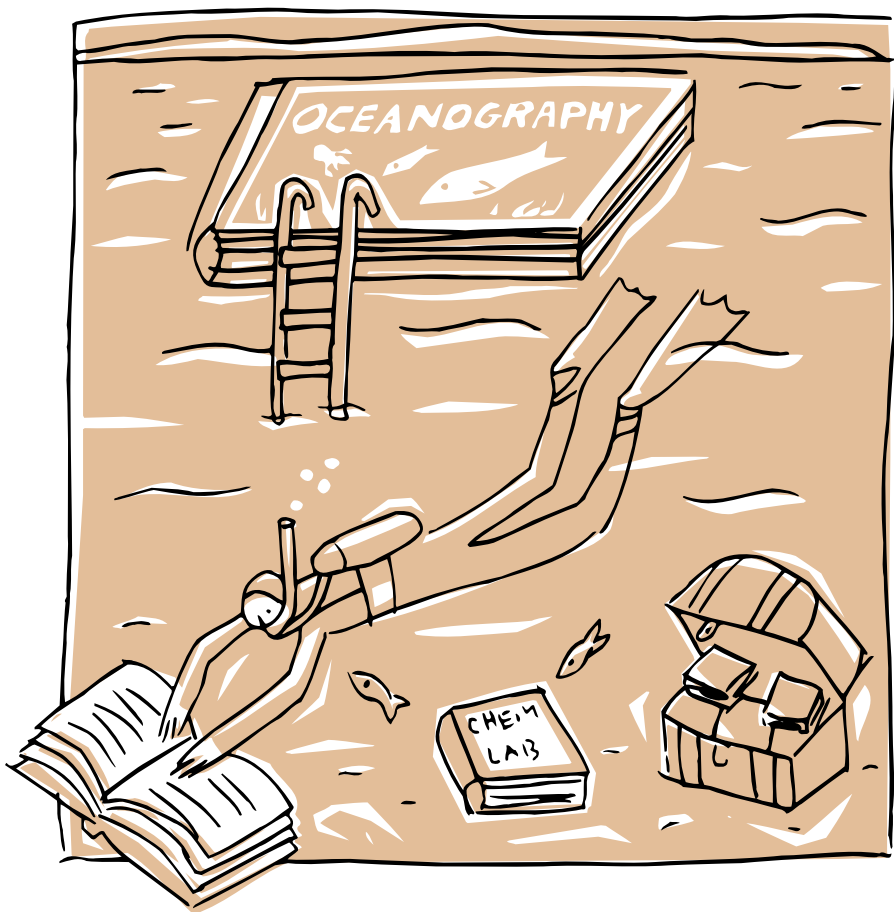
These two women's views on Katrice's and Meme's penchant for collecting and reading lyrics of their favorite musical artists point to the excitement and interest generated by this practice. Granted, it is a practice not likely to find much currency among teachers charged with improving students' subject matter learning; nor should it be. What it does provide, however, is a glimpse into a learning environment that differs greatly from the transmission model of instruction – an environment in which literacy has a real-life function, text formats vary, and youth participate actively in their own learning.

A Participatory Approach to Addressing Aliteracy

Grady, Katrice, Meme, and their friends demonstrate expertise in navigating literacy tasks that are personally meaningful and that yield results that are useful to them. This finding is not surprising, and it is supported by a growing number of researchers who study adolescents and their literacy practices both in and out of school (Alvermann 2003; Lee 2001; Moje 2000; O'Brien 2003). What this research suggests is the need to involve aliterate youth academically in ways that actively engage them in learning. One such approach is the *participatory* model of instruction, which emphasizes student involvement and treats texts as tools for learning rather than as repositories of information to be memorized and then quickly forgotten.

