

**56th Yearbook of the
National Reading Conference**

Edited by

**Deborah Wells Rowe
Robert T. Jiménez**

**Donald L. Compton
David K. Dickinson
Youb Kim
Kevin M. Leander
Victoria J. Risko**
Vanderbilt University

With the editorial assistance of

**Brad L. Teague
Julie Ellison Justice**
Vanderbilt University

Nancy J. Short, *Executive Director*
Technical Enterprises, Inc.

Jenny Kasza, *Editor*
Technical Enterprises, Inc.

Michelle Majerus-Uelmen, *Graphic Designer*
Technical Enterprises, Inc.

Published by
National Reading Conference, Inc.
Oak Creek, Wisconsin

2007

What's It All About? Literacy Research and Civic Responsibility

Victoria Purcell-Gates

University of British Columbia

As my term as your President draws to a close, I want to speak with you today about a topic much larger than my own research or any particular strand of research that has been and will be presented here at our NRC 2006. Along with all of the organizational responsibilities that the NRC President faces and struggles with over the year, the position of President also positions one to step back and view the field of literacy and literacy research as a whole and in relationship to other human endeavors. My experiences this year, as well as this impending Presidential Address, led me to examine that age-old question, "What's It All About?" Specifically, what's the purpose of all of this research endeavor? The doing of literacy research consumes an incredible amount of our time. How many hours a week do each of you spend on writing research proposals? Collecting data? Running research meetings? Analyzing data? Writing conference proposals? Preparing conference presentations? Writing research results up for publication? Rewriting research results for publication? I suppose we could all play a game with each other called, "Who Spends The Most Time on Research?" But the point is that we all spend an *incredible* amount of time, effort, money, and intellectual struggle and commitment doing what we do: Literacy research, research on reading and writing, and, quoting from the present list of NRC research areas: Pre-Service Teacher Education and Literacy; In-service Teacher Education and Literacy, Literacy Instruction and Literacy Learning, Literacy Assessment; Early and Elementary Literacy Processes; Adolescent, College, and Adult Literacy; Social, Cultural, and Political Issues of Literacy Practice; Literacy Learning and Practice in Multilingual and Multicultural Settings; Text Analysis/Child, Young Adult, and Adult Literature; and Literacy, Technology, and Media.

As to my question, "What's It All About?" there are various ways to answer this, and each of us will have a slightly different take on why we do what we do. Clearly, it's partly about tenure and promotion. Equally, it's about doing what's expected of you within your job descriptions and involves supporting a family, paying the mortgage, and so on. However, from the position of the "long view" that I was allowed to take this year, I found myself focusing on what, to me, seems to be unarguable: Literacy research is ultimately about providing the information needed for schools and communities to develop and provide fully informed citizens who are capable of using the literacy skills, including the thinking skills, necessary to contribute to the well-being of the world. This is the civic responsibility that is so much a part of educational theory.

MORE THAN ACHIEVEMENT SCORES OR CREDENTIALING

By arguing that the ultimate goal of our research is the creation of fully informed citizens who can and will participate actively in their civic duties for the good of society and humankind, I am obviously arguing for a life-span frame, or perspective, for literacy research and, by implication, literacy education. I am suggesting that we lift our heads up, both as researchers and as teachers,

and ask, “Where is this going? Why am I doing this? Why am I, as a classroom teacher, planning these lessons/asking my students to do these things? What’s it all about?”

Now the answer to this is not as obvious as some might suggest. Most of us are aware of the assumption that is prevalent in the arena of literacy education and research that if students learn to read according to some criterion, whether it is a score on an achievement test, a passing grade, or a diploma, then they are capable of, and will, apply those literacy skills in their lives. This makes the answer to “What’s It All About?” easier since we can focus more short term on teaching what is needed—or providing the research information and insight to facilitate this teaching—for students to achieve a higher score on an achievement test, a passing grade, or a diploma. So the answer from this more truncated perspective is: I do this (my research or my teacher education or my literacy teaching) to improve reading achievement scores or writing scores. Or I do this to improve school retention rates: or I do this to improve Grade 1 passing rates, and so on.

