

New literacies, alternative texts: Teachers' conceptualisations of composition and literacy

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ABSTRACT: There is a conceptual world surrounding writing in schools, and we are conditioned to a particular language about composition and literacy. This study seeks to interrogate the terms composition and literacy at the level of the classroom: to ask what is meant when it is invoked and what it means to the teachers who teach it. The central question of this inquiry is: How do teachers conceptualise composition and literacy, and how are those conceptualisations socially and historically situated? I worked with one staff of teachers to explore their articulations of composition, through a lunch-hour discussion group and one-on-one interviews. Methodologically I looked to Caputo's (1987) radical hermeneutics as a way to understand the interpretations teachers were making of composition and literacy, both in the context of their lives and within a broader socio-historical context. Caputo's radicalisation of hermeneutics allows the introduction of post-modern flux into the interpretive process. Most teachers considered literacy to be mainly about reading, and thought of composition in traditional text-forms. With a few exceptions, there was little interest or awareness in what might be termed "new literacies", or a commitment or even interest in alternative texts or digital media.

KEYWORDS: Literacy, composition, new literacies, alternative texts, radical hermeneutics, teacher thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Digital media technologies and their so-called killer apps, and the popular adoptions and acceptance of these computer applications, are revolutionising our sensory perceptions and cognitive experiences of *being in the world*. In the process, new visual, aural, linguistic, and literary codes and signifiers are emerging that require new hermeneutic responses on our part simply to keep pace (Everett & Caldwell, 2003, p. xi).

The world is changing. Arguably, a massive cultural shift in terms of how we read, write, and communicate is occurring (Everett & Caldwell, 2003) and this will have and indeed already has had enormous impact on the fabric of our everyday lives. Everett and Caldwell, above, argue that this is actually transforming our sensory experiences of the world. Illich (1993) writes of the book as a metaphor for the age from which we are just now emerging, "The book has now ceased to be the root-metaphor of the age; the screen has taken its place. The alphabetic text has become but one of many modes of encoding something, now called 'the message'" (p. 3). I was interested in finding out how teachers conceptualise composition and literacy, and to what extent these "new literacies" are a part of what teachers think about. This question is part of a larger study, where a staff of elementary school teachers were interviewed regarding their conceptualisations of literacy. This article explores these conceptualisations, and

how the notion of new literacies, alternative texts, or multi-literacies were understood by this staff of teachers, focusing on the aspects of the data relating to composition.

HISTORICAL CONCEPTUALISATIONS

In my preliminary work on this study, I identified four broad orientations to literacy: traditional, subjective-individual, critical and postmodern. This is both a historical evolution and a philosophical one. Each emphasises a different element of the text-reader-context relationship:

1. **Traditional** – a text centred approach, influenced by Christian religious perspectives on reading, specifically Protestant.
2. **Subjective individual** – a meaning centred orientation, focused on the individual's response to the text.
3. **Critical** – a socially aware orientation, that does not take the text at face value but rather views it in the broader social context and in relation to questions of power, control, and influence.
4. **Post-Structural/Postmodern** – views all text as deconstructable and unstable, avoids placing any one element of the text-reader-author-context relationship at the centre, focuses on the flux and the spaces between these elements.

I expected that teachers likely subscribe more or less to one of these orientations, whether or not they are articulated or even conscious. The particulars of these orientations, I thought, were the subject of my inquiry. I wanted to show how a staff of teachers may be working at cross purposes in terms of the composition and literacy orientations they embody in the classroom. However, the story of this inquiry became a different story, one that understands the roots of conceptualisations as not being solely prescribed by social context, but rather a more dynamic, hermeneutic relation between self and context. I began with the idea that theoretical ideas underpin practice. What I did not expect was the deeply personal relationship teachers had with literacy inside their contexts, and the significance of those relationships to their teaching. Berlin (1997) argues that our pedagogical strategies in relation to literacy and literature are grounded in beliefs about our relation to the world, and suggests that these beliefs are rooted in historical perspectives. They describe a “different world with different rules about what can be known, how it can be known, and how it can be communicated” (p. 234). Thus, the historical and cultural orientations we ascribe to, articulated or not, have a direct impact on pedagogical approaches taken.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I locate this research in an interpretive framework, specifically, hermeneutics. However it has also been my aim to keep a sense of play and disruption in this study, and Caputo's radicalisation of hermeneutics allows for this play (1987). Caputo's (1987) description of the goal of hermeneutic interpretation is what I aim for in this work: “There is no proving and disproving in hermeneutics but only a certain letting-be-seen in which we find (or fail to find) ourselves in the account” (p. 81).

Interpretive frames

I saw an interpretive frame to be most relevant to this inquiry and this orientation underpinned my research decisions. It is important to make tacit orientations explicit, because they affect my perspectives and ways of understanding, my way of asking questions, seeking out data, and interpreting results. Interpretive research recognises the absurdity of supposedly “objective” inquiry: the researcher is always present, always one of the participants. In interpretive inquiry this presence is named and considered rather than artificially made invisible. As Mayers (2001) puts it, “Understanding and interpretation come from a tension that lives in between what is familiar to us and what is unfamiliar” (p. 6). Interpretation does not take place from outside; one must inhabit the phenomena being studied.