A participatory approach to literacy instruction is no less concerned with content mastery than is the transmission model. However, rather than rely on teachers to transmit facts through skill-and-drill tactics, a participatory approach calls for teachers to support students' academic development by





“scaffolding” instruction and encouraging peer interaction through small-group work and peer-led discussions. Scaffolding literacy instruction in content area classrooms involves teaching students strategies to support their learning of new or difficult concepts and then gradually withdrawing that support as they demonstrate their ability to apply the strategies independently. Much like the scaffolding that supports construction workers, scaffolded classroom instruction is temporary; it is removed once students demonstrate that they are capable of assuming responsibility for their own learning (Rosenshine & Meister 1992).

How might scaffolded instruction within a participatory approach improve the learning environment for Jimmy

and his classmates? First, students who can read but choose not to do so often need help in finding reasons for wanting to read subject matter textbooks. Second, they need strategies for synthesizing information from a wide range of texts (print, visual, aural, and digital). Simply memorizing a textbook definition of wave frequencies, as Jimmy apparently had done, is not likely to motivate him or other aliterate youth to develop a fuller understanding of the concept. Nor is it likely to lead to a sustained discussion of wave parts, as is evident from the truncated answers the students gave in response to the teacher’s questions.

However, if Jimmy’s teacher were to use multiple texts to teach about wave frequencies, students might find

reasons for wanting to engage with the school's ninth-grade general science curriculum. For instance, drawing from an example in a study of the use of multiple texts to teach history (Shanahan 2003), I can envision Jimmy's teacher using the following texts to teach the concept of waves and their frequencies: a short paragraph on how scientists make observations when studying wave frequencies; an interactive Web site on wave parts, including an animated diagram of wave frequencies and an accompanying word problem on measuring frequencies in cycles per second (Zona Land, n.d.); and a PBS teacher source on resonance at the Scienceline Web site (Wagner, n.d.).

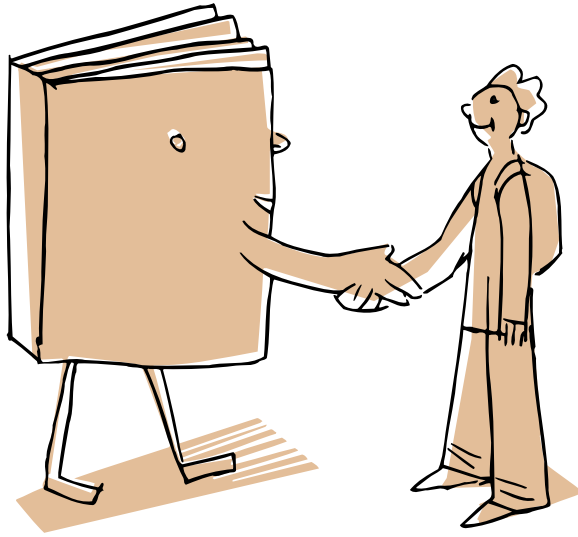
In teaching Jimmy and his classmates how to synthesize the information from these three sources, the teacher might begin by demonstrating the steps in writing a synthesis, such as creating a "grid" of common points, improving the synthesis at the paragraph level, at the paper level, and so on (see, for example, IUPUI Writing Center, n.d.). Following an initial demonstration, some of the scaffolding or support needed for completing the grid could be removed by allowing the students to work in small groups to complete a partially constructed teacher grid on wave parts, wave frequencies, and their relation to resonance. The teacher could continue to remove the scaffolding needed in synthesizing at the paragraph and paper levels until the students demonstrated that they could produce such syntheses on their own.

In the case of Katrice, Meme, and their friends, the girls' interest in reading and discussing rap lyrics might be reason enough for a teacher to work music into his or her lesson plans when the subject matter invites this kind of merger. Although a common enough

practice, such integration is not without its own set of risks. Perhaps the greatest danger is the potential for co-opting the very pleasures young people take in music by subjecting it to school-like inquiry. To avoid this possibility, care should be used in deciding which music to use and for what reason. For example, in a study reported elsewhere (Alvermann 2003), I describe how Mr. Donlon, a high school English teacher in rural Georgia, went to great pains to ensure that the music he chose to include, while related to the curriculum and to students' interests, was not overly analyzed or critiqued.

