LITERACY AS DIALOGUE

Thomas Falk
Ohio State University

> *"The skills of reading and writing have no inherent disposition to produce independent thinking…literacy is usually intended to make men harmless, obedient, and productive"*
> *– Robert Pattison*[1]

Literacy remains a puzzling phenomenon for philosophers. Why is it that we champion literacy so heartily, yet also hold it at a distance, as dimly suspect? This question, essentially, will be the concern of this paper. Critical scholarship frequently depicts literacy education as an "initiation into passivity."[2] Disconnected from the lives of students and reduced to strategies for scoring points on tests, literacy becomes an exercise in the reproduction of a moral economy of discipline, compliance, and productivity. Yet we also recognize that the modern world compels us to be literate as never before. Seeking to escape literacy's hegemonic-emancipatory dualism, many turn to criticism of recent political efforts such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 or the *Why Johnny Can't Write* report of 1975. In this essay I argue that such criticisms are limiting and that better, more philosophical answers remain to be found.

Over two millennia ago, Socrates warned that writing would deceive humanity as to the true nature of wisdom. This criticism, however, along with the criticisms of contemporary scholars, has certain limits. Socrates could not have imagined our modern world and the vital role of literacy within it. Similarly, contemporary scholars often go too far in their cynicisms as to obviate the potential for meaningful and effective educational change. I will argue that our schools *do* currently practice appropriate methods and pedagogies for teaching children how to read and write. However, these methods and pedagogies require guidance from more robust educational aims together with an understanding of literacy's dialogical nature.

In order to illustrate this nature, I will examine the lives of M. Carey Thomas, second president of Bryn Mawr College, and Frederick Douglass, slave boy turned public intellectual. The reading and writing habits of these

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[1] Robert Pattison, *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 64, 129.
[2] Colin Lankshear, quoted in Steven Tozer, Paul Violas & Guy Senese, *School and Society: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), 251.

two Americans demonstrate literacy not simply as a reductive formula for scoring points on tests, but as a metaphor for intelligent living.

Literacy and the Word

> *"And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality."*
> *– Socrates*[3]

Toward the end of *Phaedrus,* Socrates begins a critique of the written word with the Egyptian tale of Theuth and Thamus. Responding to Theuth's argument that writing would make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memories, Thamus argues that writing will instead have the opposite effect, making the Egyptians forgetful and deceiving them as to the true nature of wisdom. Although Socrates does not foreclose upon humankind's capacity to wield the technology of writing intelligently, he remains largely critical. Like a painting, says Socrates, the written word is stiff and incapable of speaking back to interlocutors.[4] Throughout the relevant sections of *Phaedrus*, he depicts writing as divorced from wisdom.

Socrates compares the writer to a farmer who late in the summer plants seeds to grow in his garden. Soon the seeds flower; and the farmer appreciates their beauty. But in short time that flower and all its beauty hath wilted.[5] Just so, men and women may marvel at the thoughts they commit to the garden of letters; but soon those words, like the farmer's flowers, prove lifeless and vacant. More than two millennia later—particularly within educational literature—much written work falls flaccid and lifeless as quickly as the farmer's late summer flowers, having been committed to print before being properly cultivated, through dialogue, into wisdom.

If men and women are to write, says Socrates, let them do so for the sake of amusement and recreation. Allow them to record words so as to protect them from the forgetfulness of old age. But let not this pastime be confused

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[3] Plato, *Phaedrus,*274e-275b, translated by B. Jowett, Project Gutenberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1636/1636-h/1636-h.htm (accessed March 10, 2010).
[4] Ibid., 275d.
[5] Ibid., 276b.

with the far nobler pursuit of dialogue. Unlike the reminiscent writer, the student trained in dialogue will be capable of handling arguments; for it is the process of argumentation which serves to graven knowledge, not on stone or paper, but upon the soul of the learner.[6]

