ISSUES IN LITERACY: A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

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BEING LITERATE IN AMERICA: A SOCIOHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

Fire burns; that is the first law.
When a wind fans it the flames

are carried abroad. Talk
fans the flames. They have

manoeuvred it so that to write
is a fire and not only of the blood.

The writing is nothing, the being
in a position to write (that's

where they get you) is nine tenths
of the difficulty: seduction

or strong arm stuff. The writing
should be a relief,

relief from the conditions
which as we advance become—a fire,

a destroying fire. For the writing is
also an attack and means must be

found to scotch it—at the root
if possible. So that

to write, nine tenths of the problem
is to live. They see

to it, not by intellection but
by sub-intellection (to want to be

blind as a pretext for
saying, We're so proud of you!

A wonderful gift! How do
you find the time for it in

your busy life? It must be a great
thing to have such a pastime.

But you were always a strange
boy. How's your mother?)

—the cyclonic fury, the fire,
the leaden flood and finally
the cost—

Your father was such a nice man.
I remember him well

Or, Geeze, Doc, I guess it's allright
but what the hell does it mean?

William Carlos Williams
Paterson, Book III[2]

These words of William Carlos Williams, an American poet, novelist, and essayist—as well as a small-town doctor in the first half of the twentieth century—capture something of the puzzle of what it means to be "literate" in the United States. To understand some of the puzzles surrounding the meaning of being literate for both literary writers and the reading community—the group referred to as "they" by Williams—I have for several years been studying both historical materials and current communities of "literates." Here I report some findings from social history and ethnography, as well as some research on human learning.

The latter interest took a critical and unexpected turn this past summer (1984) when my eighteen-year-old daughter, Shannon, suffered serious head injuries in a mountain climbing fall. Initially, she had both physical disabilities and significantly impaired intellectual functioning. I summarize here briefly the cognitive retraining program I devised for and with her and through which she accomplished within six months an excellent recovery. During her recovery, I stopped my historical research and began to dig into the neurological literature on

[1]Keynote Address, National Reading Conference, 1984.

[2]William Carlos Williams: *Paterson.* Copyright 1949 by William Carlos Williams. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

learning and especially on gaining the higher intellectual functions Western societies bundle together to mean "being literate."

My fundamental concern, simply put, is this: In recent years, and repeatedly in the twentieth century, there has been a public outcry over illiteracy in America and the need to "return to the basics" to insure that students acquire literacy skills. Policy-makers, researchers, and school personnel at all levels have responded by scurrying about to define and impose the basics, mandate more testing, and insist on more hours of teaching. In research, we have sought to isolate skills to better quantify their measures, and we have given attention to the contexts in which these skills are learned only as a variable and not as the frame for learning which it is. We have given only nodding acknowledgement to the touchy question of "what is the context for learning *literate behaviors,* as distinct from learning *literacy skills?"*

All of this flutter is a deterrent to attending to the meaning of being literate. American educational research and its institutions have long been inclined to oversimplify solutions to what are in fact extraordinarily complex problems. It is literate *behavior* which is therefore left unattended by researchers and schools while public attention is diverted to literacy *skills.* Hence, what we ignore is the denial of life chances and choices for a major portion of the population. Access to all but the most menial of jobs in American life now demands far more than literacy skills; upward socioeconomic movement depends on being literate and being a citizen who behaves and thinks as literates "should." Yet, in spite of numerous efforts to define what is meant by literacy, with definitional terms grading levels of literacy from "survival" through "functional" to "average," there are few attempts to talk about—much less define—what is meant by being literate. The gap is analogous to the long-standing almost exclusive focus of researchers and educators on decoding skills and the relative neglect of encoding, interpretive, or comprehension skills—the real heart of reading to learn.

It is unfashionable, except in certain narrow circles, to discuss what being literate means or to take up topics that ring with elitism. The term "literate" smacks of exclusivity and values traditionally tied to the leisured upper classes; it is often used synonymously with being intellectual. Moreover, nowadays, it is suspect to tie being literate too closely with certain kinds of speaking or thinking abilities or with intellect itself. The 1960s made scholars and public figures cautious about making claims that could be interpreted as linking environmental or sociocultural factors with basic thinking and speaking abilities or with suggesting that values which could be construed as elitist were necessary for success in social or economic terms. Yet admissions departments and employers who control access to higher education and high status jobs promise entry not to those who have only acquired literacy skills, but to those who have become "literate." Without definition or serious attention to what it means to be "literate," schools continue to spin wheels just to be able to guarantee that graduates will have literacy skills; researchers seem unable to move schools out of this rut. Could it perhaps be that the Marxist scholars who maintain that we fail to specify characteristics of the cultural and linguistic capital necessary for upward socioeconomic movement are right when they say that keeping such criteria for upward movement subtle and unspecified guarantees narrower gatekeeping? Could it be one of history's little ironies that neglecting to pay attention to the features which determine upward socioeconomic movement can be passed off as adhering to the proposition that all men are created equal?

I began the first and second phases of the three-part research I report here by wanting to demystify the myth of what it means to be literate. I wanted to understand how the notion became so entrenched in the ideals of American society, especially in education, and what being literate has meant in terms of thinking and speaking abilities and that elusive quality "intellect." For decades, anthropologists have studied "down," turning their investigative lenses on those who are lower class, powerless, and generally thought of as "different"—either remote societies or the nonmainstream populations of our own society. Relatively few attempts have been made to study "up," to turn the same types of detailed investigations to the habits of powerful mainstream populations or to groups which are regarded as upper class or so far above the mainstream that they set ideals for the mainstream population.