Teachers know about composition through multiple histories, enactments and meaning systems. How they make sense of this was the object of my inquiry. However, in commencing this research, I suspected that the meanings of composition would be anything but unified, between participants certainly, but perhaps even within individuals. The possibility exists of multiple and fragmented identities and meanings. Postmodern sensibility allows for more tension and recognises the potential for fragmentation and confusion of meaning; while pursuing a hermeneutic process, I see a need for postmodern disruption. For this reason, I will first explore what is meant by “hermeneutics,” and then look at how a postmodern disruption can be brought into play.

Hermeneutic interpretation

Hermeneutics is thus for the hardy. It is a radical thinking which is suspicious of the easy way out...Hermeneutics wants to describe the fix we are in, and tries to be hard-hearted and work “from below”. It does not try to situate itself above the flux or to seek a way out (Caputo, 1987, p. 3).

Hermeneutics, on first glance, means “interpretation”. Gadamer saw philosophy as a “living, participative activity” (Moran, 2000, p. 248). Hermeneutics can be a slippery and difficult term to define, but Moran (2000) helps us with this description:

Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation or understanding, and, for Gadamer, always signifies an ongoing, never completable process of understanding...a conversation leading towards mutual understanding, a conversation, furthermore, where this very understanding comes as something genuinely *experienced* (pp. 248-9).

Gadamer sees this experience of understanding as a profoundly linguistic event. He is interested in shared understanding as a conversation that comes about “between people and their tradition – the common understandings which emerge in a dialogue and which go beyond the intentions of the speakers” (Moran, 2000, p. 249). A dynamic relation is set up between the text and our lives, between the old and the new. Not only does the text have something to say about the decision we make today or the way we read or understand a situation, but this new situation then helps us to recast the past and helps us to see the text anew. This is known as the “hermeneutic circle”. Caputo (1987) describes this as a “creative production which pushes ahead, which produces *as* it repeats, which produces *what* it repeats, which makes a life for itself in the midst of the difficulties of the flux” (p. 5). Gadamer (1999/1960) explains that this circle is not

simply reconstructive of the past, but consists “in thoughtful mediation with contemporary life” (p. 169). There is a dynamic relationship between past, present and future – “History is only present to us in light of our futurity” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 9). However, the hermeneutic circle is not a vicious one; it is not simply reproductive: “Interpretation must always be a forceful setting free of the matter to be understood which counters [our] tendency to fall and take the easy way out” (p. 63).

A radical approach

In a move that infuses hermeneutics with postmodern flux, Caputo attempts to instill Derridian flux into traditional hermeneutics. Derrida, who questioned the whole notion of meaning and incited the project of deconstruction, was an outspoken critic of hermeneutics. Yet Caputo (1987) believes that Derrida “does not undo Husserl; he unfetters him. He does not undo hermeneutics; he releases its more radical tendencies” (p. 5). In my inquiry, I wanted to conflate the unlikely bedfellows of poststructural and hermeneutic interpretations, and was initially concerned that this would be too contradictory, working against myself. In Caputo, I find just this conflation. He writes: “This hermeneutics exposes us to the ruptures and gaps, let us say, the textuality and difference, which inhabits everything.... All of this is, I claim, hermeneutic work. For it describes the fix we are in.” (p. 6). I could not ask for a clearer description of the intention of this inquiry in relation to composition and literacy: to expose the ruptures and gaps in literacy beliefs and practices, and to begin to recognise and describe the fix we are in. Caputo, in his uneasy intertwining of Husserl and Derrida, recognises the invisible thread between hermeneutics and the postmodern, writing, “Derrida is the turning point for radical hermeneutics, the point where hermeneutics is pushed to the brink” (1987, p. 5). Caputo preserves the hermeneutic process, but no longer does so in the naïve pursuit of meaning. A radical hermeneutic does not seek meaning; it occurs precisely at the point of its loss. In the field of composition and literacy, I argue that we are at this point of rupture.

THE INQUIRY DESIGN

In this inquiry, depth is sought after rather than breadth. A thorough, careful, attentive reading of a particular cluster of teachers was hoped to yield insight and illumination regarding how composition and literacy is lived and understood. The elementary school is the site of investigation primarily because of its strong orientation towards literacy learning, and secondarily, because of my background as an early childhood educator. In order to provide an in-depth reading of beliefs surrounding composition within a common cultural framework, the study focused intensively on one local school.

Sources of data

Context

The staff of a local elementary school indicated an interest in participating in this project, based upon my involvement with them in the past through my language arts, student teachers. The school is located in a mid-to-upper, socio-economic area, near the university. The school has maintained a particular focus on literacy for the past year – a focus that has also been mandated district wide, and the staff have been

holding conversations regarding the teaching of literacy and the question of multiliteracies. The principal and the assistant principal were very enthusiastic about my inquiry project, seeing it as an extension of their own work in the area of composition and literacy, and a further opportunity for discussion.

Conversation

Initially, this research began in conversation. My first data collection was at a lunch-hour meeting, led by the assistant principal on the topic of literacy. With the guidance of the administration of the school, I then invited the staff to four lunch-hour meetings, which I called "Literacy Cafes" and to which I left invitations in the teachers' mailboxes. These conversations were recorded digitally and transcribed for analysis. The conversations were unstructured, with only the topic provided as a starting point for discussion. This was conceived as an opportunity for the teachers to consider, describe and interrogate their own understandings of composition and literacy.