However, taking a historical perspective, Carl Kaestle and his co-authors in his book *Literacy in the United States* (Kaestle, Damon-Moore, Stedman, Tinsley, & Trollinger, 1991) makes a convincing argument for an increased focus on the *uses* of literacy by adults along with a decreased emphasis on achievement test scores. He cites data, that some researchers are already familiar with and understand, that show that the relationship between scores on reading achievement tests and functional literacy ability is never direct and clear but more complexly related. Kaestle, et al. provide a spatial metaphor to consider both the differences and the relationships between literacy skills as they are taught and measured in school (i.e., reading achievement) and literacy skills as they are practiced outside of school (i.e., functional literacy).

On the vertical axis would be reading achievement. “School reading is embodied in a sequential curriculum, and children are tested frequently as they move up through a hierarchy of graded skills and content,” (p. 76-78) they explain. On the horizontal would be reading in the world outside of school. “Functional literacy outside of school is less structured, less hierarchical. It involves a greater variety of materials and settings and is often used to accomplish practical tasks” (pg. 76-78).

For Kaestle, et al. this metaphor is useful because the two dimensions intersect at any point. They suggest that at any point of reading achievement, one could trace the application of those skills horizontally out into some non-school situations. In turn, for any real-world literacy use, one could ask how demanding the reading tasks are on a vertical scale. It occurs to me that this would be useful for badly needed research on the relationships between literacy in use and literacy as taught and measured in school! At this point, though, it is enough to say that literacy in use, as practiced by the products of our educational systems, is not directly predicted or explained by reading achievement, by literacy as taught and measured in school.

In fact, researchers of adult literacy have acted upon this fact in their attempts to provide measures of adult literacy abilities. Through efforts to document and describe literacy rates around the world, organizations like UNESCO and individual national governments have chosen to measure what people can *do* with literacy. Both the National Assessment of Literacy Survey (NALS), the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and the ALL (Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey) are based on a definition of literacy that “stands in contrast to arbitrary standards of adult literacy ability used by previous measures such as signing one’s name, completing five years of school, or scoring at a particular grade level” (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993, pg. 2). Rather, they

defined literacy as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (pg. 2).

Within this definition, the NALS, IALS, and ALL were constructed as criterion-referenced assessments, using three different scales to represent three types of literacy: Prose Literacy, Document Literacy, and Quantitative Literacy.

They define these three areas in this way:

1. Prose literacy: The knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts that include editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction; for example, finding a piece of information in a newspaper article, interpreting instructions from a warranty, inferring a theme from a poem, or contrasting views expressed in an editorial.
2. Document literacy: The knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in materials that include job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphs; for example, locating a particular intersection on a street map, using a schedule to choose the appropriate bus, or entering information on an application form.
3. Quantitative literacy: The knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials; for example, balancing a checkbook, figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest from a loan advertisement. (pg. 3-4, Kirsch, et al.)

The ALL added problem solving and, indirectly, familiarity with and use of information and communication technologies as foundational skills to be measured.

Each scale used scaled scores and criterion levels for reporting degrees of proficiency from limited to advanced. The scores on each scale range from 0–500. There are five criterion levels for each scale. It serves my purpose today to examine the criterion levels for the prose literacy scale, although clearly all three are closely interrelated.

On the prose scale, task items with low scale values ask readers to locate or identify information in brief, familiar, or uncomplicated materials, while those with high scale values ask readers to perform more demanding activities using materials that are lengthier, unfamiliar, or complex. These descriptions come from the presentations of the NALS, on which the IALS was modeled, by Kirsch, et al. in 1993.

- Prose Level 1: Tasks in Level 1 require the reader to locate and match a single piece of information in the text. Typically the match between the question or directive and the text is literal. The text is usually short or has organizational aids like headings or italics that suggest where the information can be found. For example, one item asks test takers to read a newspaper article about a marathon swimmer and to underline the sentence that tells what she ate during the swim.
- Prose Level 2: Tasks in Level 2 also ask readers to locate information, but more demands are placed on the reader. They may require readers to match more than a single piece of information in the text and to discount information that only partially satisfies the question. Low-level inferences may be required. For example, in one task, readers are asked to identify specifically what was wrong with an appliance by choosing the most appropriate of four statements describing its malfunction. Readers in this level may also be asked to infer a recurring theme. For example, one task asks readers to read a poem that uses several metaphors to represent a single, familiar concept and to identify its theme.