THE AMERICAN LITERARY COMMUNITY

My current research focuses on language as the core of being literate and is an attempt to study both "up" and "down." I have begun first to examine the American literary community—those authors who have been anthologized, taught in American literature courses, and who have been recognized critically as the major literary figures of our history. In addition, I am looking at historical and contemporary communities which contain members who self-consciously make themselves literate: immigrants, women, or marginal groups who have through individual quests sought ways beyond formal schooling to improve and expand their literate behaviors. In this work, I expect to identify the environmental contexts and sources of motivation that lead people to become fully literate and link these contexts and sources to our current knowledge about the extent to which such factors affect human thinking and potential. These two phases of a long-term research plan were, however, interrupted by my daughter's accident. Through my involvement in her rehabilitation process, I have been able to identify several specific environmental and motivational features which have seemed to play a central role in her regaining intellectual functioning and literate behaviors. I tie similarities in environmental contexts and motivational features from her case to the historical and anthropological findings.

First—the literary community—the authors in American literature. In any society with a written literature, authors are to some extent set apart from the rest of society and tend to have special views about language and their own role in the setting of language values in the society as a whole. Society, and formal education institutions in particular, reinforce the view that "real authors"—those who provide the canonized literature collected in anthologies, taught in literature courses, and lauded by elite critics—are set apart, not only from the rest of society, but from other mere writers as well. Roland Barthes distinguishes "authors" from "writers" in much the same way that William Carlos Williams characterizes those who write "literature." They are captured by a fire that is fed by talk about that writing and by the public's view that they are to be set apart from the rest of us.

Some current literary theorists characterize the evolution of language in literature since the early 19th century as a reconstitution in which literature has separated itself from other language by forming a "counter discourse"—a discourse which is meant to be separate from that of ordinary language. Other

dominant voices in literary theory go even further and maintain that society accepts literary discourse as something more than what it says—the locus of the "ultimate" in language—while recognizing that it draws its essence from the texts of everyday experience. Literature is then both apart from everyday language and experience and dependent upon it. In some societies, including some modern European nations, the literary community has an identity and visibility which place writers close to the center of national existence and national values. In the United States, since Emerson's announcement of the profession of authorhood in the 1830s, the literary community has not greatly increased its size, productivity, or readership. The community's relation to society at large has remained unclear, and the values which hold it together often seem at variance with norms and practices widespread in the society. In particular, the members' beliefs about language and the sacred duty of the members of the community to cherish their beliefs and pass them on to succeeding generations are central to the self-identity of the literary community but find resonance in the nation at large only in oblique ways. The majority join William Carlos Williams' well-meaning admirers and say "We're proud of you" or "Geeze, I guess it's all right but what the hell does it mean?" Authors are lauded and prized but they feel their writing is not widely understood.

In the 1830s, the initiation of the profession of authorship in the United States coincided with the first declarations of literary independence by writers such as William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Fenimore Cooper. These efforts by writers and publishers replaced earlier short-lived attempts by educators and political elites to establish national institutions, such as the American Academy of Language and Belles Lettres (1820), designed to promote American literary efforts and to provide for national greatness in language (see Heath, 1976). But the force which historian Michael Kammen has termed "collective individualism" in American life (1972) prevailed in language and literary choice, and the development and promotion of prescriptive language standards fell primarily to members of the literary community, isolated in Emerson's terms "by truth and by . . . art" from the reading public. Educational institutions, especially through the English curriculum of universities, colleges, and secondary schools, promoted American literature and expanded awareness of the uses of language in literary discourse for those in society who wished to consider themselves "educated" or "literate."

Study of what these American writers have written about their writing tells us of their own sense of how their work constitutes a linguistic "reconstitution" of ordinary language. To what extent do views about language and actual uses of language determine membership or gatekeeping functions within the literary community? What values do members hold about language? To what extent are these transmitted from past community members, and how do past values get changed? What uses of language or views about using language do members of this group hold? Does the literary community sometimes deliberately retreat from views and uses of language which become widespread in society? Though I have been able to spend only a relatively short time sifting through the sources of evidence—unpublished writings and published letters, diaries, and notes of American authors, I can provide some early answers to these questions.

First, it is quite clear that members of this community see a focus on language *per se* as an important ingredient of authorship. From Emerson's "Essay on Language" to Gertrude Stein's essays on narratives or lectures on grammar, to John Updike's critical essays on genre and linguistic conventions, all those authors whose writings I have examined have a strong metalinguistic sense of language. They believe that the medium of writing—language itself—is an issue and a theme for authors, and such feelings enable them to use language as an effective instrument of expression. Their concerns for language range from such grand issues as the aesthetics of expression to smaller points such as linguistic adaptation (the choice of words to represent new phenomena in the environment or society), the origin of words, sentence forms, and genre conventions, and the relation of "real conversation" to that represented by authors.

Some of the concerns of past authors have foreshadowed in numerous ways some current areas of interest for linguists and other social scientists who focus on language. Washington Irving, for example, wrote often in his notes or diary wondering why he was writing these notes or daily entries if he did not expect someone to read them. He debated with himself the importance of a sense of audience for any writing and the merits of self-writing, that is, writing only to be able to see one's thoughts on paper but not to communicate these thoughts to others. Such concerns are at the heart of not only the work of anthropologists who debate the interrelatedness of speaking, writing, and thinking, but also the research of cognitive psychologists who attempt to study what goes on inside the head by hearing or seeing what comes out as language.