Interviews

I determined to ask individual teachers if they would participate in a semi-structured interview, and the majority of teachers were pleased to participate. I interviewed twelve teachers, as well as the school principal, for one interview, each ranging from twenty to ninety minutes, with most interviews taking about forty minutes. Several of the teachers were interviewed a second time. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The grades represented ranged from kindergarten to grade five (elementary schools in this school district are K-5), along with the technology specialist, the French/Dance teacher, and the Reading Recovery teacher. Please note that all names are pseudonyms and the name of the school is fictionalised.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

There were a number of significant observations I was able to make based upon the data collected. Relevant to this article are the following:

This staff is a group of passionate readers

Many of the teachers were voracious readers as children, although as we will see in the next section, not all of them were, and these exceptions prove as interesting as the rule. Also, not all of the teachers became dedicated readers through the influence of reading families, although many did. Rosemary, the principal, became a reader in spite of the values of her family, as "*a defiance...almost a response against*". This aspect of the interview data became a critical insight for me as I came to better understand conceptualisations surrounding literacy of the teachers. Also of note is that most of these stories were in relation to reading, rather than writing or other forms of literacy, which repeatedly seemed for most of the teachers to be the central tenet of literacy. In Sara's interview, she told me:

I could read before I started kindergarten, and I don't know where that came from...I was always read to, I was always surrounded in books, I loved books...So I guess a lot of it was from being immersed in an environment and loving it, I made connections easily and quickly and it took me to other worlds...As a teacher it's my favourite thing to do, I could do literacy all day.

Sara's description above, of her childhood reading, is a passionate endorsement of a particular kind of reading, an immersion in the world of books, of being transported by fiction and "loving it". She can't tell me why she loved reading so much as a child, but just that she was read to and surrounded by books, and was "taken to other worlds". This kind of description, although not universal, was very common amongst this group of teachers. I began to wonder if people who had this kind of experience with books are people more likely to become elementary teachers in the first place. I was struck by how what Sara said mirrored Caputo's (1987) description of Kierkegaard's repetition, where people are actively involved in a productive, not merely reproductive, process of being and becoming, beginning in "situatedness in which one finds oneself" and "by choosing the self comes to be the being which it all along has been" (p. 30). She tells me that her goal in teaching for the students is: "*to inspire them to keep reading and writing as much as they can*".

The warm memory of Sara's childhood reading goes unquestioned, the essential "goodness" of this is uninterrupted. Schooling is, at root, a middle-class endeavour, and the middle class value placed on books and reading is a dominant discourse in schools that is very difficult to disrupt (Stuckey, 1991). Thus, what Sara had in her childhood – "*I was always read to, I was always surrounded in books, I loved books*" – is what she wants to do for the students in her class, saying on more than one occasion: "*As a teacher it's my favourite thing to do, I could do literacy all day*", and during the literacy meeting, "*Given my choice I'd teach reading five hours a day, 'cause I love it.*" This reproduction of a middle class ethic goes uninterrogated. Sara was one of the teachers for whom reading was a much stronger focus in her classroom, as it is in her life:

Michelle: Do you consider yourself a writer in the same way?

Sara: No. I can write. I don't do a lot of writing. I do a lot of reading, I don't do a lot of writing. I write grocery lists, I write notes to my children's teachers. I don't have time, anymore. I don't write nearly as much as I read. I could, I'm capable, but it's not a major part of my life. When I was younger, like a teenager, I used to keep diaries and things. But no, reading is a huge part of my life, writing is a little part of my life. It's interesting, I never thought about that before.

Emma embodies another example of family practices surrounding literacy having clear implications for the teacher's classroom. She tells me:

I come from a family of readers. And so, that was something that was always valued in our home, is to read and talk. So that's something always, in my life, I've just read tons, so for me, just on a personal level, to read in that form, and to talk about ideas is really important. I came from a family of everybody reads. There's books everywhere, all over the house. It's just, everybody reads. My sisters, and I, we all read.

Listening to the teachers' voice should teach us that the autobiographical, "the life", is of substantial concern when teachers talk of their work (Goodson & Walker, 1991, p. 144).

Emma's description of her childhood is echoed precisely in her priorities for her classroom, "*I have a real strong belief that kids should be reading and reading and reading and responding lots and lots of thinking and reading, so that's my basic premise.*" This underlines once again Caputo's description of Kierkegaardian

repetition, where the self “does not create something altogether new, but actualises what [she] has been all along” (Caputo, 1987, p. 30). Emma’s situatedness began in a home filled with books, books “*everywhere, all over the house*”, and in her family there was a common practice of reading, thinking and talking about what you read. The value of this practice then permeates her classroom, forming a central pillar of her day-to-day practice. Vivian tells a similar story, and echoes Sara’s description of reading as an escape:

Yes, I’m a reader, I read very early as a child, and just lost myself in reading, it was a great way to cope with life. It was sort like a legal drug I guess (laughs), get into great myths or whatever, and leave the rest of it behind. So I read a lot as a child. I mean it was a great escape, and very enjoyable.

Multiple teachers made reference to the magical experience offered by reading and the value it had in “coping with life”. Sara was “transported”, Emma used it as a springboard to “think and to talk”, Elizabeth would rather read than play outside. Vivian’s description of reading as a “legal drug” was fascinating, given how we often celebrate signs of “addiction” to reading in school children, while being appalled if they show similar addictions to television or video games. The consistency amongst the teachers this way was striking. On the positive end, it makes sense that adults with a passion for literature might become those that teach elementary school. Do we have as many teachers for young children equally passionate about writing?