- Prose Level 3: A relatively easy Level 3 item asks readers to write a short letter explaining that an error has been made on a credit card bill. Others require readers to find information in fairly dense text. One of the more difficult items in this level requires readers to read a magazine article and provide two facts that support an inference made from the text.
- Prose Level 4: The tasks in Prose Level 4 require readers to perform multiple-feature matches across and within complex or lengthy passages. More complex inferences are needed. Further, readers must take into consideration conditional information presented in the texts. A relatively easy task at this level requires the reader to synthesize the repeated statements of an argument from a newspaper column to generate a theme or organizing principle. A more difficult item in Level 4 requires the reader to contrast the two opposing views stated in the newspaper feature that presents two experts' views on the existence of technologies that can be used to produce more fuel-efficient cars.
- Prose Level 5: Some tasks in this level require the reader to search for information in dense text which contains a number of plausible distracters. Others ask readers to make high-level inferences or use specialized background knowledge. Some items ask readers to contrast complex information. For example, one task with an average Level 5 difficulty value asks readers to read information about jury selection and service and then to interpret that information to identify two ways in which prospective jurors may be challenged.

Levels 4 and 5 have been combined in later versions of the IALS.

The makers of these adult literacy assessments acknowledge that this survey of literacy proficiency does not in any way reflect the different lives that people lead, the different texts they encounter, nor the different literacy demands that they will encounter as the result of living and working within a range of different social and cultural contexts. However, it does sample the different literacy demands encountered across a range of life contexts.

My first purpose in going into this in some detail is to underscore my claim, and to support my argument, that when we, as literacy researchers and as literacy educators, consider "What's It All About?", we cannot assume that focusing on reading scores, passing grades, or diplomas is enough. That meeting these goals will lead to fully literate citizens of the world. No, it is more complex than that. And it is important, even critical, that we act on that complexity. That we reflect and think long and hard about the relationships between what we teach children in school and the ways in which these students will *use* their literacy skills acquired in school when they are adults.

When the teachers that we, as literacy researchers, inform and train invoke guided reading in their classrooms, do we know what their third grade students are going to do with this instruction when they go out into the world? When the teachers we inform and train involve their students in Book Club discussion groups, do we know how this experience will inform their literacy lives as adults? When the teachers we inform and train teach their students to use strategies for comprehending informational text, how do they, and we, think that this instruction will be embodied in their lives outside of school? When the teachers we inform and train employ methods to foster phonemic awareness in young beginning readers, do we think about how this skill will serve their young students twenty years down the road when they encounter multiple texts across a complex landscape of literacy demands?

My second purpose for presenting you with this information about the IALS and NALS is to help us explore together how we, as a field of literacy researchers and educators, have *failed* to do our jobs; how we have failed our individual national publics and our collective world community. This assertion is based on the assumption that our job, or ultimate goal, as literacy researchers is to inform and facilitate literacy instruction in ways that lead to fully literate adults, who use their literacy proficiencies for the good of society. The description of the IALS, NALS, and ALL are meant to provide us with an example of ways to assess, or consider, functional literacy proficiency and how successful we have been at meeting this ultimate goal.

"NATION(S) AT RISK"

Education and educational research has been under attack and accused of putting nations at risk for quite a while. In the U.S. the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, issued by the Federal Department of Education under the administration of Ronald Reagan (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983) claimed that American education was rife with failures, putting the U.S. at risk of losing its competitive edge in the world. This obsession with the supposed failures of education played out also in other developed countries. In the UK, the Reading Reform Foundation lobbied long and hard to insert more synthetic phonics into the early reading curriculum, although the U.K. does not seem to brandish a big political club over issues such as this. In Australia, the "return to basics" movement dominated for a while, focusing on teaching phonics instead of whole language. This movement was apparently heavily influenced by what was happening in the U.S. and has now shifted from "basics" to "performance."

