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ABSTRACT

The close scrutiny of literature study and how literature is currently taught and learned reveals major findings in four crucial areas of educational concern: critical thinking, cultural diversity, assessment of achievement, and at-risk students. Currently, literature instruction is focused on information retrieval, and remains unconcerned with critical thinking skills. However, students must be taught how to foster literary understanding and interpretation, and numerous methods of attaining such interpretive and critical skills can aid the teacher in doing this. Concerning cultural diversity, currently literature instruction is largely monolithic and traditional. Essentially, there is no need to return to a traditional canon, since literary instruction has never left the tradition. Thus, the canon still needs to be broadened at the elementary and secondary levels. One promising technique is to tap the low-art world of mass culture and media, the main cultural world of today's youth. Concerning testing and assessment, findings indicate that teachers remain fact-centered. Various models of assessment, including portfolios, are promising. Finally, at-risk students afford special concerns, but various studies suggest strong implications for improving instruction for these students. In sum, these studies indicate the great need to reinvigorate literature instruction at all levels. (HB)

Breaking the Mold of Literature Instruction: Recent Findings from the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning

by Robert Burroughs

University at Albany S • U • N • Y

National Research Center on Literature Teaching & Learning

Literature UPDATE

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Breaking the Mold of Literature Instruction: Recent Findings from the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning

Robert Burroughs[1]

The students in six upstate New York elementary schools were neither better nor worse than those in other elementary schools around the country. Some students, however, were better readers than others. When they'd finished answering their textbook questions, those better readers used their independent reading time to steam through lots of good literature.

The poorer readers weren't so lucky. They were less likely to do independent reading because it takes them longer to do their other work, says Sean Walmsley, a project director for the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning (Literature Center). Poorer readers have less time to read full-length books and teachers steer them toward easier books, Walmsley found. The bottom line: teachers think of literature as what you do *after* you learn to read, not as something to help you learn to read, Walmsley's research tells us.

Alan Purves, co-director of the Literature Center, is not surprised. He has found much the same thing at the high school level. "The literature curriculum in schools is the Rodney Dangerfield of curriculum," Purves asserts. "It gets no respect."

Recent bestselling books by E.D. Hirsch (*Cultural Literacy*, 1987) and Alan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*, 1987) argue that literature deserves our highest respect. As Hirsch argues, literature promotes "cultural literacy." But it does even more than that. Literature study can promote the kind of critical thinking and "skilled intelligence" demanded by the authors of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Literature study can also address "the ability to reason, solve problems, apply knowledge, and write and communicate effectively," one of the National Goals for Education adopted by the National Governors' Association (1990).

Literature Center studies and activities confront this central issue of critical thinking in literature teaching and learning. Yet, literature study has more to contribute to our understanding and improvement of education. The study of literature also addresses other fundamental educational concerns that face the country today: cultural diversity, assessment of national achievement, and students at risk of failing. Literature Center work has addressed all of these concerns in its studies of current practices and its explorations of new approaches.

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This report will trace the Center's major findings in these four crucial areas of concern: critical thinking, cultural diversity, assessment of achievement, and at-risk students. Within each area, we will discuss the Center's studies that define current practice in the teaching of literature, as well as the Center's work to foster new approaches to teaching and learning. We begin with the issue of critical thinking.

Critical Thinking

Currently, literature instruction in schools is an exercise in information retrieval, if even that. At the elementary level, it is at best haphazard, as Walmsley's findings suggest. Anne McGill-Franzen's study of pre-kindergarten programs found that opportunities to listen to literature or to explore reading and writing of any kind were in short supply across a range of programs—Head Start programs, public schools, parent cooperatives, or religiously affiliated nursery schools. Depending on the program, children spent as little as 15 minutes to as much as an hour in sharing and telling about books, storytelling, writing, or learning about print. Although these results are preliminary, one implication is clear: Many pre-K programs need to provide more access to books.

When children move into elementary school, the picture changes concerning reading, but doesn't change concerning literature and critical thinking. Literature is treated as an "extra" after the main work of "reading." There is too much emphasis

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on facts and "right answers," with little attention on how to interpret those facts. As Richard Allington's work for the Center has shown, the result has been growth in "basic literacy," at the expense of "thoughtfulness"—the kind of critical thinking that the National Governors' Council is seeking.

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High school instruction of literature tends to be more of the same. Center director Arthur Applebee's survey of public, independent, and Catholic schools—the first such survey in 25 years—found that literature instruction emphasizes recall of information from the literature studied. For example, an average of 65% of the questions in widely used textbooks assume there is one right answer. Such emphases turn literature from a process of interpretation—a process of critical thinking—into a game of guessing what the teacher wants.