The teachers are not writers in the same way, and this impacts their approaches in the classroom, with a heavy focus on reading over composition

In contrast to many of the other teachers, Vivian also immediately following upon her love of reading, explains how this grew into an interest in writing as well:

As an adult, I’ve become more interested in how it’s actually put together, how did the person get there, how did various writers that I admire actually structure this story, and not only stories but factual writing. I try to write occasionally for the newspaper and they’re always telling me to hack it down to about half. So I really enjoy the challenges of becoming a better writer myself, and I’ve taken lots of editing, substantive and copy editing courses and writing courses. I just do it for pleasure, but it’s fun. Sometimes I do it professionally, I’ve written some things for school here and for the district and for the newspaper; it’s fun.

Vivian and Elizabeth were the only teachers who considered themselves writers as well as readers. But these experiences carried forward into their practice. Elizabeth, for example, used text in her classroom in a very different way than the other teachers:

A lot of the ways that I use reading is about writing. I’ll read to them and we’ll talk about it. I’m kind of doing it for some other purpose, I’m not teaching them reading so much. When I was teaching poetry, I think my main reason for teaching poetry was (you know I love it), it’s so they’ll write poetry.

It was clear in getting to know Elizabeth’s practice – and she was the teacher most interested in participating in this study and having long conversations about the nature of literacy and her teaching practice – that her focus in the classroom, especially in relation to text, was unique amongst the staff. This approach, where reading in large

part was in the service of writing, and writing in the service of thinking, really contrasted to the reading response approach described by most of the others. None of the other teachers talked about reading texts with students in order to understand the craft of the author, yet this was a central aspect of Elizabeth's work. Thus, becoming a writer in her own life transformed her literacy practices in a very real way.

“NEW LITERACIES” ARE NOT A TYPICAL PART OF DAILY CONVERSATIONS SURROUNDING LITERACY

The structures of schools were built around traditional text-forms: individual desks, paper (or, at one time, slates), writing implements – ink, pencil and pen, the chalk board at the front of the room. Beyond word processing, this structure does not adapt itself easily to alternative text-forms or electronic media. These forms are endlessly complex and provide opportunities for non-linear experiences and expression, yet typically adults tend to think of them in relation to print metaphors, as the technology teacher in this study pointed out. Children have a different relationship with digital media (Hagood, 2000). Teachers and schools face enormous challenges in introducing computers, for example, in a meaningful way into the students' daily composition work, simply on a practical level, as Laura describes in her interview:

You know I used to be at [another school]. Awesome, awesome lab. Incredible. Go in there and there was a working machine for everybody, all the programmes were networked, so each computer had the same programme. This one here? A disaster. An absolute walking nightmare.

These practical frustrations, in working with out-dated computer labs, limited software, limited support, limited resources, and often a lack of personal skill, plague efforts at integrating computer technology at the classroom level, despite its being mandated in the curriculum. More importantly, however, is the paradigm shift in moving from print to digital texts. Usually it looks more like Morgan (1998) describes of a class of students preparing to publish on the web:

Because the teachers and students have limited access to networked computers, the old literacy technologies (chalk, pencils) here persist as the means of instruction in the new. That is, the students are still “doing it by the book” – writing instructions on paper for writing instructions for the computer. They are thus doubly dependent on the authority of the teacher's written word (p. 140).

Thus, in using computer technology in the school, children undergo a process which differs enormously from the experiences they have at home, where blogging, instant messaging, iTunes, email, and youtube all blend in a postmodern swirl, largely, if not entirely, uncontrolled by adults, and never planned out on paper first. They use computer technology for their own purposes, to their own ends, with results we cannot control, even if we understand. Using educational programmes to teach composition skills specific to traditional book forms of literacy is a foreign endeavour, and no wonder students find this largely meaningless and frustrating.

When I asked the primary teachers about technology and literacy, they usually assumed I meant using packaged educational programmes to teach children how to read, for which they saw some, albeit limited, benefit. Most of the teachers do not use

this kind of digital media meaningfully in their own lives, and the potential benefit they saw seemed to be in correlation with what they lived. In Emma's view:

Well, I would think teachers, in general, would value book and writing literacy much more than computer literacy, because a lot of teachers aren't computer literate, they're Neanderthals. They really are, they can't even do their marks on the computer, or report cards, like they just don't have any computer skills, so it's not something they value at all. Would be a pretty big judgment statement, but it is. Teachers just aren't comfortable with it. I would think most people when they look at literacy would just think of writing and reading.

In Emma's case, she had a certain appreciation for alternative text-forms, partially because of the experience she had with learning-disabled children. Through her experiences teaching children who struggled with literacy, she realised that literacy can take different forms or be expressed in alternative ways. However, what she described to me in terms of her own practice was a classroom strongly focused on text-based reading.

It seemed that the teachers recognised the value of alternative text-forms to greater or lesser extents, but it seemed to only impact their classroom practice if it was something they had a relationship with in their own lives – appreciation does not necessarily lead to altered practice. Some teachers saw little relevance to the children they teach for new literacies and alternative texts in their classrooms. Anne told me:

It's a tool. It's a tool, and, you know I'm going to talk about six-year-olds. I have a computer in the room; they play games on it, and they enjoy it. By the time they are in the workplace, that technology is going to be totally different. So, is it really important? No. For young children.

Anne's view, then, that Grade One was about learning to read, and that computer literacy was "least important" for young children, informs her priorities in practice. She sees book literacy as having primary meaning for young children. She sees the computer as a tool for traditional literacy, rather than as transformative to it, arguing: "Is it going to help them be more literate, at this stage? No. Picking up a book and listening to a good story, or listening to a tape, that's going to be much more beneficial for that six-year-old's life." Clearly, there is an emphasis on students being consumers, rather than producers, of text.