Working from his belief in a participatory approach to instruction, Mr. Donlon motivated a group of aliterate ninth-graders to read and discuss material in the school's mandated literature anthology. He did this by appealing directly to their interest in rock music. After initially failing to engage the class in a discussion aimed at comparing the imagery in Langston Hughes' two poems "Mother to Son" and "Dreams," Mr. Donlon had more success using a lesson plan entitled "Langston Hughes and the Blues" that he downloaded from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum (n.d.) Web site. His objectives were to help students make connections between Hughes' poetry and the blues and to point out the influence of the Black experience on so much of American music, including rock. He also used a recording of Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" from the local library's folk collection and a copy of the song's lyrics from the American Studies at the University of Virginia (n.d.) Web site.

As students listened to Johnson's music and took turns reading the lyrics out loud, Mr. Donlon invited the class to break into groups of three or four



In a participatory approach, aliterate students are encouraged to read from a mix of trade books, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, student-generated texts, digital texts, hypermedia productions, visuals, and artistic performances and invited to interact with their peers rather than simply fielding teachers' questions.

students each to discuss how the two poems by Hughes, which they had earlier deemed uninteresting and irrelevant, were either similar to or different from Johnson's "Cross Road Blues." The small discussion groups were lively and punctuated with talk about why the music had made their task both meaningful and enjoyable.

In a participatory approach to instruction, aliterate students are encouraged to read for multiple purposes from a mix of trade books, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, student-generated texts, digital texts, hypermedia productions, visuals, artistic performances, and the like. They are also invited to interact with their peers in small-group discussions, rather than simply fielding the questions that teachers throw to them.

Because many adolescents of the 'Net Generation will find their own reasons for becoming literate – reasons that go beyond reading to acquire disciplinary knowledge – it is important that teachers create opportunities for them to engage actively in meaningful subject matter learning that both extends and elaborates on the literacy practices they already own and value. Aliterate youth, such as those whose voices are represented here, deserve supportive teachers who value their students' in- and out-of-school literacy practices and who take the time to help students develop strategies to master the range of subject matter they encounter in their formal schooling.

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What Is After-School Worth? Developing Literacy and Identity Out of School

Glynda Hull and Jessica Zacher

Today's visual age demands a broadened view of literacy that encompasses understanding and using new technologies. After-school programs can provide venues where young people can develop this form of literacy and express their newly created identities.

“**H**ow much is a life worth?” asked Asia Washington, a fifteen-year-old resident of Oakland, California, in her digital movie about current threats to life – wars, terrorism, drugs, violence, a lack of belief in self – and about the universal need for love, acceptance, and understanding.¹ Articulate and confident, a budding filmmaker, and a participant in an evening multimedia and literacy program called DUSTY (Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth),

¹ We thank Asia Washington and her mother, Sonja Stewart, for sharing their insights about multimedia composing and about Asia's creative work with *VUE*'s larger audience. We would like to acknowledge the pivotal role of Michael James, director of the DUSTY programs, in making DUSTY a safe, creative, and innovative learning space for children, youth, and adults. Alberto (Beto) Palomar was the instructor for Asia's Digital Visual (DV) poetry class; his skill and care as an instructor are well known and much appreciated. Korina Jocson was instrumental in beginning and sustaining DV poetry and is a fine poet and multimedia composer in her own right, as well as a literacy researcher. We thank each of these individuals, as well as the larger DUSTY staff and community. DUSTY development, operation, and research have been supported by a range of institutions and grants, all gratefully acknowledged. These include the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California's UC [University-Community] Links project; the U.S. Department of Education; the Community Technology Foundation of California; the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth; the Robert Bowne Foundation; the Allen Temple Baptist Church; and the Prescott-Joseph Center for Community Enhancement.

Asia began her movie by querying the worth of a life, and ended it with the answer: “Priceless.” With this choice of words, she smartly appropriated the language of a recent credit card commercial to serve her own ends. We, in turn, borrow from Asia and ask, What is the value of after-school programs? What is their worth, especially as spaces in which we might foster powerful literacy practices among young people?