The move of authors away from the established forms and genres of Great Britain and the continent in the 1830s, coupled with Transcendentalist debates over inspiration and craftsmanship in writing, led off the first serious American authorial attention to language per se. Emerson considered linguistic topics such as the source of convention or "laws" in language, the extent to which "ordinary speech" could (and should) be written, and the art of conversation versus the art of the essay. Edgar Allan Poe also considered the source of "rules of language" and proposed that grammar be a descriptive analysis of language, not an adaptation of the rules of Latin and Greek. In many ways, his views anticipate not only those of modern linguists but also those of modernist poets: he rejected some established patterns of English meter and verse and argued instead for the natural rhythms of speech. "The language of common speech" was a topic addressed, each in an individual way, by Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, James Russell Lowell, and Emily Dickinson in the nineteenth century. Henry James, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams have, in the twentieth century, given a great amount of attention to language as a topic, its forms, uses, and values, and the need for serious consideration of language by the literary artist.

Since the 1950s, various American literary rebellions have fought against prior forms, aesthetics, and traditions. Poets have not only lashed out against "traditional" forms, but have also chosen as their topics private anguish, individual mental journeys, and extended examinations of what history has made of the nation. Fiction writers have turned to nonrepresentational fiction or fantasy, and elaborate strategies to make language refer to itself, to focus attention not so much on the narrative story line as on the writing and the words. Others such as Raymond Carver seem to have turned to sheer chronicling of human unresponsiveness and sameness, so much so that it is not the writers but the critics who try to tell readers there are unique characters and real feeling in those pieces. In Carver's classic story "Popular Mechanics," a separating mother and father quarrel angrily about who will get to keep their baby, then attempt to yank the

child from each other's grip. We read

> She felt her fingers being forced open. She felt the baby going from her.
> "No!" she screamed just as her hands came loose.
> She would have it, this baby. She grabbed for the baby's other arm. She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back. But he would not let go.

The story ends a sentence later, with the words "In this manner, the issue was decided." The theme is, in Benjamin DeMott's words, "the death of fellow-feeling" (1984). It is a theme however played out by current writers who say that in their writing they strip their language of feeling, of attachment to representation. The emptiness of cocktail party chatter ("We skied cross country," "I dated a musician," "Different people came,") marks their uninflected writing. It is still the case, then, that even in modern fiction which differs in numerous ways from its predecessors, the focused attention of writers on their language comes in part from the attempt to strip ordinary language of the nonverbal cues and interrelationships which give it meaning in life. Hence it moves counter to the ordinary. By piling up the empty phrases of daily interaction, such writers intensely communicate that much of ordinary discourse fails to communicate. Here, the "ultimate" in language becomes ordinary speech stripped to its barest structure and of its communal function—to facilitate human interaction.

A second finding from my work is the consistent attention which authors give to their selection and use of words in any type of writing they do, and not just in their literary writing. For those authors I have studied, all writing merits attention to word choice, the author's concern to "get it right," and the author's sustained awareness that writing is permanent. These concerns are evident, even when materials are written only for the author, who has expressed the desire that no one else see this writing. The recent publication by Susan Cheever of work based on her father's private notes makes it clear that John Cheever shared this characteristic with the earlier writers whose work I have studied. From Washington Irving to John Cheever, then, American authors have attended to their writing, even when they believed such writing was only for themselves and for no one else.

A third finding, and a curious one, is the reluctance and perhaps even inability of many, though not all, American authors to engage in casual *talk* about the bare mechanics of their writing. I refer here not to the content of their works, but to the actual techniques they use in their writing. It has only been since the 1950s, when the majority of serious successful American authors have found an uneasy home in university or college English departments, that this characteristic has been somewhat altered. Now authors must talk about their writing to college students, on the college lecture circuit, and to suburban book clubs. Prior to the 1950s, the majority of authors did not choose to talk about the craft or art of their own writing; they might talk of its content or its reception by the public or by critics, but they did not talk of their own ways of manipulating words, sentence structure, or dialogue. Gertrude Stein, in her lectures in America, is, of course, an outstanding exception to this characteristic, as was William Carlos Williams in his later years. However, these two authors stand out among American authors as individuals who made public their views about the mechanics of their own language uses.

If we scan the volumes of the Paris Review Interviews *(Writers at Work),* we find very few of these interviews in which American writers (unlike British writers) talk about the words, sentences, paragraphs, and genre forms they use.

Writers "usually seem glad to talk of anything but the business of writing" is the assessment of Van Wyck Brooks (Plimpton, 1963, p. 2). Thus, with the exception of those who served also as critics (Robert Lowell, for example), we find little talk about the mechanics of language, or what today's educators value as literacy skills. Writers show a great exactness of thought and speech, but, whether they find writing difficult or easy, they prefer to discuss their subjects rather than their form. They may talk of revision or their need to perfect each paragraph, each sentence, either as they go along or when they have finished their work, but they mention these bits and pieces of the bricks of their final construction only in passing when they talk of their work. Other writers tell us that writing must be fun, and pausing over each word removes this quality; still others, such as William Stryon, do correct each word as they go and so cannot enjoy writing, though they feel completely self-possessed only when they are writing.

BECOMING LITERATE—THEN AND NOW

Let us turn now to the second area of my research, designed to try to answer the question "Has the definition of literacy or the way one becomes literate changed, and if so, in what ways?" Answers come from ordinary readers and writers within the American population across the decades. We want to examine individuals becoming literate in their communities, their views of language and its uses, and the symbolic meanings reading and writing have for them. To capture historically how the literates' definition of themselves has changed, one must have comparable individuals or groups across historical periods and from contemporary communities as well. In studying literates, the researcher has to follow primarily what historian Robert Darnton (1984) calls the "high road of intellectual history" (p. 3)—that road which is dependent on written documents left by elites and their institutions.