But anyone who has cried at a movie, gasped at a play, or lost themselves in a novel knows that there is more to literature than facts and information. When we read literature, "horizons of possibilities" open up before us, as Center co-director Judith Langer's work has shown. We interpret literature. And that experience of interpreting is a kind of knowing just as valuable as the remembering of facts. Researchers have shown that practitioners as diverse as doctors, lawyers, mechanics, and moral philosophers all use storytelling and interpretation to solve complex problems.

This interpreting is at the heart of what Langer calls "literary understanding," a way of thinking that acknowledges the horizons of possibilities we experience when we read literature. Her research has shown that literary understanding differs from understanding in fields such as science or history and that students intuitively use literary ways of understanding, even in science and history classes. Langer's work in this area has led directly to a change in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) framework for evaluating reading comprehension on the 1992 and 1994 Assessments.

Moreover, Langer's further work for the Center has shown that literary understanding can be supported and encouraged by teachers. Working with teachers of all grade levels, Langer is developing principles of instruction for literature teachers. These guidelines for instruction will provide teachers with more effective ways to structure lessons. For example, these guidelines will help teachers close lessons without necessarily providing closure. Since our understanding of a work of literature is always growing toward those horizons of possibilities, the end of a lesson is more a matter of "stock-taking" than of closing off further thought, Langer argues.

Ultimately, work like Langer's will help to define ways that teachers can help students achieve the critical thinking that interpreting a piece of literature can exercise. Suzanne Miller's work for the Center has shown that students do learn a kind of dialectical reasoning from discussions of literature in their English classes. At the same time, Lil Brannon has been helping groups of teachers at the Center become "reflective practitioners," who analyze their own teaching as part of an ongoing process of rethinking how they teach. The continuing challenge for the collaborating scholars and teachers at the Center is to show others how to create the kind of classroom climate where critical reasoning can flourish.

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Cultural Diversity

Throughout the twentieth century, America has prided itself on its wealth of cultural diversity. Lately, that pride has been tested as cultural groups vie for resources. Recently, the National Governors' Association has listed the broadening of students' understanding of cultural diversity as one of its goals for education. The literature curriculum can contribute significantly to that goal.

Currently, literature instruction in schools is a remarkably traditional and monolithic enterprise, despite pleas like E.D. Hirsch's to return to a traditional curriculum. In his national survey, Applebee found there is little reason to "return" to a traditional curriculum. It has never left. The traditions tapped by the books students read in English classes have changed little since the turn of the century. Of the top ten required texts in public, catholic, or independent schools, all but one were the work of white, male, Anglo-Saxon authors. The most frequently required authors among all schools were Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Dickens.

But how does this traditional curriculum serve the diverse needs of a multicultural nation? Literature Center studies suggest that most English programs work best for college-bound, primarily white, middle-class students—the ones whose culture is most clearly represented in the books read in schools. Yet, evidence from past National Assessments shows that students are more likely to be knowledgeable about the literature and culture of their own racial and ethnic groups. African-American students, for example, do less well overall on the NAEP than do their White peers. But they do better than Whites on questions dealing with literature by or about African Americans.

Historically, literature in the schools has played a central role in discussions of cultural assimilation and cultural differentiation. The choices of America's early educators were clear: the role of literature was to reduce diversity and promote common values and a common culture. Literature, they believed, had the power to shape values and beliefs. Most recently, this same belief in the power of literature has led to

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a different line of argument. The traditional canon of required texts needs to be broadened to reflect the diverse cultural traditions that have found their place within the nation.

A Center study directed by James Collins dramatizes this point. Focusing on a Puerto Rican community within an industrial New York town, Collins is investigating the division between an older population of settled immigrants and a younger population of Puerto Ricans. The tension between the communities is reflected in discussions about the school curriculum. Collins sees a clear implication for the literature curriculum: choices about literature are not neutral and have to be seen in the context of other cultural concerns.

The "cultural diversity" of the literature curriculum is reflected in issues involving the use of mass media in the English classroom. As we've seen, the literature curriculum has concentrated largely on the "classics" of the British-American tradition in literature. Some have called this a "high art" approach to literature. But students live in the low-art world of mass media, a culture many of them understand well. How can English teachers tap that knowledge?

Glenn Hudak's project for the Center tackles this issue. Working with boys and girls in suburban high schools, Hudak is investigating the relationship between the literature students read in class and the popular media they "live" outside of class. His initial findings suggest that students read popular media differently than they do school literature. They let popular media speak to them in ways that the traditional curriculum doesn't, Hudak is finding. His study goes to the heart of ways teachers can move from what students already know to what they need to learn in school.

The Literature Center's work suggests that careful rethinking of the content of the literature curriculum is still to come. One clear implication of both the Center's surveys and the National Assessment data is that questions of literary understanding and curriculum are inextricably bound up with questions of testing. And it is to testing we now turn.