In Canada, the Fraser Institute (a right-wing "think tank") regularly ranks the schools, public and private together, to arrive at a "report card" that is used to whip up dissatisfaction with education.

The literacy field has for the most part been at the center of the target of this condemnation, although certainly the fields of math education, science education, and to some extent history education have also felt the heat. We felt it strongly in 1983 and many of our own members took part in providing a response to *A Nation at Risk* and an agenda for literacy education and research with the report *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985), published by the Center for the Study of Reading, directed by Dick Anderson. Recently, we again came under the gun as U.S. literacy researchers, teacher educators, and teachers were, and are being, unrelentingly attacked and held responsible for the purported decline in reading (forget about writing!) proficiency of U.S. students. Commissions were formed, expert panels convened, and reports were issued—all based on the assumption that students were performing less well than in the past on reading assessments and on the assumption that this was because teachers were failing to teach reading in ways that were supported by "good," "scientific," research. Having lived in Canada now for two years, I can attest that these attacks, based on unsupported assumptions are growing in Canada as well. While each country has its own ways of embodying these types of ideological moves by governments, they do look remarkably similar under the surface. Within the U.S., though, (and I suspect other national contexts), the fact that the data do not support these warrants of declining effectiveness of schools, and of literacy education in particular, raises for me the possibility of using the NALS, at least the

Quantitative Literacy Scale as a screen for educational policy makers as well as elected officials (see above). For more information on this, read and evaluate David Berliner's and Bruce Biddles' award-winning *The Manufactured Crisis* (1995). Based on the available evidence that I have read and examined, this latest attack on literacy research and literacy education is more ideological than reality-based, although the claims do enlist some legitimate areas of concern for the field.

But I just said that I was going to focus us on how we, as literacy researchers and educators, *have* failed to serve society. And so I will. A very compelling piece of evidence that we have failed to do our job and to meet our ultimate goal is staring us all in the face every day: This is the propensity for adults, many of whom are in positions of power, to misread texts, to base conclusions on only some of the information in texts and ignore others, who demonstrate the failure or the inability to locate important information in multiple texts and to synthesize general principles across them; who evidence the inability, or deliberate refusal, to understand data such as how test scores are derived, what they really mean, how they relate to reality—issues of validity and reliability.

This is the real failure of the professional literacy community: To work toward the creation of readers who are, in the language of the IALS, "Proficient." It is in this respect that I believe we can claim responsibility for failure. It is with this failure that we have and are putting nations, and collectively the world, *at risk*.

EVIDENCE

Let me share with you some anecdotal pieces of evidence that I have collected to support my conclusion that we have been part of an educational system that turns out adults who cannot read and evaluate information, who cannot read critically, and who cannot use these literacy skills to act in their own self-interest or in the interest of individual and collective nation states. Forgive me for the eclectic nature of these examples. I collected them serendipitously, but I believe that they represent the breadth and depth of the problem.

I will start with a fairly prosaic example, one that has been around for a long time: Tabloid "newspapers" with headlines like "Bat Boy Found in Cave!" or "Baby with Four Heads Born to 60-Year-Old Woman!" This type of "newspaper" is read widely around the world. All of us have encountered them as we shop, usually as we wait to pay for our items. It is easy to scoff at this type of publication, but many of us know people who read these faithfully and who actually believe what they read—at least some of it. Think of it: People who *can* read these texts learned to read in some sort of instructional context, from a teacher of reading whose knowledge of reading methods and reading research came from people like us. This, I assert, *is a failure of literacy research and literacy education*.

Advertisements, and their effectiveness, represent another instance of failure to read critically. People are asked to believe that young children should be "branded," with designer wardrobes, that buying a certain type of car will attract a sexy playmate, that smoking is sexy.

Many of us remember when the term "critical literacy" meant the ability to read "in between the lines" and step away from the text and make a judgment as to its truth value. When I began teaching reading in grades 7 and 8, the texts I was given to use included "lessons" on teaching critical reading, and these lessons inevitably taught about advertisements and how you should be

able to view them and recognize which of eight different persuasive techniques the advertisers were using.

Believing unreal claims of reality such as those in tabloids, or passively allowing oneself to live in a Branded world created by unscrupulous business cartels, seems so familiar to us that these beliefs are no longer noticed as aberrations by most of the people. They also are data for the claim that we have failed society as a field.