For both members of the literary community and their readers from the upper classes, I have had to depend primarily on written sources, which, more often than not, they themselves wrote and selected for deposit as archival evidence of their ways of believing, valuing, and behaving. Across the country, local libraries hold the unpublished papers of past generations of locally prominent and elite families. However, it is difficult indeed to find extensive written materials left by those from middle and working classes who might have either imitated the literate patterns of the elite or created their own ways of being literate. Archives of neither their workplaces nor their voluntary associations have retained records which enable us to sort out those who self-consciously found ways to expand their literate habits. But there are some few ways of learning indirectly what the habits of these readers and writers might have been. Etiquette manuals and sources on childrearing, as well as library, city, and school records prepared for the young and the immigrant newcomer, tell us much about what citizens of past times believed individuals should do to become literate. Used carefully with more direct sources, these materials can give a view of children and adults reading and writing in earlier decades of American history (for a discussion of the use of such records by historical sociolinguists, see Heath, 1978).

I report here briefly on the findings from only two such sources of data—one historical, the other contemporary. The first is the case of Francis Lieber, a German immigrant who came to the United States with the Generation of 1848. He came to America as a swimming instructor, and only by strenuous self-

education did he obtain a position as a political philosopher at the University of South Carolina. He was the first editor of the *Encyclopedia Americana*. I was fortunate enough to find at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, a cache of 15 volumes of notes Lieber prepared on language in the United States. His notes were drawn from his careful listening and close observations of conversations and his own extensive reading of newspapers from Great Britain and the United States. To become an acceptable writer and conversationalist, he studied the uses of language across dialects, informal and formal occasions, and in a variety of written forms. He noted numerous characteristics of American literates, such as their acceptance of abbreviations in spoken English but their resistance to such forms in writing. He took careful note of many other characteristics of American language, and he distinguished uses of these forms as they varied from context to context. He also took note of linguistic evidence for processes which only modern language scientists have named—pidginization, simplification, and adaptation—and he strenuously argued against the notion that simplicity of grammatical form should be equated with simplicity of cognitive development and abilities (Heath, 1982a).

Lieber not only wrote about these ideas, but he debated them orally with friends and members of his family. He gave considerable time to oral debate with anyone who would listen to his talk about not only language, but also the ways in which ideas were presented by literary and political authors. He self-consciously worked to make himself an American literate, and, in doing so, he focused on the language of American writers as well as what he saw as the raw materials of these writers—the ordinary talk by any American. He chronicled his views of this talk, contrasted ways American writers rendered dialogue and conversation with those of British and continental writers, and concluded that American writers had to be in some deep way highly self-conscious about language in order to write.

In this respect, Lieber's views were similar to those of native-born, self-conscious literates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, "conversation clubs," which began among leisured upper-class women in the United States in the early nineteenth century, before women had access to formal education, fostered their members' close attention to the language of American authors. In these conversational groups, a different literary work was the focus of each meeting, and under the direction of one of their own members, the women discussed their reading. Louis Auchincloss has recently described this phenomenon in his novel *The Book Club*. These clubs still survive in some parts of the United States among upper- and middle-class women, though as more and more of such women either work outside the home or participate extensively in volunteer work, these clubs are dying out. Specific records of the clubs are scant, because their major aim was to provide an opportunity for women to talk about their reading. The letters among women in these clubs and interviews with remaining members make clear that these women self-consciously regarded these clubs as occasions to sharpen their own skills with language by talking about the language of writers. In the nineteenth century, frequent letter-writing to other female readers and talk in local conversation clubs were among the primary opportunities women had for developing skills of debate, argument, and exposition. When they can be found, assessments of the relative writing abilities of men and women in the general population, as well as their critical thinking talents, placed women ahead of men in both areas. Those who offered judgments on the causes of this differential suggested that time in conversation which could be highly argumentative without special regard for social convention gave women the edge (see Heath, 1982b). In addition, women gave extensive attention to language per se in their child-rearing practices and dictates regarding etiquette for the young. Such materials provide data for comparison with the practices of current mainstream families aspiring to help their children become literate.

My ethnographies of communication in the mainstream black and white neighborhoods which surrounded two working-class communities, Trackton and Roadville, have attempted to ferret out early socialization practices and values which might lie behind being literate (Heath, 1983). In these contemporary mainstream communities which consider themselves "highly literate," such special occasions as "conversation clubs" for talk about works of literature have been replaced by other types of reading behaviors. Child-rearing practices have also shifted the means of becoming literate for the young. The preschool years provide what seems to be far more time and a greater variety of activities surrounding book reading; the school years provide fewer occasions for literature-reading than they did in the past, and social pressure for literary interests by those aspiring to upward socioeconomic mobility is much reduced.

Adults read reviews of books and buy "imperialistic" novels—works of 500 pages plus, usually in paperback or through book clubs. However, they rarely read all the way through these books. They rarely read poetry, but adults name short stories, novels, and historical biographies as their favorite choices for leisure reading. Neither adults nor children return to literary classics, except those associated with holiday seasons, such as Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Those who have jobs which require long hours of driving listen to tapes of contemporary fiction and regard such knowledge as topics for talk in casual social interactions. On such occasions, talk about sports events, movies, and television programs takes precedence, with talk of contemporary fiction considered appropriate when based only on reviews of the work. Unlike discussion of politics or religion, these topics can engender discussion without the risk of challenging the judgments zealously held by others.