It is believed that the technology of writing affected the way people conceive of their own thinking processes.[7] During the time of Socrates, logic necessarily involved dialogue between two or more people. With its medium as the spoken word, this logic existed evanescently in its mode of production. Lacking the written medium, ideas could only be preserved and passed on through exchange. Even during the Middle Ages, university students at Paris still proved their knowledge and wisdom orally, by "disputation," not because they lacked the tools and skills to write, but because the connection between knowledge, wisdom, and writing still remained tenuous.[8]

As literacy proliferated over time, readers began to conceive logic as "thinking," a private act taking place within one's own skull.[9] Whereas thoughts had previously been understood to take shape in the midst of discourse, they could now be marshaled silently within the brain. Two thousand years after Socrates, the invention of print intensified this phenomenon to the extent that the modern person can no longer imagine thinking as anything but a private matter. But this is a notion Socrates would have thought ridiculous.

I argue that Socrates' criticisms of writing and suspicion of private thinking are relevant to modern educational practice. However, as Socrates failed to predict literacy's crucial role in the modern pursuit of wisdom, his criticisms are necessarily limited. Following, I examine a constellation of contemporary criticisms of literacy education. While I agree with these in part, I also argue that most lack a sense of literacy's connection to Socratic wisdom and further lack recognition of the ingredients of a more healthy literacy education already present in our schools.

Learning Literacy's Lessons

> *"Children no longer read literature. They read disconnected sentences and answer practice questions based upon them."*
> *– Thomas Sobol*

[6] Ibid., 276a.
[7] Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies,* ed. Jack Goody (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 44.
[8] Charles Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 63-67.
[9] Walter Ong, "The End of the Age of Literacy," *The Sounds of Learning Series,* (Omaha, NE: Opinion Institute, 1960), lecture by Walter Ong, MP3 audio file, http://libraries.slu.edu/special/digital/ong/audio.php (accessed August 1, 2009).

New York State Commissioner of Education, 1987-1995[10]

As far back as the early industrial period, advocates of common education emphasized not merely the individualistic ends of literacy such as personal growth and empowerment, but primarily its aggregate social goals such as the reduction of crime, the instillation of proper morality, and the increase of economic productivity. Harvey Graff has written that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, literacy was popularly conceived as a vehicle for disseminating a common morality of orderliness, compliance, and docility necessary for social, cultural, economic, and political cohesion in the expanding capitalist order.[11] Recognizing such aims of literacy particularly and of schooling more broadly, many critical scholars have come to decry the institution of education as hegemonic and oppressive.[12]

In this section I address three common criticisms of literacy education: 1) externally-imposed teaching materials lacking connection to students' lives; 2) rote drilling and one-way teacher talk; and 3) standardized testing. Certainly there is validity to each of these criticisms and we must be vigilant in guarding against their abuses. However, I also argue that instructional practices commonly condemned as disengaged, rote, and oppressive are often actually valuable ingredients of effective and robust education.

The first axis of criticism involves externally-imposed teaching materials divorced from students' lives. In *The Politics of Education,* Freire shares stories of Chilean peasants who had lived under the brutal Pinochet dictatorship. These peasants told Freire that their survival came to depend upon blind compliance with strict military orders regarding not only how to farm, but how to think and speak. After some time, these men and women fell out of the habit of exercising independent thought; eventually they feared losing the ability altogether.[13] Freire saw these stories as analogous to modern schooling. Acclimated to an institution in which success depends upon following orders and keeping one's own thoughts to one's own self, students lose their capacity to speak the word.

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[10] Thomas Sobol, quoted in Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 132-133.
[11] Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 22-28.
[12] For example, see James Paul Gee, "Literacies, Schools, and Kinds of People in the New Capitalism," in *Language, Literacy, and Power in Schooling,* ed. Teresa McCarty (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2005), 223-240. Also see Ira Shor, "What Is Critical Literacy?" *Journal for Pedagogy, Pluralism & Practice,* 4 (1), (1999), 1-15.
[13] Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation,* translated by Donaldo Macedo (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 60.