I now turn to the literacy lapses and gaps that have more serious impacts on our collective well-being. It appears that the vast majority of our previous students, the graduates of our educational institutions, cannot perform literacy tasks that are considered basic to functioning as fully informed citizens. And these failures have ominous results. Probably one of the most striking examples of the failure of the schools to produce critical readers and thinkers, able to synthesize across texts and call on background knowledge to arrive at conclusions, lies in the spectacle that occurred in 2003 when the vast majority of the people in the United States, including virtually all of their elected representatives, and every major and minor press outlet, appeared to believe the governmental assertion that Iraq did indeed possess weapons of mass destruction on the eve of the U.S. invasion. How can it happen that one of the most highly educated countries in the world could display such an appalling lack of ability to read, to think, to act?

Let us take a look at the texts and textual sources of information that would be needed to evaluate such a claim that Iraq possessed weapons capable of inflicting great harm on the citizens of the United States and its allies. Well, the obvious first ones would be the repeated reports of the UN commissions sent into Iraq to look for these weapons. Over and over again, the team led by Hans Blitzer searched for these weapons. This team reported that they could find *no* evidence of the existence of such weapons. These reports, these texts, were available to all, and not just in print, and not just in the elite newspapers. It is tempting to conclude that this literacy task was quite basic: Find one piece of information in a text. However, it helped, in evaluating the evidence, to call upon other texts to support or challenge your conclusions. For example, many national newspapers and news magazines reported on the U.S. President's deep chagrin with the 'wimp factor' that dogged his father when he pulled out of Iraq following the Kuwait, Desert Storm incursion. He was reported, in his own words, as determined to finish that battle. So, in evaluating the claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and therefore the U.S. and its allies were required to invade to remove the threat, readers needed to make inferences across texts—a literacy task considered basic to full literacy for full citizenry.

So why is it that almost all of the elected officials in the U.S. and many other leaders and people in other countries could conclude that weapons of mass destruction did exist and to an extent worthy of sending their own children into war? Recently, the only defense put forth by the members of the U.S. Congress who approved the invasion of Iraq, who should have been capable of using their literacy skills more productively, has been that they believed one piece of information over all of the others—the assertion by the U.S. Secretary of State that we had evidence that the weapons were there.

How would this be scored on the IALS? This (incredible) failure is our failure. We are responsible for ensuring that all of our students (or at least the majority of them and, at the very least, the ones who assume dominant positions of power) are able to "Use printed and written

information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential (see IALS discussion, above)." To "function in society" also brings with it the responsibility to function as a civic minded citizen in the best interests of society. The U.S. voters and their elected representatives failed in this respect. They were our students. We apparently failed them, and by implication, society.

We could perform the same exercise with the claim advanced by the present administration of the U.S., and supported by the leadership of Britain, Australia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the Ukraine, that it would be possible and good to import Western style democracy to Iraq. Granted, world history education has suffered from a Western bias for years, but the history of the Persian and Ottoman empires is known to Westerners who take the time to find it. Even the watered down history taught in school includes descriptions of tribal conflicts, shifting alliances, colonization of the area and so on. Further, recent popular texts in newspapers and magazines have included summaries of this history and this culture and used them to raise doubts about the goal of imposing Western style democracy around the world. But it is necessary that one *reads* these texts, all of them, including those that argue for the possibility (some said the ease) of imposing Western perspectives on non-Westerners, and then: . . . read . . . and provide two facts that support an inference made from the text. (Level 3, IALS) . . . perform multiple-feature matches across and within complex or lengthy passages. (Make) complex inferences . . . take into consideration conditional information presented in the texts . . . synthesize the repeated statements of an argument from a newspaper column to generate a theme or organizing principle . . . contrast the two opposing views stated in (text) that presents two (or more) experts' views on the (issue) (Level 4, IALS) . . . search for information in dense text which contains a number of plausible distracters....make high-level inferences or use specialized background knowledge . . . contrast complex information (Level 5, IALS) (Kirsch, et al., 1993).