Adults in mainstream homes prepare their children for being literate in numerous ways. The early years of childhood in these homes surround children with books, with attention given less and less to "classical" children's literature. Books which are favored are those which can be read in one sitting, and "modern" authors, especially those given named awards, such as the Caldecott award, are preferred. Adults read to their children from the time they are toddlers, stopping often to ask questions about the illustrations, words, and events of the text. Books come into the home from the library, as well as from relatives and friends at birthdays and Christmas. Between the ages of two and three, children become question-askers, initiating mock routines in which they "read" to adults and ask them questions about pictures or story content. Children also link the books' contents with their own lives, asking questions such as "Is there a monster in my closet?" Religious events and voluntary associations provide similar occasions, in which the children and an adult interact around a text, and the goal is to negotiate an agreed-upon meaning for the text.

From an early age, these children expect books and talk about books to be a normal basis for the interaction of adults and children. When they reach school age, adults continue to emphasize the values of reading, the merits of visits to the library, and the retention of written materials which will serve as resources for future projects. For adults, both at home and at work, there is an almost continuous use of written material as a topic or backdrop for talk. Children learn there are different reasons for reading—to guide actions, to reinforce opinions,

and, most important, to provide information which will be the basis of subsequent talk. Children learn they should not interpret some texts literally, for their placement in the frame of a fantasy experience disconnects these texts from a strict adherence to real-world rules. Written materials have a context of their own which disengages them from literal linkages to objects, people, and events of the real world.

In addition, children before they reach school have an awareness of different literary styles available in books intended for young children. My ethnographic research in these homes concurs with the experimental work of Georgia Green which shows that 5-year-old mainstreamers have the ability to appreciate and discriminate among the literary styles—both the illustrations and the verbal features of texts—available in books intended for young children (1981). Though it is probably impossible to prove beyond a doubt that what children attend to in noting the differences of literary style are the fine details of the language, or the "wordcraft" and the genre forms, the evidence mounts that it is precisely this attention to language which enables them to make such distinctions. Children in the first three primary grades cannot find such distinctions in the stories of their basal readers. The constraints imposed by the publishers on sentence length, vocabulary, and story length have insured that these are devoid of most characteristics of literary style; hence, that which makes writings literary—special uses of language—has been removed from the materials given children in school.

In mainstream homes, both their own book reading and the reading of adults they observe enable these children to act like literates before they can read. Thinking and talking about reading during repeated and varied occasions reinforce the types of talk children use to describe both their current and planned activities. These uses of language can be divided into at least six genres (see Heath, forthcoming, for fuller discussion):

Label quests: These are occasions in which adults either name items or ask for their names. With very young children, adults name the item, usually pointing to it or holding it in front of the child. As children learn to say words, adults ask "What's this?," "Who's that?" Label quests include not only the names of items, but their attributes as well. While reading a book to a young child, the mother may say "giraffe, giraffe, funny-looking fellow with a long neck, isn't he?" When children can talk, adults question them about the names and attributes of items pictured or named in books.

Meaning quests: Within this genre, adults either infer what the young child means or ask for explanations of what is intended. The mother may say of the baby's cry "You're hungry," may explain away an action by saying "You're tired, aren't you?," or may ask a child to explain a book's character as intending to be mean or playful, mysterious or bold. Adults make inferences about the meaning of children's statements as they restate "Dog, mama, dog" into "You want the new book about Sparky's dog, is that it?"

Recounts: This genre is prompted by adults' requests that children retell experiences or information known to both teller and listener. As children retell, they may be questioned by the listener who wants to scaffold the telling in a certain way. For example, adults ask children to repeat stories they have heard read to them or to tell third parties about an outing they have had with a parent. The prompt for such recounts is usually a question: "Can you tell Daddy about the book the dentist gave you today?" During the child's recounting of the events

known to another party, the adult corrects the telling when it begins to veer from events as the adult remembers them.

Accounts: Unlike recounts, which depend upon a power differential—one party asks another to retell or perform for the sake of performance—accounts are generated by the teller. Thus power resides initially in the teller rather than in another person who will serve as judging audience. Accounts provide new information or new interpretations of information which may already be known to both teller and listener. Examples include children telling parents about events enjoyed or a story heard at a friend's house. Listeners judge accounts not only by their truth value—could this have happened?—but also by the organization of the telling. If the teller follows what the audience expects as a "logical" telling, the account will be accepted; if the organization of the telling seems chaotic and unpredictable in structure, the listener will discount the event as well as its telling.

Eventcasts: This genre provides a running narrative on events currently in the attention of the teller and listeners; the narrative may be simultaneous with the events or precede them. A mother may narrate as she changes a child's diaper the events which will then ensue: "We'll have our lunch, and then we'll get some clean clothes on, and then we'll go to the grocery store." As children grow older, they provide eventcasts during their solitary play, talking aloud to themselves about what they are doing or pretend reading a book they have read with an adult. In their dramatic play, they eventcast as they tell their friends who will play certain roles, what identities certain objects will assume, and how the script for the dramatic play in the pretend kitchen, battlefield, or doctor's office will go. Adults model eventcasts as they ask children to project ahead what will happen to characters in a book's story or how characters might have done something differently in order to alter the plot of the story. Through eventcasts children project actions into the future and verbalize plans for scenes and events in which objects and people will be involved. Eventcasts around books enable adults to present children with concrete evidence—the book's words and pictures—which they need to consider when creating plans for future scenes or events which will involve the characters of the story.