Darlene marks some of the cultural changes she sees in terms of computer technology:

My kids have never really written a letter, they've written one or two letters to Santa, and that's about it. I think it has changed, if you ask these kids if they've emailed people, they'll say yes. But I don't know how many of them have written letters.

Michelle: Do they play video games?

Darlene: Oh yes. I think a lot, well, a lot of the boys do, I don't know about the girls, they might, but they don't talk about it, if they do.

Michelle: Do you know which games they play?

Darlene: No, no. I tune it out (laughs)...It's not something that interests me or that I know anything about. So I just tune them out.

Darlene was one of the teachers who identified herself as being more "traditional" in her approaches. While she recognises a fundamental shift in literacy practices, it

doesn't impact the way she approaches it in her classroom, thus, a disconnect can clearly be seen between how the world is and how the teachers teach, even within their own awareness. Is this disconnect something we have simply come to expect from schools? As far as video games go, Darlene admits, "*It's not something that interests me or that I know anything about.*" Video games did not come up frequently in the interview, but when they did, it was rarely in a positive light. Meanwhile, theorists such as James Gee (2003) argue:

Video games are particularly good places where people can learn to situate meanings through embodied experiences in a complex semiotic domain and meditate on the process. Our bad theories about general meanings; about reading but not reading something; and about general learning untied to specific semiotic domains just don't make sense when you play video games. The games exemplify, in a particularly clear way, better and more specific and embodied theories of meaning, reading, and learning (p. 26).

Seeing video games as something relevant to the literacy process is not a view shared by teachers that I interviewed. There is also a gender element here: boys are seen by the teachers as those playing video games, while the girls are often seen as enjoying their work related to school literacy. These perceptions, as Sanford (2006) suggests, are "hegemonic constructions" and ones that need to be "analyzed and children helped to question how they shape, and are shaped by these discourses" (pp. 313-314). She argues that, while girls may conform to school-based literacy practices, this does not necessarily translate into automatic success later in life, particularly as the disconnect grows greater between societal and school literacy practices

Teachers do see changes in terms of how children today go about traditional processes of research and writing in using the tool of the computer. Dan notes changes in the way that children go through writing and editing processes from when he was a student and in how they seek out information, with a brief reference to a concern over time spent on video games:

Well, I went from everything that was written, or any assignment that was completed, in say writing, was written, to now two-thirds are done on the computer. So that's been a real evolution.

Michelle: Do they do that at home, or here in the lab?

Dan: The rough copies are all written in the classroom; the completed version is done at home. So that's where I've seen it the most. So I've seen technology, yes there are a lot of students using it for video games and that is an issue, but I don't quite know how to tackle that one. So it is changing, and trying to keep up with it sometimes is a challenge.

Interesting is that the final draft is still dependent upon a handwritten first draft in the classroom, as Morgan (1998) describes. In Dan's description, one can clearly see what Jack spoke about when he said that adults who grew up with print literacy need to use familiar metaphors in order to understand computers: "*Without concrete metaphors or similes to parallel digital concepts, adults are unable to grasp how the computer works....Adults need to be shown, 'Look, this thing works a lot like a typewriter but with glitches instead of sticky keys.'*"

Like most of the other teachers, Sara acknowledges the cultural shifts that have taken place but, like Darlene, doesn't see this as having a big impact in terms of her classroom, at least, as she says, "not yet":

Michelle: What about technology? How do you think, or do you think that technology is altering literacy practices or changing kids' literacy?

Sara: Well it certainly changes kids, so it's got to affect them in different places. I think technology has changed our whole world, so it has to have changed us.

Michelle: Do you see that impacting your classroom?

Sara: Not in the classroom. Not at this point. My class has 18 minutes of computer a week. We're not doing a lot on computer.

So what is fascinating here is the recognition that technology "*has changed our whole world, so it has to have changed us*", and yet the relatively minor impact on her classroom. All of these exemplify McLuhan's notion of schools as "rearview mirror" (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 249).

Exceptions to the rule

Elizabeth and Jack were strong exceptions to the general resistance to the notion of "new literacies" or "alternative texts". This is because they both have an authentic relationship with alternative text in their lives: Elizabeth is a practising artist, who both works with alternative text-forms in her own work and brings them into the school in various classroom and school-wide projects. Jack, as the technology specialist, was hired specifically for his interest and expertise in this area, in contrast to the usual model where a teacher is given a small amount of release time to run the lab. Jack's perspectives on literacy, contrasted drastically with those of the other teachers. His view is that technology is a part of literacy in the same sense that the pencil is a part of literacy; he reminded me that the pencil is also a technology. We also had a discussion surrounding literacy as a technology of control.

In looking at how digital media is changing literacy, ultimately traditional notions of "What is learning?", "What are schools?" and "Who is the teacher?" are raised. This inevitably raises questions surrounding the future of schools as we have known them, which were developed around traditional text-forms. Ultimately, alternative texts and new literacies will transform school structures.

INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

In Caputo's infusion of Derrida into hermeneutics, there is a loss of innocence. In disrupting the hermeneutic circle (without destroying it), we return to the place we already are with new eyes, seeing all of the flaws and weaknesses in the presuppositions that brought us here in the first place, without abandoning ourselves completely. It is a further loss in the sense of knowing, wisely, that we cannot escape, that metaphysics cannot save us, and that we must look forward to always living inside the fray. This is both loss and release. There are a number of insights (rather than conclusions) that have emerged as a result of this study. These are: (1) Reading is the magnet at the centre of literacy; (2) The particularity of school literacy and classroom composition; (3) The significance of teachers' literacy histories; and (4) The presence of absence in teachers' conceptualisations of composition and literacy.