Freire's educational philosophy criticizes a "nutrition" model of education in which students are treated as "undernourished" and in need of spiritual (literary) fuel.[14] This model, says Freire, fails to account for the fact that students come to the classroom already possessing spiritual and intellectual substance. Rather than imposing externally-derived materials, teachers ought to make use of values and ideas that students already possess. By reducing instructional authority of teachers and schools, students will learn to see the world not as a static, *a priori* entity, but as subject to their own agency.

Whereas I find wisdom in Freire's philosophy generally, it is ill-suited to our present educational task. Scholars who champion Freirean education for children are mistaken regarding the *ideal of authenticity*. This ideal, which dominates our Western liberal culture, holds that the source of the self is to be found deep within each individual. Thus, an education which imposes externally-derived materials upon students threatens to stifle the authentic inner self, out of which true human creativity emerges.[15] But this ideal confuses human nature.

Just as persons gain physical nutrition from externally-derived food resources, so too must they seek mental and spiritual constitution from externally-derived intellectual resources. The business of education is to induct young persons into a dialogue between themselves and the intellectual tradition of their culture so that they may navigate life more wisely, prudently, and successfully. Failing to offer—moreover, failing to impose—this tradition upon students, and to trust human growth entirely to the creative forces of the internal self, is tantamount to intellectual and spiritual malnourishment. Certainly the imposition of ideas must be tempered and moderated so as not to become vulgar indoctrination. Students must also be able to speak back to and reconstruct their intellectual tradition. However, in our current cultural context, the greater danger is that education will fall victim to the ideology of the "authentic self" and fail to provide students with sufficient resources for fostering robust growth and diversity.

Along the second axis, critical scholars charge one-way teacher talk and rote grammar drills with preserving the oppressive and hegemonic character of our schools' darker and less friendly days of old, which John Dewey described as a "lifeless, monotonous droning of syllables."[16] However, I argue that contemporary constructivist and student-centered theorists are too quick in condemning classroom pedagogies as either teacher-centered or rote.

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[14] Ibid., 45.
[15] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 25-30.
[16] George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 187.

Over the past half decade, Conversation Analysis scholarship has provided robust evidence that “teacher-centered” and “rote” instruction are ambiguous and often-abused descriptors of what may actually be productive, engaging, and most importantly dialogical, classroom practice.[17]

Contemporary classroom pedagogy is essentially what I shall here call *cohort pedagogy,* assuming a one-to-one relationship between teacher and class cohort in which individuals participate in lessons not as individuals but as cohort members. Cohort pedagogy is distinct from other modern pedagogies such as *monitorial* pedagogy, developed by Joseph Lancaster in the early 1800’s, and also *simultaneous recitation,* popularized in the Baltimore city schools later in that same century.[18] During the early 1800’s, massive urban schools employed “monitors” to roam large classrooms and devote specific attention to individual students. In many ways, this preserved a one-on-one, dialogical relationship between teacher (monitor) and student. However, as city budget cuts eventually obviated monitors, teachers had to somehow adapt to individually handling upwards of 400 students at a time. Simultaneous recitation proved well-suited to this task and hence became standard practice.[19] Absent dialogue, however, classrooms became dull, monotonous and impersonal, invoking in both student and teacher what the Baltimore City School Commissioner described in 1866 as a “dozy indifference…[which] encourages the absence of thought by lulling the mental faculties into a sort of supineness or slumber.”[20]

In contrast to simultaneous recitation, cohort pedagogy involves student/cohort-teacher dialogue. As today’s teachers lead classes through lessons, they must concern themselves that the cohort be able not merely to recite, but to demonstrate competence and understanding of the lesson. Although teachers do not ask each student to display this competence individually, they do ask individual students to demonstrate their competence *as cohort members,* in a manner publicly witnessable to each other member. At any moment, each student must be engaged and prepared to speak for the cohort. Expert teachers carry off this mode of instruction with striking speed and proficiency. Although it may appear to outside observers and novice teachers alike as overtly rote and teacher-centered, it is in-fact a proper and effective educational method.