Stories: Fictionalized narratives which include some animate being who moves through a series of events with goal-directed behavior (cf. Stein, 1982) constitute this genre. Parents tell children stories they remember from their youth, read to children from "storybooks," and may insure that children come to know stories associated with great religious traditions. Adults elaborate factual accounts to make them "good stories" and sometimes link these stories to those found in books. They ask children to create their own stories by fictionalizing events of their life.

In school, the gradation of talk about books is such that label quests and recounts receive the greatest amount of attention in the primary grades as well as at the lowest levels in not only language arts classes, but in the study of science, social studies, and other subjects as well. Meaning quests, which allow for individual interpretation and inferencing, appear as soon as teachers and tests judge that children are successful with label quests and recounts—terms and summaries of material known to teacher and fellow students. Only in the most "literate" of classes—those at the upper end of the academic spectrum—do accounts, eventcasts, and stories told or written in connection with textbooks and other written sources occur. At these highest levels of ability grouping and in

higher education, teachers ask students for interpretation, their valuation of events on the basis of their experiences, and their creation of knowledge through research.

REPLAYING EARLY LITERATE SOCIALIZATION IN FAST FORWARD

What conclusions—tentative and initial though they may be—can I draw from these historical and contemporary explorations into the habits of literate groups or communities? Ironically, I come to the same conclusion which followed from a survey of reports of the retained effects of literacy programs around the world that I carried out several years ago. Two environmental features surrounded the new literates who retained literacy once the program and its teachers left the area. One was the provision of opportunities for those who could read and write to *talk* about what they had read or wanted to write. A second was the establishment and maintenance of *institutions* outside the home which promoted talk about written materials. Without both of these, new literates did not retain their skills in reading and writing, and they also seemed unable to transfer information obtained from written sources to new situations.

Tentative conclusions then from the study of literary authors and those who self-consciously seek to become literate readers lead me to my third area of concern—the environment and habits of writers and their literate readers. What can we learn from them which might better enable us to unravel the meaning of being literate in America? It is quite clear that those who would be literates must have extended and repeated opportunities to talk about what they have read, as well as a strong motivation to focus on the craft or art of the writings they have read. This focus on not only *what* pieces of writing mean but *how* they give meaning seems necessary because authors do not use language in ordinary ways—because their language is a counter discourse to that of ordinary talk. Thus talk about the language is the way of attaching meaning to the non-ordinary discourse. The language of literature needs special cognitive, perceptual, and mnemonic skills which must be developed orally. These skills, moreover, do not easily become automated, and they need repeated and continued opportunities for display.

These historical and anthropological findings were brought home to me in a traumatic way through my eighteen-year-old daughter's accident in which she suffered severe head injuries. Soon after the accident, doctors and rehabilitation therapists said that the higher intellectual functions would be lost to her—the functions associated with literate behavior: analogical reasoning, verbalization about abstract topics, quick and ready skills in conversation, and sustained focus in writing exposition and narrative. During her five days of coma and nearly three weeks of post-traumatic amnesia, before rehabilitation personnel began working with her, I talked or read to her hour after hour. I gave accounts of events in which she had participated, asked her questions about events or people that I did not know well, and read her familiar and new stories. Her first day out of the coma, I asked her to write; she printed at first and then gradually replayed a child's movement to early script; within a week or so, she was able to produce the handwriting which had been characteristic of her just before the accident. She wrote something each day, single words at first and later a summary of the day's events; only after several months of such written recounts did she add an affective

assessment of her day's activities. Before the accident, she had been a competitive swimmer; as soon as she returned to swimming, her coach asked her and other team members to write daily notes on their swimming and to provide an assessment of each day's workout. He collected the notebooks and responded weekly in writing; this notebook and the many letters she began writing to her friends soon after she came out of the hospital provided opportunities for her to receive written responses to her writing.

Once she was well enough to work with rehabilitation personnel, they focused on labels and recounts, testing her long-term memory for names and her short-term memory for immediate events; she had few occasions to give them accounts, eventcasts, or stories. The relatively scant medical literature on head-injured patients gave primary attention to discussion of cases in which fully functional or high-level recovery did not seem possible because of the entensive loss of brain cells, which do not regenerate as do other cells in the human body. However, recent medical research also pointed repeatedly to brain and neuronal plasticity and regenerative capacity (for a brief review of this literature, see chapter 4 of Lerner, 1984). Furthermore, this literature suggested that experience and contextual influences could stimulate dendritic branching (e.g., Greenough & Green, 1981; Lynch & Gall, 1979). I devised a plan to replay in fast-forward motion the early literate socialization my daughter had had as a child. Since the rehabilitation personnel focused on labels and recounts, I focused on filling out the range of other genres for her. For as many occasions as possible in the six months following her accident, members of her family gave her opportunities to eventcast, provide accounts, and hear and tell stories. We tried to surround all of her activities with a literate or intellectual approach, in which she talked aloud of the processes through which she moved, how she felt about what she was doing, and what the current action or surroundings reminded her of. The scheme was as follows:

Action or event (recount)
↓
Process (account)
↓
Components (labeling)
↓
Meaning (meaning quest)
↓
Subsequent action or Parallels (eventcasts, stories, or accounts)

Thus for each action or event, either she or another member of the family would provide a recount; we would then ask her to give an account focusing on the process of that action or event. Following this interpretation of the past event, we would engage in a conversation which called attention to components of the event which we labeled or asked her to name. We then talked about the meaning(s) of the event and finally planned ahead or reminded ourselves of the similarity of this event to others in the past or to literary versions of such events.