Assessment

Recent calls for educational reform and improvement have increasingly focused on national agendas. The recent National Governors' Association's report (1990) and the Carnegie Institute's *A Nation at Risk* (1983) are the most familiar examples.

The Literature Center has focused a series of studies on literature testing as it currently is employed and as it might be improved. In addition, several other Center projects touch on questions of testing and assessment. For example, Richard Allington's work with elementary school teachers and students has convinced him that literature instruction in elementary schools is a haphazard, district-by-district affair. He advocates a national effort to produce "thoughtful" schools, just as the national government did with "basic literacy." According to Allington, it is time to move beyond the 25 years of systematic testing of "basic literacy." Such a shift to "thoughtfulness" will require conscious effort. Peter Johnston's research for the Center found that teachers' grading tends to perpetuate the "factual" view of literature.

> *"The continuing challenge for the collaborating scholars and teachers at the Center is to show others how to create the kind of classroom climate where critical reasoning can flourish."*

At the secondary school level, Alan Purves similarly found that most literature testing focuses on a low level of comprehension—facts about plot, character, or theme. Purves and his colleagues analyzed standardized tests, commercial tests, and school district tests of literature achievement. Their conclusion is that literature is treated as a subset of reading, focusing on low-level comprehension. Moreover, Purves found that no attention was paid to the aesthetic or "cultural" aspects of literature. Students know this well. Purves questioned students about how they prepare for literature tests. The answer: they read *Cliff Notes* to memorize plot facts for the most prevalent kind of test—multiple choice questions.

Faced with this dismal assessment, Purves and colleagues have spent two years designing alternative testing packages. These tests seek to measure a host of activities associated with literature learning. For example, they measure students' knowledge of a text, as well as their ability to write about it. They also attempt to measure students' preferences, including aesthetic judgments of specific texts. This work reminds us that to really test literature learning, we have to ask students a variety of questions in a variety of formats.

For many teachers, literature learning is tested through essay writing. One promising approach to essay evaluation is "portfolio assessment," in which teachers collect a range of student work for evaluation. A Literature Center survey of teachers who use portfolios suggests that the technique is something of a bandwagon approach that hasn't quite arrived. The idea of portfolios is hopeful, however, largely because it broadens our notions of student achievement. But schools need to think carefully about what to collect and how to evaluate it.

Much of the Center's work on testing has been carried out at the state level of education. Textbooks and state assessments are beginning to change. These literature testing changes, coupled with the Center's efforts in modifying NAEP procedures, contribute to the Center's considerable efforts at improving student achievement on a national level.

At-Risk Students

No discussion of national student achievement can be complete without discussing "at-risk" students. Largely drawn from groups of lower socio-economic status (SES), these students are the ones at greatest risk to drop out of school or achieve the least academically. Several Literature Center studies address the concerns of these students.

Taken together, the Center's studies paint a worrisome picture for at-risk students. Anne McGill-Franzen found great discrepancy in literacy expectations for lower SES students in government-sponsored pre-K programs. Sean Walmsley found that poorer readers, many of whom

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Breaking the Mold, continued

are poor themselves, get less instruction in literature. Allington found that children in schools from poor neighborhoods are much more likely to have limited access to books in their homes, communities, and schools. Applebee found that in secondary schools, at-risk students get a watered-down curriculum.

A few Center studies offer some promise to these students. Langer's studies suggest that when exposed to thought-provoking literature instruction, traditionally at-risk students can and do participate effectively with their classmates in rich discussions of literature. Walmsley studied a group of students in a classroom filled with literature instruction. In that program, where lots of literature was available to every student, differences in the amount of reading done by good and poor readers disappeared. This study has great implications for improved instruction. If we believe that wide reading builds better readers, then programs that provide lots of literature are clearly beneficial.

These findings about the nation's most fragile students underline the urgent need to reinvigorate literature instruction at all levels. As we have said, literature instruction, curriculum, and testing currently work well for only a portion of our population: The college-bound, the white, and the suburban. But literature instruction has more to offer all the students of our society. By investigating new approaches to instruction, curriculum, and testing, the Literature Center is leading that national effort at reform. ▼

For further information on Literature Center activities, contact:

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Sample of Publications Available

Curriculum and Instruction

1.4 *Literature Instruction in American Schools.* Arthur Applebee, $7.00.

1.5 *A Study of High School Literature Anthologies.* Arthur Applebee, $7.00.

1.6 *A Study of Second Graders' Home and School Literary Experiences.* Sean A. Walmsley, Linda G. Fielding, and Trudy P. Walp, $6.00.

Teaching and Learning

2.10 *Discussions of Literature in Lower Track Classrooms.* James Marshall, Mary Beth Klages, & Richard Fehlman, $6.00.