Above, Caputo writes about what must be done from within an institution, of critique mounted from within. In mounting a critique of literacy and its conceptualisations in schools, I feel not a little treacherous. However, Caputo argues that it is just this kind of treachery that is necessary for the survival of the whole; only by disrupting and fragmenting the grand narrative of literacy can we recover what is of value and open up fissures, creating space for new conceptualisations and possibilities for action. Caputo (1987) describes how disruption can create possibility rather than paralysis:

The thought of the flux does not leave action behind, does not let us enter a new world, make a leap into a different sphere where there is no longer any need to act...We act not on the basis of unshakable grounds but in order to do what we can, taking what action as seems wise, and not without misgivings (Kierkegaard called it "fear and trembling") (p. 239).

The results of this study will be discussed in the following sections.

Reading is the magnet at the centre of literacy

This insight, that seemed central throughout the study, was surprising to me. I had anticipated that traditional, text-bound forms of literacy might be central to teachers' conceptualisations. What I did not anticipate was that *reading* would be so central. In almost every case, with Elizabeth as the clear exception, the focus of talk around literacy was not only on text-based forms of literacy, but on the *reading* and *interpretation* of those texts. Children in elementary schools are being taught to *decode* print text, and in most cases it is assumed that they need to bring *personal meaning* to those texts in order to be able to interpret them. Emphasis is on making *connections*. Fascinating is that while teachers speak of their views as being individual and idiosyncratic, this emphasis on reading is clearly historical. Christie and Misson (1995) note the emphasis in the 18th, 19th, and early part of the 20th Century on reading, noting, "There was a sense in which, in much educational practice, reading was often seen as the more significant skill" (p. 1).

While we no longer believe that children must learn to read before writing, clearly in this study the overwhelming focus of what teachers considered as literacy was *reading*. Thus, the historical emphasis of reading, like a magnet at the centre of literacy, drawing all other elements back to itself, lives on. What is of concern here is that, ultimately, children are taught to focus on becoming consumers, rather than producers, of text. What is "given", in print, in "black and white", the canon, is authorised over children's own voices. As Stuckey shows (1991), texts are never neutral, and literacy practices can serve to disempower. She writes, "Far from engineering freedom, our current approaches to literacy corroborate other social practices that prevent freedom and limit opportunity" (p. vii). The importance of approaching texts critically, and being a constructor of one's *own* texts, is present in a small number of the interviews. However, over the staff as a whole, the overwhelming understanding of reading is through comprehension and personal meaning, firmly located in traditional and subjective-individual orientations.

The particularity of school literacy and classroom composition

In presenting the data, I have tried to show how teachers' conceptualisations of composition and literacy are in themselves a hermeneutic process, casting backwards

into their experiences and circling forward into their practices. These conceptualisations have little to do with what they have been formally taught in teacher education programmes, and in most cases little to do with current curricula, theories or projections about the kind of world students will be living in when they grow up. They even have little to do with the kinds of composition and literacy that function in the world today, here and now. What they do reflect, however, is an induction into *school* literacy and *classroom* composition, which is very specific in its form and content. From this viewpoint, and in the context of the historical narrative of literacy, the spelling test, the handwriting practice, the desks and the chalkboards still make some kind of sense. This is what school is, and what it requires. However, what must be recognised now is the growing disconnect between schools and the world. I think of Vivian, when she told me what she felt she was doing in providing Reading Recovery: “*I’m offering a vital service, for survival in this environment. And that’s where they are, in this environment.*” There is something tragic about this, that we create a system that causes children to suffer in the event they do not grasp something as difficult as learning to read on schedule, by age six or seven, and then have to provide redemptive services in order to rescue them from the very system we created.

School has colonised learning, and its missionaries teach literacy with a religious zeal. But the forms of composition and literacy taught are a specific, school-shaped doctrine, which has increasingly less relationship with the literacies students experience in the world. There are so many school-based literacy practices which we take to be natural and correct, but this is often because we are held captive and conditioned by our own language (Gadamer, 1999, p. xxv), unable to get outside of the picture that captivates us (Wittgenstein, in Monk, 1990) of what school literacy and composition is and is supposed to be, as this is “repeated to us inexorably” (p. 365). As Williams (1998) comments, “Media reports, and the political policies in which they frequently result, often suggest that useful directions for literacy education policy are to be found in imaginary visions of learning and teaching which are located in the halcyon days of nobody’s youth” (p. 18). It is time to break free of the constraining nostalgia that whispers in our ears, unquestioned, because we believe the myth conveyed that students will not be prepared for life without our adherence to practices developed as technologies of control rather than as opportunities for real learning.

Significance of teachers’ literacy histories

There were definitive connections between teachers’ own experiences and histories of literacy and their current conceptualisations of composition and literacy. These stories had great power. In many instances, the teachers were not aware the extent to which their own experiences had shaped their practice, and saw it more a matter of idiosyncratic personality. In each case, I could hear echoes of the childhood experiences they described in their current descriptions of how they understood literacy, and in many cases, their experiences with their own children. This process of looking back to think forward is a hermeneutic one, still always contextualised within a socio-historical consciousness. These findings agree with much of the current literature in teacher education, which has begun to recognise the significance of teachers’ biographies in their being-and-becoming a teacher (Calderhead, 1996; Carter & Doyle, 1996; Clandinin, 2000; Munby et al., 2001).