No one is saying this is easy. But it's what literacy education and literacy is supposed to be about in the long run. Where have we been? How have we come to such a pass? This is our field!

Another example of what I am claiming is a failure of our field of literacy research to prepare adequate citizens comes from Bob Herbert's commentary in *The New York Times* (February 2, 2005) on a study commissioned by the James L. Knight Foundation of the beliefs and opinions of American students (Yalof & Dautrich, 2005). Herbert reports: According to this study, only about half of America's high school students think newspapers should be allowed to publish freely, without government approval of their stories. And a third say the free speech guarantees of the First Amendment go "too far." A high school English teacher, a friend of mine, comments in an email (D. Roemer, personal communication, February 4, 2005):

This should shock the hell out of all of us but especially teachers. How is it that the youngsters we "educate" believe, for example, that the government should control what gets printed in the Newspapers? Forget NEASC, forget about MCAS, forget about NCLB. It appears that we've left a whole generation of students behind in so far as their understanding of the constitution goes. It strikes me that this calls for a radical realignment of curriculum. How does a five on an AP test stack up against the quiescent relinquishment of free speech? We are in deep, deep trouble, folks!

The ability to read, comprehend, make inferences, and handle conditional information synthesized across texts is also lacking in other fields like science. Lisa Randall (2005), a professor of physics at Harvard, wrote in a recent op-ed piece in *The New York Times* of the difficulty of communicating significant scientific developments to the general public. She acknowledges that some problems come from the esoteric nature of current scientific research and the related difficulty of finding what she refers to as *faithful terminology*. Complexity and abstraction is part of the research, she acknowledges, but the communication of the evolving findings of that research is crucial to people's lives: research on global warming, cancer research, diet studies, and so on.

Another problem is jargon. Every special field has specialized terminology that is difficult to comprehend from the outside. Randall uses the term "relativity" as an example. "Many interpret the theory to mean that everything is relative and there are no absolutes. Yet although the measurements any observer makes depend on his coordinates and reference frame, the physical phenomena he measures have an invariant description that transcends that observer's particular coordinates. Einstein's theory of relativity is really about finding an invariant description" (p. 2). She goes on to give other examples of how the common interpretations of specialized terms are often significantly different from their true definitions within the specialized field.

This is vocabulary knowledge! This is learning to read within different disciplines. This is the responsibility of teachers: Content area teachers informed by literacy experts, people like us.

Here's another reflection from a public scholar and citizen: In an essay in *The New York Times*, titled "How to Make Sure Children Are Scientifically Illiterate," Lawrence Krauss, a professor of physics and astronomy at Case Western, addresses the U.S. controversy of Creationism, or Intelligent Design versus Evolutionary Theory. In commenting on a statement by the then chairman of a state school board, a veterinarian, who had openly stated that he believes that God created the universe 6,500 years ago, Professor Krauss (2006) writes:

A key concern should not be whether Dr. X's religious views have a place in the classroom, but rather how someone whose religious views require a denial of essentially all modern scientific knowledge can be chairman of a state school board.

I have recently been criticized by some for strenuously objecting in print to what I believe are scientifically inappropriate attempts by some scientists to discredit the religious faith of others. However, the age of the earth, and the universe, is no more a matter of religious faith than is the question of whether or not the earth is flat. It is a matter of overwhelming scientific evidence. To maintain a belief in a 6,000 year-old earth requires a denial of essentially all the results of modern physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology and geology. It is to imply that airplanes and automobiles work by divine magic, rather than by empirically testable laws (p. 15).

These failures to engage full, critical literacy skills in the products of our educational systems and literacy curricula are apparent in searing social issues also. African-American scholar John Hope Franklin, in an interview for *The Sunday Times Magazine* last year (2005), responded to the interviewer's question as how he thought Hurricane Katrina has altered our view of race in this country. Said Professor Franklin, "The tragedy is that Katrina changed our view at all. We should

have known the things that Katrina brought out . . . It's a fundamental problem of this country today, the lack of critical thinking and judgment on the part of the American citizens" (p. 23).