In this essay we draw on Asia's digital movie, along with our experiences in conceptualizing, participating in, and documenting after-school programs, to discuss new kinds of literacy.² We advocate recognizing new communications strategies arising from multimodal and multimedia composing, including the juxtaposition of visuals with print, audio, and music, as well as the appropriation of words, compositional techniques, and images from popular culture, as illustrated by Asia's movie. We believe that such communicative channels are pervasive, potentially effective, and, most important, satisfying aspects of literacy,

² In keeping with our interest in exploring and promoting new forms of communication such as multimedia, multimodal composing, we have made available a CD of Asia's movie, “How Much Is a Life Worth,” and audio tapes of interviews with Asia and her mother on line at <www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/spring04>.

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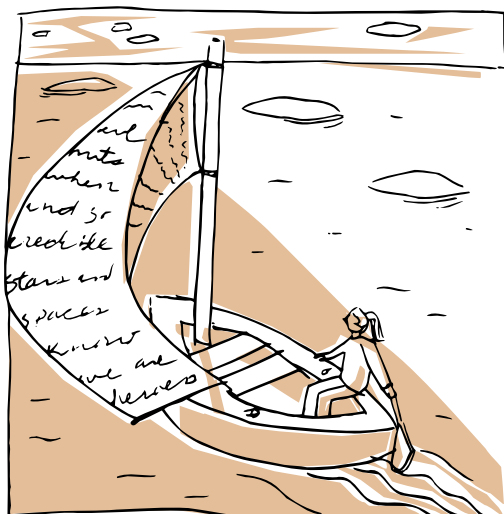
especially for youth (Buckingham 2000). And we believe that many out-of-school programs are well suited to foster these new forms of literacy.

We begin with an overview of the historical origins of after-school programs in the United States and a sketch of the current after-school landscape. We include a discussion of some of the debates that have arisen around literacy within and outside of school and some of the theories that we have found helpful in thinking about literacy, out-of-school spaces, and the design of after-school programs for Asia and other children and youth. We then return to Asia's digital movie and the question of worth.

A History of After-School Programs in the United States

After-school programs have existed in the U.S. since at least the late 1800s. They came about when the need for child labor decreased, and, at the same time, societal expectations that schooling should be compulsory grew. These shifts created a new temporal zone: the out-of-school hours. Youths must have found this freedom to play in the streets, escape crowded housing, and mix with a range of people greatly appealing; but adults came to regard unsupervised after-school time as worrisome – drawing children into potentially unsafe activities or making them vulnerable to new dangers such as street traffic (Halpern 2002).

Eventually, in response to these concerns and to those of educators and reformers who wanted to “improve” working-class children, outdoor or playground programs were developed, and those programs expanded to include indoor activities (Gagen 2000). The historical research of Robert Halpern (2002) provides an example of the



sorts of activities and programs available at a boys' club that first opened in Manhattan in 1876. Staffed by middle-class volunteers, the club included a fife, drum, and bugle corps; singing classes; wrestling; natural history studies; bookkeeping; writing instruction; and a reading room.

The long-term perspective on the after-school movement in the United States reveals several tensions that remain unresolved. First, after-school programs (particularly those serving low-income children) have always been underfunded and overly dependent upon volunteers. Yet they are regularly asked to assume more and more responsibilities, to take up the slack for overworked families, and to assist students whose schools struggle to help them.

Second, as the Manhattan example suggests, after-school programs have typically had a range of emphases – academic, athletic, artistic, social – and have used their flexibility in programming to distinguish their offerings from those of schools. But they face continued and increasing pressures to serve as academic, test-heavy extensions of the school day (California Dept. of Education 2002; U.S. Dept. of Education 2000). Finally, there have long been

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conflicts between their regulatory functions and their commitment to youth development. On the one hand, for example, they are expected to ensure safety and socialization through the control of children's and youths' time and movement. On the other, program officials see their mission as enabling youths to grow toward adulthood by giving them the freedom to take ownership of their activities and products and placing their interests and desires in the foreground.