There are important implications, then, for teacher education. The data clearly shows that teachers view their teacher education, in general, as having little impact upon their practices. For those of us involved in teacher education, this should be data that causes us to sit up and take notice. If teachers' practices in surrounding literacy and composition are based on conceptualisations built through childhood experiences, then these experiences must become a central text for the education of teachers, to give them the opportunity to make conscious these experiences and to critically interpret their meaning.

Presence of absences

There were a number of significant absences in what the teachers described to me about their conceptualisations of literacy, a presence of absence in the conversations. Sometimes it was only when one teacher spoke of something, for example, Elizabeth's description of how she uses texts in her classroom to inquire into the craft of writing, or Jack's comment that writing is a technology, that I would notice its absence amongst the other interviews. The following are significant absences that I noted:

a) An absence of talk surrounding the significance of race, class and gender to the task of becoming literate. In other words, while I could interpret the effect that ethnicity, class and gender had in these teachers' own lives in relation to literacy, talk of the importance of race, class, and gender to the literacy practices in their classrooms and to the students' lives was markedly absent. I argue that as public school teachers, there is a mythology surrounding the equalising effects of education, and in particular, the acquirement of literacy:

We live the mythology of a classless society. We believe our society provides equal opportunities for all and promises success to those who work hard to achieve it. We believe the key to achievement is education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy (Stuckey, 1991, p. vii).

In contradiction to this mythology are numerous studies demonstrating, in fact, the opposite: that students who vary in ethnicity, class and gender receive *different* educations. (For ethnicity see Heath, 1983; for class see Anyon, 1981; for gender see Sanford, 2006; for all see Stuckey, 1991, p. 105). So while for at least several of the teachers, these elements directly impacted their own experiences of literacy, they seemed hesitant to consider their implication for their own teaching, other than an idealism that they can simply counter these social forces with literacy learning. It is high time we started asking *what* the children are reading, to what ends and purposes, and *how* those texts position them in all of their gendered, classed and ethnic experiences of the world. These questions are being asked in the theoretical literature around literacy, but not enough in the classroom.

b) An absence of the notion of "new literacies" or "multi-literacies" other than in a superficial way. Despite the shift in the broader society that Illich (1993) notes, whereby the "book has now ceased to be the root-metaphor of the age", I argue that it is still very much the root metaphor of the school. Schools are designed with printed text in mind. This absence is becoming more and

more glaring, the gap between school literacy practices and societal literacy practices ever widening.

c) A general absence of viewing literacy as a complex phenomenon, beyond, basically, reading and writing. In many cases there was talk of complexity, but in their interviews I heard generally a sense of the straightforward nature of composition and literacy. Laura was taken aback when I asked her where her ideas about literacy came from, "*Oh my goodness (pause). Maybe I'm off the mark in what I think literacy is all about.... I guess I just make an assumption that as a teacher it's our responsibility to teach kids how to read and write with comprehension, and to sort of elaborate and expand.*" Clearly, the teachers view their work with children as complex, and the learning of literacy by children to be a complex task. However, what I am hoping to accomplish here is to disrupt and confound the common, everyday understanding of literacy and composition. After my interviews with the teachers, several of them approached me to say that our discussion had made them rethink the nature of literacy. This demonstrates the importance of these kinds of conversations in schools.

The results of this study show that it is the teachers like Elizabeth, who write in their own lives, who seem to have a more robust understanding of how to teach writing to children, and indeed, are more likely to do so, where many of the other teachers spend much more time on reading. While it is not clear if this would be universally found across schools, in this specific school context the teachers are much more dedicated readers than writers. Therefore, what would make sense for this staff would be personal work in the area of writing. I think of Sara, whose writing activities as described are currently comprised of grocery lists, notes to her children's teachers, and writing report cards. What might potentially come out of an opportunity for her to write a short story, a poem, an article or an essay? A first-hand, current experience of the difficulties of writing would be of benefit when creating writing opportunities for her classroom. The difference in perspective created by this kind of activity is found in the teachers' descriptions of their practice, where Sara has her students read almost exclusively for understanding and the creation of personal meaning, whereas Elizabeth has her students read for the sake of learning about the craft of writing.

This example of writing is only one example. The same might certainly be true of new aspects of the curriculum such as technology integration. It is little wonder that the envisioned curriculum is not implemented, by and large, because of the teachers' lack of relationship to computer technology in their own lives. This would take more than a one-day workshop on how to use a word processor or download from the Internet. This might take discussion groups online amongst staff for various professional purposes, introduction of "play" such as video games, or groups that might explore interests such as photography or music through available technology. It is not enough to tell teachers what is possible, mandate it in the curriculum and then throw information at them quickly at a one day workshop. What needs to be understood is the relationship between teaching, composition, and life, and this makes higher demands on schools and school districts to support teachers in exploring the curriculum they expect them to teach.

A RADICAL LITERACY

What I have tried to explore throughout this study is how teachers actually conceptualise composition and literacy and how those conceptualisations are socially and historically situated. What I learned was how directly those conceptualisations were personally located within teachers' experiences. These experiences, while being rich sources for classroom practice, are also limited by the historical consciousness to which they belong. There may be no escaping this entirely, but an awareness of this movement between past, present and future is necessary if we are to open new possibilities for literacy, rather than clinging on to those that have served us in the past, repeating them to ourselves inexorably as necessarily "true". As we look forward in the field of literacy and composition education, at this time of deep change, I would like to argue for a radicalised literacy, using Caputo's (1987) radicalisation of hermeneutics as a guide. As previously explored, he attempts to free hermeneutics by exposing it to deconstructive flux.