I would clarify this indictment with a reminder for us that critical thinking and judgment results from careful and critical reading within and across texts, and those texts have been available for a long time on this topic, but apparently have not been taken up by all. The pressing issue of immigration, legal and illegal, is currently upon the U.S. public as well. Tony Horwitz, historian and author, writes in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* (2006) of the historical illiteracy running rampant among the concerned citizens of that country. He claims that this appears to be true among supporters and opponents of tighter border control. Supporters obsess over the threat to the national language, claiming English "is part of our blood." Even undocumented immigrants invoke our Anglo founders, waving placards that read, "The Pilgrims didn't have papers."

Horwitz points out that four of the sample questions on the naturalization test for the U.S. ask about Pilgrims:

Nothing in the sample exam suggests that prospective citizens need know anything that occurred on this continent before the Mayflower landed in 1620. Few people in the U.S. know that the first European presence on present day U.S. soil was a Spaniard, Ponce de Leon, who landed in 1513 at a beach he christened La Florida. Nor do they know that within three decades of this landing, the Spanish became the first Europeans to reach the Appalachians, the Mississippi, the Grand Canyon and the Great Plains. Spanish ships sailed along the East Coast, penetrating to present-day Bangor, Maine, and up the Pacific Coast as far as Oregon (p. 9).

And he goes on and on, documenting the historical illiteracy of people who (in my interpretation) "know how to read" but appear incapable of "reading proficiently," calling upon background information, old texts and new texts to arrive at new levels of knowledge and insight.

I have more examples, but I believe that my point has been made. I collected these examples over the past year and a half as each one seemed to indicate, or point to, this failure of literacy research and education: to produce readers capable of: reading proficiently; reading and synthesizing across multiple texts to separate fact from opinion; recognizing themes; "(Using) printed and written information to function in (and *for*) society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Kirsch, et al., 1993, p. 2).

To argue that the world is in dire need of such readers, I turn to Harold Pinter, Britain's renowned author and playwright. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2005, Pinter, after calling the United States and the British leadership under Prime Minister Tony Blair to task for hundreds of thousands of deaths, total contempt for international law, outright lies and linguistic manipulation, and the adoption of what in the U.S. administration's own words they call "full spectrum dominance" of the world, Pinter declared: "I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the *real* truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory" (p.13).

The title of the lecture is "Art, Truth & Politics." I ask you to consider how we, who have undertaken to develop literate citizens who can discern truth in and across written texts, should take our place in this title.

HOW CAN NRC RESPOND?

I would like to put before you three ways that NRC, the largest organization of literacy researchers in the world, can respond to this situation. These are the result of my own musings on this topic and I expect, and hope, that many of you will have your own suggestions.

Adopt a Lifespan Vision of Literacy

First, I would like to see NRC adopt a lifespan vision of literacy, and thus, of literacy research. I would like to see this vision explicitly framed and acted upon. This means that, first of all, we need to embrace research on literacy in adults. We need to aggressively seek to breach that wall that exists between research on K-12 and adult literacy. I know we do have a few adult literacy research presentations at the conference each year, but they are few and far between. All of the researchers who come to NRC with their research on adult populations are much more active in organizations that focus primarily on adult literacy. We have struggled over the years to encourage more adult literacy research at NRC. Several years ago we set up the J. Michael Parker Award to do just that. Winners of this award receive financial help with conference attendance such as travel, registration, lodging and so forth. This is a modest award, but even so, we never have more than a few submissions. Several years, no one submitted. This year was the first year that the award was given.

I believe that some of the information included in this Presidential Address will help us, as an organization, intentionally and explicitly, develop the rationale and purpose statements that say *NRC is about literacy as it is learned and as it is practiced throughout the lifespan*. I don't know exactly how this lifespan frame would and could be operationalized in our publications, our research presentations, our committees, and so on. I just know that for it to be real, it needs to be about more than trying to get more sessions on adult literacy research. It needs to result in the conception and presentation of data that is always viewed through a lifespan vision of literacy, literacy development, and literacy practice.

Expand the Construct of Literacy

As part of this new lifespan vision of literacy, I believe NRC needs to expand the construct of literacy from which it operates and does its work, both at the individual researcher level and at the organizational level. This is my second recommendation. We need to make room for equal attention to the different textual genres that adults must negotiate and use for successful and proficient functioning in society, "to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Kirsch, et al., p. 2).