When following this scheme became too routine for daily activities, we focused on literary writings. Initially, I tried reports of current events or nature essays; however, Shannon saw talk about the language of these pieces as pointless and quickly grew impatient. We turned then to literature, beginning with "The Bath," a short story by Raymond Carver about a child who has a head injury. We moved on to other short literary pieces, supplementing our talk about these with audiotapes of readings by writers of their own works. Now, six months later, she can continue this process as she studies literature and begins to write expository essays in her first attempts to resume taking college classes.

The building—or rebuilding—of the literate behaviors she had before the injury will continue for several years, but she surpassed in the first six months the highest expectations of any of the medical personnel within the acute rehabilitation unit which had served her. In her first set of mental status tests, given five months after the accident, she excelled in reasoning abstractly, logically analyzing complex problems, and developing hypotheses regarding the solution to problems.

Medical research often reports results from a single case; reading researchers rarely do. Hence, some apologies are in order for reporting this case of one; because we have no control cases, we do not know whether or not the fast-forward replaying of Shannon's early literate socialization had a significant role in her outstanding recovery. However, there is considerable support from neuropsychological research to suggest that within the human brain, there is a dissociation of language from the higher cognitive associative operations; thus, simply having the language with which to perform these operations is not sufficient. Repetition of specific kinds of language uses is needed to make these cognitive operations automatic. Gazzaniga and Smylie (1984) report that when "increased abstraction of language stimuli is required, these demands are met not by the language system itself, but rather by other cognitive systems that carry out computations on the language stimuli. In this view, the 'language system' is considered to be a 'dumb' system that acts more as a simple data structure system" (p. 152). The power of experience and environment, plus the strong will of the individual to value these cognitive operations, are needed to promote specific types of cognitive processing. In Shannon's rehabilitation, we replayed in fast-forward motion her early literate socialization. As a child, she had had multiple opportunities to focus both concretely and abstractly on her own and others' activities as well as on stories and factual content in books; we had repeatedly called on her to label and explain actions, events, and feelings and to fictionalize herself and link her experiences to those given in books. For her relearning, the coordinated bundling of all of these activities renewed not only the raw structures of language but also the cognitive habits which identified her as an individual of literate behaviors and high-level intellectual functioning.

In sorting out how language processes influence cognitive, perceptual, and mnemonic skills, what seems to be critically important is the detection of associations between what something is and how it came to be, as well as between one process and another and one result or event and another. The cognitive and linguistic work necessary to recognize and explicate associations of both dynamic processes and static conditions of events should become automatic, since non-automatized learning requires considerable central processing capacity. The linking of conditions and processes of events—or, in our terms, of labels and recounts with meaning quests, accounts, and eventcasts—helps reinforce the automaticity of strategies for assessing new situations and for bringing to bear relevant old information or practices.

Moreover, texts which not only carry information about the real world but also are constructed so that the reader must attend to the language as medium force the reader to consider how meaning is transmitted. Literary texts which demand that the reader attend to their language slow down the reader's rush to gather information from the text and encourage talk about the language per se. Literature provides a wide range of opportunities to explore association or covariation of not only language uses but also real-world events. It is this link of life to

literature which promotes the associative skills behind the inferencing which makes literate readers, writers, and speakers.

The skills demonstrated orally and corrected or guided in adult-child interactions are those which promote development of the ability to recognize that similarities of behaviors do not occur by chance; they are patterned in coordination with places, times, events, and people. The full complement of cognitive skills associated with literate behaviors—and writing about written texts, reasoning about the actions, assumptions, and associations of those texts—seems to require certain types of occasions or uses of language. The activities of language which illustrate the facilitation of thought of an associative type depend on certain types of opportunities for talk about texts. Such early "literate" behaviors are then, or can be, transferred to other types of interpretive situations in which focus must be on the bits and pieces of the situation.

CONCLUSIONS

For those groups or individuals who do not have such occasions to talk about what and how meanings are achieved in written materials, important cognitive or interpretive skills which are basic to being literate do not develop. This denial has not always been the case. If we examine the origins of the English curriculum in American schools, these points seem to have been recognized: that is, early descriptions of the English class emphasize the need for students to focus on the art and craft of writing in order that they might develop—in both their written and oral abilities—facility in following *both* the development of ideas and the uses of language by those recognized as literary geniuses. Gradually, the opportunity for talk and for extended debate about interpretation was lost. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, standardized tests pushed alternative views of texts aside. In the twentieth century, literature for the masses of students in public education met with resistance, and literature teachers responded by reducing the interpretation of literature more and more to terms of literary analysis, identification of genre forms, and specification of universal themes of human life.

The historian Daniel Calhoun (1973) has said, "Ability that is exercised in successful practice hardly needs a specially devised audience to prove itself. Ability that is being threatened by larger developments may need to separate itself off, and seek out some means of being tested as formal intelligence" (p. 255). What happened to literary discourse—that is, talk about literature—was that as opportunities for successful practice declined, these abilities had to be separated off and measured as formal intelligence. I have detailed elsewhere (1982b) how oratory and conversation declined as standardized language arts curricula, essayist composition, basal readers, and standardized tests came to dominate what happened in school. The essay, along with tests and standardized language arts curricula, cut out alternatives and playfulness with ideas about language and literature and reduced former topics of discussion in classrooms to right and wrong answers and to the terminology of describing literature. Being literate became not a playful talking relation among readers talking about their reading but, instead, a separation of literary interpretation into identifiable bits and pieces. The future became, as far as intellectual development was concerned, one of training people to seek answers rather than to accept greater and greater

degrees of intellectual complexity in an articulate debating community. Verbal thinking that could seize reality in wholes came to exist only outside the classroom, and for the majority of those who would achieve the distinction of being "literate," the primary contexts were the home and voluntary associations.