If there is no master name, if there are too many truths, what has become of science and ethics, thought and action, theory and practice (provided we can make such distinctions)? If the flux is all, and linguistic, historical structures are nothing more than writings in the sand which we manage to inscribe in between tides, what then? What can we know? What ought we to do? What can we hope for? Who are we, we who cannot say "we," we who are divided from ourselves, our (non) selves?

In understanding composition and literacy within the sweep of history, we can contextualise our own moment of history where literacy practices are shifting on a large scale.

We are now moving beyond a time when literacy seemed to be settled, restoring the difficulty of literacy as its shapes and forms shift. Christie and Misson (1998) assert,

Not since the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century has there been anything with equal potential to revolutionise literacy as the advent of digital technology in all its different manifestations....Literacy itself will inevitably change, indeed is already changing, has already changed" (p. 13).

This is even more true now, at the time of this writing, than it was in 1998. It is not only composition and literacy that is changing, but the whole world, at a faster and faster rate. Literacy has been cut loose from its moorings, but this fact is largely not recognized in schools. The task for educators is to cease imagining that we are in possession of the knowledge children of today will need for tomorrow. We must become more more brave in wading into the flux, becoming more comfortable, as Caputo (1987) says, "with a raised awareness of the insecurity to which we are exposed" (p. 239). Critical here, I argue, is not a rushing forward into the future, imagining a linear trajectory. Fischer (2006) argues that we must now "develop a critical philosophy of the digital" in relation to "dominant ideologies", a "philosophy that will allow us to rethink the foundations" (pp. 13-14). This is the gift that Caputo gives us, showing how to deconstruct and destabilise without abandonment. The past is neither annihilated nor venerated as a foundation. Rather it is reread, wisely and with eyes open, for the purpose of living now, in the noise and clash of the fray.

This kind of thinking is counter to practice in schools, where the institution demands a high level of organisation and clarity of purpose. While I have one example from my study of a teacher opening up a writing experience for students in this way, where Elizabeth asks her students, "What's your project?" – this certainly is not business as usual in schools. Indeed, the very structure of schooling, let alone its history as modeled on the industrial machine, works against an authentic engagement with the flux. Schools are designed for a stable world. The structure of schools as we know them today was made possible by the fact of composition and literacy as we have known it, and were built around the possibilities it afforded. It follows that as composition and literacy are irreversibly transformed, so too with time will schools transform. The question is whether this will be primarily a reactive process, or one in which we take an active part.

As I look around the coffee shop in which I work, I see many people involved in a variety of literacy activities, broadly conceived. The girls in the corner curl up with papers and books spread everywhere; one studies while the other talks on her cell phone. Beside me a couple converse while papers litter the table, at the same time as the laptop on the table hums with the young man's instant messaging conversation which he has open next to the term paper he is writing while his girlfriend flips through her text book and text messages on her cell phone with the other hand. Several men laugh, while one of them describes the content of a humorous email he had received, "typing" on the table as he did so. A study group debates biological processes at the large table in the corner, while the man next to them reads the paper and works on the crossword. Meanwhile, friends meet and converse with lattes in hand. All of these represent multiple literacy processes, for purposes determined by the individuals who use them. These open, loose communities might represent the education of the future, rather than the tightly controlled community of the classroom, where all legitimate activity is determined by the teacher. This current state of affairs is partially an assumption that students will not be interested in learning if they are not compelled, through a complex system of reward and punishment, to do so. The school ensures its own survival by controlling the credentials with which society's members may obtain employment and professional status.

There are those that will argue that what we are experiencing in the world in terms of new forms of composition and literacy, particularly digital media, is in fact one of the largest shifts we have undergone as a species, on par with or even more drastic than the invention of writing in the first place (Fischer, 2006). What is abundantly clear from the data collected in this study is that those changes have not made it into the classroom in any authentic way, or into the conceptualisations of most teachers. It is, unfortunately, business as usual to a surprising degree within classrooms. Reading was the strongest component in the interviews, for example, rooted in the schooling practices of a century ago. What about the predilection for those who love reading to not only be the most successful at "school literacy" but also to become the most likely teachers in the first place. By and large, those involved in the transformation of literacy in society are not those involved in the education of the young. This basic irony has grave implications for schooling and its role as a conservative instrument; for all of this, the mechanism becomes clearly apparent. Those most successful at school literacy are the ones who then take over its perpetuation. Those successful at it are heavily invested in maintaining traditional notions of literacy and text-forms,

without which the purpose of schooling becomes heavily suspect, and traditional literacy becomes transparent as a technology of control (Stuckey, 1991).

I call here for work in the present from the community of educators in re-imagining literacy, re-imagining school spaces so that alternatives can be considered now. Insisting on continued “rearview” approaches to education does not serve us, and ignoring the fissures in the institutional structure created by massive changes in society will not prevent the crumbling. Caputo (1987) says, “We have argued that thinking and acting...are to be understood in terms of the agility of one who knows how to cope with shifting and elusive circumstances...to stay in play with the play” (p. 293). We must become co-constructors of the future that is being thrust upon us, rather than nostalgic conservers of a past that has already disappeared. This is a moment of opportunity, where, if we are to embrace the flux of change, and recognise the momentous shifts in literacies even as we appreciate its history and tradition, we might find ways to act, with thoughtfulness and with purpose.

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