Interest in after-school programs has grown many-fold in the last decade. Driven by the much-publicized worry over "latchkey" kids forced to stay home alone in the afternoons while their parents work, along with concerns over youths' safety in those hours, more and more public and community agencies have created after-school programs to provide safe and productive activities for adolescents (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids 2000). These programs have also been aimed at improving students' academic achievement and reducing the fiscal and societal costs associated with poor school performance (University of California 2002), although there is some debate over how effective after-school programs are in improving academic knowledge and skills.

For whatever reasons, some three million to four million low-income and moderate-income children currently attend after-school programs (Halpern

2002), including large-scale efforts such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (U.S. Dept. of Education 2000) and New York City's After School Corporation (After School Corporation 1999), as well as thousands of independent local efforts. And the need for these programs is expected to continue growing, regardless of whether funding is available (University of California 2002).

Literacy in the Visual Age

The predominant push in after-school programming in the United States today is literacy development. To be sure, literacy activities have always been staples in after-school programs. But now, with federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind and accompanying funding requirements and instructional mandates to measure reading (as well as a school's worth) through student performance on standardized tests, the pressure is on for after-school programs to redouble their focus on literacy.

Some research has shown that literacy improvement – or rather, school-based conceptions of literacy improvement – is not the forte of most after-school programs, whose personnel usually do not have specialized training in such areas (Halpern 2003). Yet, while academic literacy – the ability to write academic essays and read school-based texts – remains critically important, we believe that after-school programs can play a unique role in developing a different form of literacy, one that we think is especially important today.

It has become commonplace to acknowledge that we live in a visual age. Pictures are pushing words off the page or the screen. The lives of young people, especially, are increasingly dominated by television, music, movies, images, and popular culture, often via the Internet and companion technolo-

gies like MP3 players and video games. Those of us who are interested in adolescent literacy must understand forms of communication other than writing and learn how youths value and use them. We must also learn to recognize the value and place of these new means of communication in our own lives.

Typically, American adults, especially overburdened teachers and other school staff, dismiss or fear these new forms of communication, believing that they will corrupt or deaden youth. Others, meanwhile, romanticize new technologies as educational and societal panaceas. Neither position is adopted here. In the words of David Buckingham (2000, p. 206), an observer and researcher of media and their uses by youth, “The new forms of cultural expression envisaged by enthusiasts for digital media will not simply arise of their own accord, or as a guaranteed consequence of technological change: we will need to devise imaginative forms of cultural policy that will foster and support them, and ensure that their benefits are not confined to a narrow elite.”

New technologies, including new forms of communicating via multiple modalities, do not determine uses, although they facilitate and influence them. It is up to people and institutions to imagine and foster supportive social practices and to create equitable ways to meaningfully use new technologies and communication channels. As will be illustrated below, this is where we see a possible important role for after-school programs.

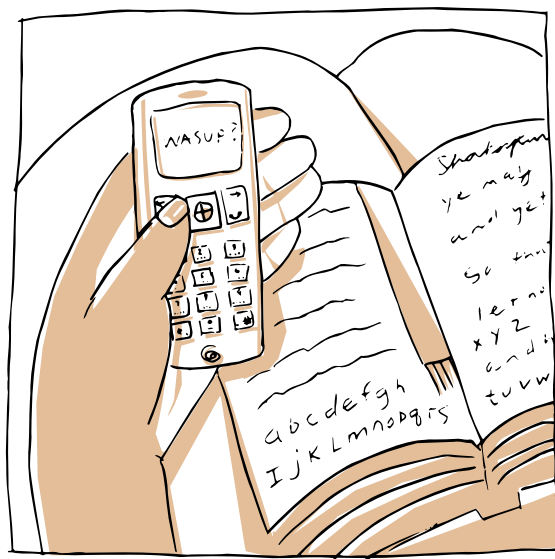
The development of a broadly conceived form of literacy is important for all young people. But we have been especially concerned, as has much of the after-school movement, with youth who face the greatest challenges in construct-

ing positive life pathways. Most of these youth live in neighborhoods described as “low income,” most are people of color, and many are first- or second-generation immigrants. For some, English is a second or other language.