By this I mean more than adding informational books to literacy curriculums. I mean looking ahead to the future textual demands of our students. Just a few examples from the Adult Literacy Surveys will remind you of what these demands and genres are: editorials, news stories, poems, fiction, job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphs, checkbooks, order forms, and loan applications. We need to research the ways that school literacy relates to out-of-school literacy practice; we need to help design curricula that include real-life literacy practices with real-life texts. Then we need to research the effectiveness of these instructional schemes. We also need to return to the old reading-across-the-curriculum efforts, only this time with a new focus on the future literacy needs of our students. In the '60s, '70s and '80s, reading-

across-the-curriculum efforts were formulated to help students read and understand their textbooks better in their content areas and thus to improve their learning in those content areas. With a lifespan perspective on literacy, our goal would be to teach our students (a) how to *read, write, and think* within specific disciplines, but also how to read across texts *across* different disciplines to address real-life problems and issues.

Also as part of the expanded construct of literacy, across the lifespan, we need to do our work with teachers, in curriculum development, and in policy in such a way that literacy instruction, literacy lessons at all levels and in all areas, always reflect the long-term goal of that instruction which is the ability to read, comprehend, and synthesize across texts critically. Some of the ways I see this working out, as an example, would be for even pre-school and kindergarten teachers to read multiple texts to their students and conduct discussions of them that require the children to draw implications, information, and inferences across all of them; or for first and second grade teachers to present their students with multiple passages for practice with short vowels, at the same time co-constructing discussions of the content of all of them together, with an emphasis on "What do you think?," "Why?," "What's your evidence?," and so on. Critical reading and thinking that calls on multiple data points from multiple perspectives and texts should be required, and assessed, from the beginning of literacy instruction on through adulthood.

How Does My Study Fit Into the Larger Picture?

This last suggestion is a recommendation for a conceptual strategy—a strategy that I suggest will help us work toward realizing our long-term goals, much as a driver must focus on the road ahead in order to drive straight enough to reach his destination, or as a bicycle rider must look about 3 feet ahead of the front tire in order to stay upright and proceed down the road. I am suggesting that each of us—in our individual research lives and communities—ask, if not always be able to answer: How does my study ultimately fit into this larger frame, this expanded construct, this long-term purpose of literacy instruction? While rationale and implications sections do not usually expand to include the answers to these grand type questions, they are valuable nonetheless. They help us stay on the road and increase the likelihood that we will get where we want to go. So with the future of society and its members (our students) in mind, let's start asking ourselves: What's it all about?

REFERENCES

- Anderson, R. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the Commission on Reading*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading.
- Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J. (1995). *The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books.
- Franklin, J. H. (September 18, 2005). Awash in inequity. *The New York Times*, p. 23, New York Times Magazine.
- Herbert, B. (February, 2, 2005). Our battered constitution. *The New York Times*, p. 19A.
- Horwitz, T. (July 9, 2006). Immigration – and the curse of the Black Legend. *New York Times*, p. 9, Section 4.
- Kaestle, C., Damon-Moore, H., Stedman, L. C., Tinsley, K., & Trollinger, Jr., W. V. (1991). *Literacy in the United States*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kirsch, I. S., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L., & Kolstad, A. (1993). *Adult literacy in America*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

- Kraus, L. M. (8/15/2006). How to make sure children are scientifically illiterate. *The New York Times*, Section 2, pg. 15.
- National Commission of Excellence in Education. (1983). *A Nation at Risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, D.C.: U.S Government Printing Office.
- Pinter, H. (2005). *Art, truth and politics*. Retrieved September 3, 2006 from www.Nobelprize.org.
- Randall, L. (2005). *Dangling particles*. Retrieved September 18, 2005 from www.nytimes.com.
- StatsCanada (2004). *The adult literacy and life skills survey, 2003*. Retrieved August 25, 2006 from www.statcan.ca/english/DI/Metadata/ials2003gid.doc.
- Yalof, D., & Dautrich, K. (2005). *The future of the First Amendment*. Washington, D.C.: James L. Knight Foundation.