2.11 *Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction.* Judith Langer, $5.00.

2.15 *Supporting the Process of Literary Understanding: An Analysis of a Classroom Discussion.* Doralyn Roberts & Judith Langer, $5.00.

2.17 *Discussions of Middle-Track Classrooms.* James Marshall, Mary Beth Klages, & Richard Fehlman, $5.00.

2.18 *Creating Change: Towards a Dialogic Pedagogy.* Suzanne M. Miller, $3.00

Assessment

3.2 *Comparison of Measures of the Domain of Learning in Literature.* Alan C. Purves, Hongru Li, & Margaret Shirk, $6.00.

3.3 *Prototype Measures of the Domain of Learning in Literature.* Alan C. Purves, Hongru Li, & Margaret Shirk, $4.00.

3.4 *Teachers' Evaluations of Teaching and Learning in Literacy and Literature.* Peter H. Johnston, Paula Weiss, & Peter Afflerbach, $5.00.

3.5 *Student Perceptions of Achievement in School Literature.* Alan C. Purves, Hongru Li, Virginia McCann, & Paul Renken, $3.00.

3.6 *Writing Language Arts Report Cards: Eleven Teachers' Conflicts of Knowing and Communicating.* Peter P. Afflerbach & Peter H. Johnston, $4.00.

Literature and Culture

7.1 *Schooling, Literature and Work in a Rural Mountain Community.* Deborah Brandau & James Collins, $3.00.

Occasional Papers

6.3 *Discussion as Exploration: Literature and the Horizon of Possibilities.* Judith A. Langer, $4.00.

6.4 *The Ideology of Canons and Cultural Concerns in the Literature Curriculum.* Alan C. Purves, $3.00.

6.5 *Critical Thinking and English Language Arts Instruction.* Judith A. Langer, $4.00.

6.6 *Journeying Towards Collaboration: Back Roads, Fast Lanes, Detours, and Ever-Moving Horizons.* Francine Z. Stayter & Elizabeth A. Close, $4.00.

A more complete list of publications is available. To order individual reports, send your pre-paid requests to:

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Please make all checks payable to the Research Foundation of SUNY.

Recent Publications by Literature Center Faculty

Allington, R.L. (1992). How to get information on several proven programs for accelerating the progress of low-achieving children. *The Reading Teacher, 46*, 246-247.

Allington, R.L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (1992). Unintended effects of educational reform in New York. *Educational Policy, 6*, 397-414.

Brannon, L.B., & Knoblauch, C.H. (1993). *Critical teaching and the idea of literacy*. Portsmouth, NH:Heinemann Boynton/Cook.

Langer, J.A.(Ed.). (1992). *Literature instruction: A focus on student response*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Langer, J.A. (1992). Speaking of knowing: Conceptions of understanding in academic disciplines. In A. Herrington and C. Moran (Eds.), *Writing, teaching, & learning in the academic disciplines*. New York, NY: Modern Language Association.

Langer, J.A. (1992). Discussion as exploration: Literature and the horizon of possibilities. In G. Newell and R. Durst (Eds.), *Exploring texts: The role of discussion and writing in the teaching and learning of literature*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

McGill-Franzen, A. (1992). Early literacy: What does "developmentally appropriate" mean? *Reading Teacher, 46*, 56-59.

Walmsley, S.A. (1992). Reflections on the state of elementary literature instruction. *Language Arts, 69*, 508-514.

Calendar of Upcoming Events

- **National Literature Network meeting:**
  IRA Annual Meeting
  San Antonio, Texas
  April 29, 1993
  (topic: LitNet and Computer Networking)

NLN

- **Teacher Research Institute**
  University at Albany campus
  SUNY
  July, 1993

Arthur Applebee, *Director*
Judith Langer, *Co-Director*
Alan Purves, *Co-Director*
Genevieve Bronk, *Assistant Director/Administration*
Kate Blossom, *Assistant Director/ Outreach, Newsletter Editor*

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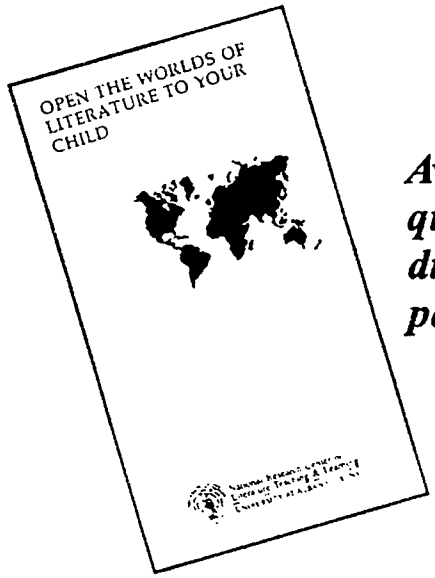

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