The achievement gap separating youth along income, ethnic, and linguistic lines in the United States is well known, as is the failure of many schools to engage increasing numbers of these youth (Thernstrom & Thernstrom 2004). And many adults tend to demonize certain groups of young people, particularly African American males, for their preferences and creations in music, dress, language, and style. Of all the difficult questions that face educators, surely the most critical is how to transform schooling and its principle activity and means – literacy – so as to engage young people and sustain their participation. After-school programs can provide at least a partial answer by offering youth the opportunity to communicate via multiple modalities.

Asia's Digital Poem

Asia Washington came to DUSTY because her mother, Sonja, made the arrangements, accompanied Asia to



classes, and even created her own digital poem. “Young people sometimes don’t stick with things,” Sonja noted; she was determined that this would not be the case with Asia. Once the classes were under way, however, and Asia understood and became invested in what she was working toward, attendance and follow-through were no longer an issue.

The Digital Visual Poetry program (DV Poetry) met during weekday evenings for eight- to ten-week cycles; it began with writing workshops and proceeded to multimodal composing via computers. Participants recorded and digitized their voices as they read or recited their poems; searched for images to illustrate their words and ideas; selected or composed a sound track as background music; and then assembled the whole digitally, adding transitions to connect images, adjusting pace and timing, and sometimes adding special effects. The result was a three-

to five-minute movie later shown to a wider audience of friends and family.

Asia, Sonja, and other DUSTY participants premiered their digital poems on a big screen at a special celebration held in Oakland. Afterwards the artists came up on stage to answer questions from an attentive and appreciative crowd. Sonja especially enjoyed a question from a young boy about the sibling relationships that she had humorously depicted in her digital poem. Later Asia premiered her movie before a different group, taking it to her high school and showing it to her English teacher and classmates. She noted that she saw her teacher wiping tears from her eyes as the lights in the darkened classroom were turned back on. Such emotional reactions and expressions of interest and pride during showings are not rare.

Asia’s digital visual poem, which we describe and analyze below, is three minutes long and contains fifty-one images. Narrated in her voice, the piece compels viewers to reflect on the worth of a human life. “How much is a life worth?” she asks at the start of the poem and several times again at the end. When she asks this question, an image of stacks and stacks of dollar bills carefully arranged in a glass case appears on the screen; instrumental music in the background evoked both the tinkling of coins and, remarked Asia, the church bells of her childhood.

The poem continues by identifying hatred as “the reason that most lives are no longer here,” and represents the instruments and products of hatred through a set of images that are grim and visceral: a pile of bodies from a Holocaust photo; a man’s torso, shirt pulled up to reveal a the gun in the waistband of his jeans and another held between his legs; gangsta tattoos on the arms and chests of Latino and



African American men; a white girl's face, bruised and purple from a beating; a picture of crack cocaine.

These graphic images are occasionally juxtaposed – to lighten the mood, and for humor, Asia explained – with cartoonish figures and line drawings: a small child sits, legs crossed, and sadly stares; a pink fox flashes on the screen, too quickly for most viewers to see his defiant hand gesture; two oblong potato heads with arms attached punch toward each other. Other sets of images depict recognizable people, places, and icons from history and contemporary pop culture – Frederick Douglass, Alicia Keys, Tupac, the Twin Towers, a Powerpuff Girl – in service to Asia's points about human emotions and desires.

In the second part of her digital poem, Asia considers hate's opposite: the need, desire, and lack of love. She points to community as "a form of love" that some people don't even know they have. Using a satellite image of the earth, a portrait of the cartoon Simpson family, and a photograph of a sorority group gathering, Asia writes, in some of her most striking lines, "Communities are worldwide/It's like an ocean with no tide."