Within mainstream school-oriented society, written literature presents the most intense and earliest opportunities for focusing perceptual and cognitive skills on language itself. Literature is appropriate because it is not life—it is not reality, but it is about reality, and it is thus one degree removed from talking about oneself or one's immediate environment. Literature does not mandate a specific course of action; it may provide morals or aphorisms, but to be carried into action, association must be made and a variety of inferences carried out on the relations between the items, characters, and events of the text and those of one's own life. Thus, it is possible to focus on text without ensuing action. Moreover, because the language of literature is non-ordinary, a counter discourse, it gives us not only those opportunities Jack Goody long ago (1968) identified for writing per se—the ability to hold constant for examination the word itself—but it also focuses our attention on the words as words, on language as such, and facilitates our attending to minutiae within the stream of communicative text.

Where do these findings leave us? We have since the 1960s endorsed a "different but not deficient" approach to understanding non-mainstream groups—or in the context of my remarks here, groups which may have achieved literacy skills but have not become literate. We have trained out of our thinking and our speech many of the "slips" which in the past reflected our parents' prejudices and perceptions of those who were different from us in background. But we now face the difficulty that as our research, especially that of social historians and anthropologists, has brought scholars to a closer and closer analysis of the ways of living, thinking, perceiving, and valuing of these groups within our own society, we have to say that different *is* deficient—deficient, that is, for success as literates in mainstream institutions.

We as scholars have to admit that we have not fully explicated what is sufficient for success as literates in mainstream institutions. What is sufficient for enabling individuals to acquire the literate behaviors which can affect life choices and provide chances for upward socioeconomic mobility? First, individuals must have the motivation and be able to develop a self-conscious sense of themselves as literate. To do this, if there are no models in the home, there must be other primary or face-to-face models who achieve some degree of intimacy with the individual. There must then be sustained occasions for practice of talk and writing—and a lot of both—about meanings of texts which do not demand action. Such texts are most commonly available as literary works; the talk which surrounds them must include analogous accounts, eventcasts, and stories—the genres which allow the creation of associations and the practice of numerous types of inferences based on attending to the language of the literary text itself.

We recognize that the kinds of participation structures identified here with literate behaviors represent only a small portion of the range of oral and written behaviors possible across the different cultural and social groups in the United States. Many other types merit recognition and, no doubt, more incorporation in schooling and other mainstream settings. However, the historical development of schooling in America and especially the current focus on literacy skills have determined that the small range identified here will be expected of upper-level and advanced classes in schools and elite institutions. As researchers, then, we have an obligation to do a better job of explicating these behaviors to make them

available to a wider range of students. In the past, we have tended to focus only on basic and literacy skills that do not in reality provide access to the broadest possible range of perceptual and cognitive skills. If we continue to push only literacy skills, we guarantee that the schools will not take responsibility for helping develop literate behaviors. By not acknowledging and explicating the characteristics of the linguistic and cultural capital necessary for mainstream entry, educators have been ruthless in shutting out portions of society who in their early language socialization have not had models and opportunities for literate behaviors. Currently, being literate in America is in large part something one cannot learn in school; one can only practice it there.

There are those who say that it will take a major restructuring of society to alter this fact. I am afraid it will take something perhaps even more difficult—the restructuring of what can happen in classrooms. There is abundant evidence that teachers who are given sufficient support and information about alternative and expanded ways of facilitating learning and who are given a sense of being independent professionals *can* promote the learning of literate behaviors, and one teacher is all it often takes to make the difference in a student's choices. Ken Macrorie's book *Twenty Teachers* (1984) indicates that in the case of each one of these good teachers, one teacher or mentor made the difference. Surveys of individuals from non-mainstream backgrounds who have "made it" into decision-making positions in mainstream institutions reveal that each of these individuals credits one person—usually a teacher—for "turning them on" to becoming literate. However, as long as teachers remain the victims of blame, as well as the workhorses given responsibility for transmitting literacy, they will follow the predictable human responses of withdrawing—leaving teaching—or simply taking the easy way out and teaching by the "teacher-proof" texts and tests they are given. Teachers need support and freedom to experiment. Any education researchers who have seriously worked collaboratively with classroom teachers will be able to testify to the differences their attention, input, and concern have made in teachers' self-confidence and commitment to continue.

I opened these comments with a portion of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* and his dismal assessment of the non-literate—the one who could focus only on the details of life which surrounded the doctor-poet. Williams tells us "Talk fans the flames" of the literary artist's fire; it is not the artists' talk he refers to, but the talk of their readers. Williams says elsewhere that writing and the work of authors "make the stores of the mind available." Available, yes, but only to those who have the appropriate environmental circumstances for the talk and self-conscious focusing on language which opens the stores of the mind. For schools to open these stores, researchers must recognize that the current societal and research focus on *literacy* locks not only researchers, but also future generations of students, away from the meaning of being literate. If we continue to keep our attention only on what is *basic,* we will have to take responsibility for allowing many students to leave schools able to say only "Geeze, Doc, I guess it's all right but what the hell does it mean?"

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