In the last part of her digital poem, Asia returns to her first line, using three distinctive images of question marks to signal her repetition of the question at hand. The poem crescendos with the images of question marks and the money encased in glass, the repetitive (but not soothing) instrumental music, and lines questioning the value of the lives of those involved in "black-on-black crime," of "people getting killed in the army every day," of "girls and boys getting raped and molested every day," and, ultimately, of the "people on this earth who don't know why." Asia's penultimate image, the last question

mark, is half black and half white; she told us she chose it because, as with the question at the heart of the poem, "you can have either/or opinions about it, you could argue about it all day." Asia ended by posing the question to herself: "How much is a life worth to me?" Her answer, "It's priceless," is accompanied by the initial photo of stacks of money, but this time covered with a large red "X."

The first point we want to make about Asia's poem is that it exploits to wonderful advantage many aspects of the multimedia composing environment. One power of the piece is its

The poem's appeal goes beyond the juxtaposition of modalities. It represents a new kind of text – a new approach to composition.

combination of an individual's voice and message amplified by images, movement across the images, and sound. This innovative combination of modalities is made possible and practical by digital technologies.

But its appeal goes beyond the juxtaposition of modalities. Asia's digital poem represents a new kind of text – a new approach to composition – that some have called *postmodern* (Buckingham 2000). One feature of these new texts is *intertextuality* – a semiotics concept that considers a single text to be embedded in a larger system of interrelated texts. In Buckingham's words, these texts tend to be "highly allusive, self-referential and ironic. They self-consciously draw on other texts in the form of pastiche, homage or parody; they juxtapose incongruous elements from different historical periods, genres

What counts as literacy – and how literacy is practiced – are now in historical transition, and young people like Asia are at the vanguard of the creation of new cultural forms.

or cultural contexts; and they play with established conventions of form and representation” (p. 88).

Today’s writers, artists, and musicians are in a stage of experimentation with such texts, and we should expect in the near future more and more examples of them, as well as new theories of texts that account for their aesthetic as well as their intellectual value. (See, for instance, the new on-line journal, *Born Magazine*, at www.bornmagazine.com, which publishes literary collaborations between poets and visual artists.) What counts as literacy – and how literacy is practiced – are now in historical transition, and young people like Asia are at the vanguard of the creation of new cultural forms.

A second striking aspect of Asia’s digital poem is the way in which it is a vehicle for enacting a socially conscious self. A large body of work on identity formation has for many years theorized and illustrated the ways in which individuals enact, through language and other forms of representation, a sense of self – a version of who they are, have been, or want to become (Appiah 1994; Giddens 1991; Hall 1996). Although we are always enacting a self, there are certain periods, like adolescence, when a concern with identity comes to the fore. We argue that the genre of multimodal digital poetry such as Asia’s allows the expression of emotion as well as reason, making it particularly well

suited to examining and representing versions of oneself.

Asia represents herself in “How Much is a Life Worth” as a mature social critic but also as a compassionate person with a sense of humor. As the poem’s narrator, she comes across as someone engaged with big ideas who is unafraid to name the world’s ugliness but who nonetheless holds onto a sense of idealism and a belief in the power of human beings’ ability to love. What an impressive identity to enact and strive for! Interestingly, Asia had to fend off attempts from her writing group and her mother to persuade her to choose a different topic. Here is how she described that pressure and her decision:

Everyone said, “I think you should stick to the other poem. . . . The “how-much-is-a-life-worth” poem – it’s too complicated, too deep!” They were thinking “It’s too deep for a teenager – a fifteen-year-old. What’s she going to do with this deep poem?”

Asia suspected that everyone, including her mother, wanted her to choose a topic that was “kiddier,” but she stuck to her guns and, in the end, all were impressed and proud.

The importance of the power to choose – to be supported in writing about topics of interest and to be allowed and encouraged to use literacy activities to represent, analyze, and understand one’s own world – cannot be exaggerated for adolescents. Asia took great pleasure and care in illustrating her poem with just the right images; in fact, she reported that three-quarters of her work on the poem consisted of searching the Internet for photographs, drawings, and illustrations.

These images had personal relevance for Asia and were thereby loaded with an authorial significance that might not be immediately apparent to

viewers. About a photograph of three young African American men standing by a corner liquor store, she remarked that it reminded her “of a store right around the street from my Grandma’s house . . . where, you know, in the ’hood, people just stand outside all day at the liquor store. They don’t have a job or anything, [they] just stand outside the liquor store.” The importance of authorial agency for Asia was strikingly illustrated by her decision not to major in journalism, even though she loved to write; as she notes below, her journalism class at school did not allow her to write about things that interested and concerned her:

And then she’s [her teacher] talking about you gotta do all this writing, and it was writing that wasn’t that interesting to me. She said, “Write about the new principal.” Who cares about the new principal? I mean, not to be mean or anything, I’m interviewing people around the school: “What do you think about Miss Canton, the new principal?” “Who’s Miss Canton?” “Who cares?” “Who’s Miss Canton?” “That’s the new principal!” She’s talking about, write three or four pages, for homework, about Miss Canton. I said, “I don’t care about Miss Canton.” I thought I was going to be writing about things that interest me. So I decided I want to be a writer, a director, of film.

Of course, many productive activities in school and in life require doing things that do not seem to be of immediate relevance or interest. Nonetheless, it is important to note the power of connecting, wherever possible, our assignments as well as our creative work to adolescents’ lives and interests.

A final notable aspect of Asia’s digital poem is its creation at DUSTY. In composing and sharing her poem, Asia traversed school, home, and community. The idea for the poem originated

in an art class at school, where, in the wake of 9/11 and the most recent Iraq war, Asia created a collage. This artwork became the second image of Asia’s digital poem. In writing her poem she consciously drew on literary techniques that she had learned in school, including the use of alliteration and the repetition of words and ideas.

She also relied on her knowledge of and concerns about her own community – where the number of homicides has topped 100 for two years running – as she developed her themes and selected her images. At DUSTY she acquired expertise in multimedia composing, and she found a social space that allowed her to bring her own interests center stage. Sharing her poem included taking it back to school, as well as sharing it among friends and family.

After-School Programs: An Alternative Space for Literacy

For Asia, moving across social and geographic spaces appeared to be a seamless and natural activity – a kind of movement that we believe is characteristic of one way young people use after-school programs. The programs can provide material resources, social relationships, and social practices – including particular uses of multimedia technologies – that complement and extend, sometimes in dramatic ways, the kinds of educational and literate experiences available in school and other contexts.

For other youth, after-school programs play a different and in some ways more crucial role, serving as their primary public space for the development of certain kinds of expertise, for acquiring a sense of self as valued and capable, and for exercising their claim on attention, care, safety, and their right to heard. As one young male participant

One young male participant explained, “DUSTY just took me off the street. . . . And it gave me a chance to use my creativity and tell my story.”

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We think of literacy in this way: a familiarity with the full range of current communicative tools, modes (oral and written), and media, plus an awareness of and a sensitivity to the power and importance of representation of self and others. This literacy, we argue, can be fostered most easily in spaces that support readers and writers in their critical, aesthetic, loving, and empowered communication.

We have tried in this essay to illustrate how after-school programs can be key institutions for providing young people with opportunities to become literate, confident, and influential communicators. After-school programs can be constructed as safe but vibrant social and physical spaces that allow youth much-needed out-of-school opportunities. They can offer equal access to material and symbolic resources and relationships; chances to engage in productive activity through the creation and performance of valued popular cultural products – music, videos, poetry, and art – and places to develop identities as powerful actors able to describe and impact an unsettling, yet changing and changeable, world. A tall order, yes – but one that keeps time with an important theme in the history of after-school programs in this country and one that pushes toward a vision of after-school programs as alternative public spheres. This is the vision that drives DUSTY and its DV Poetry program.

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