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[17] See George Payne & David Hustler, “Teaching the Class: The Practical Management of a Cohort,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 1 (1), (1980), 49-66. Also see Alexander McHoul, “The Organization of Turns at Formal Talk in the Classroom,” *Language in Society,* 7 (2), (1978), 183-213.

[18] William Johnson, “‘Chanting Choristers’: Simultaneous Recitation in Baltimore’s Nineteenth-Century Primary Schools,” *History of Education Quarterly,* 34 (1), (1994), 2-3.

[19] Ibid., 3-4.

[20] *Baltimore City School Commissioners’ 38th Annual Report* (1866), 135.

Comprising the third axis of criticism, standardized testing lies at the core of most contemporary educational arguments. During the 1960's, America's obsession with measuring and scaling its students began to escalate precipitously. Our culture has come to marvel at our students' test scores just as Socrates' farmer marveled at his late summer flowers. Unwisely, we place these scores at the center of our judgments as to whether an education has or has not been successful. Critics charge that standardized tests assess students along narrow and impoverished criteria. While I agree wholeheartedly with this criticism, I suggest that the major error of standardized examination is to proliferate the metaphor of thinking as a private act, to the exclusion of thinking as shared, dialogical, and Socratic.

Being examined silently and individually, students may come implicitly to believe that silent, individual knowledge is the most valuable—or the only—sort of knowledge to have. Socrates would concur that the exclusion of shared, dialogically-derived knowledge amounts to the exclusion of a tremendous resource in the pursuit of wisdom. While I do not advocate the total abandonment of assessing and measuring student progress, I would argue that we ought to abandon standardized and solitary formats in favor of direct interaction between student and teacher. In 1917, long before the obsession with accountability took hold of American education, Alfred North Whitehead wrote the following:

> And I may say in passing that no educational system is possible unless every question directly asked of a pupil at any examination is either framed or modified by the actual teacher of that pupil in that subject. The external assessor may report on the curriculum or on the performance of pupils, but never should be allowed to ask the pupil a question which has not been strictly supervised by the actual teacher, or at least inspired by a long conference with him.[21]

The sort of evaluation proposed by Whitehead requires more from teachers than do proffer standardized tests. Importantly, it requires teachers to engage students in dialogue. This allows teachers to learn how students' readings and writings connect to the interests and concerns of their lives.

To recapitulate, I argue that a constellation of criticisms against modern literacy education—oppressive teaching materials, teacher-centered and rote instruction, and standardized examinations—may be valid, but are often excessively cynical. Externally-derived teaching materials, grammar drills and testing may each be part of a healthy, robust education so long as

[21] Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 5.

they are moderated by a philosophical understanding of their proper pedagogical roles. The largely unmitigated error of our current regime of testing is to encourage the metaphor of knowledge as being generated from private thinking, to the exclusion of dialogue; it is this latter form of knowledge-generation which may be our greatest creative resource for human growth and diversity. Education's road forward requires re-conceiving literacy as a dialogical habit of human interaction.

M. CAREY THOMAS AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS: LITERACY AS PASSIONATE AND INTERSUBJECTIVE

> *"We often experience in ourselves or others how achieving, say, a more sophisticated vocabulary of the emotions makes our emotional life more sophisticated and not just our descriptions of it."*
> *– Charles Taylor*[22]

The lives and literacy practices of Nineteenth Century figures M. Carey Thomas and Frederick Douglass offer a way of imagining what literacy might become for our students.[23] The promise of literacy to serve as a tool for human growth and diversity remains bright in the lives of these two exemplary Americans. Thomas, the second president of Bryn Mawr College, and Douglass, the slave boy turned public intellectual, read and wrote in ways that were intimately connected with their passions and social surroundings. Throughout their lives, literacy fostered what Deborah Brandt calls "metacommunicative ability… an increasing awareness of and control over the social means by which people sustain discourse, knowledge, and reality."[24] Taken together, Thomas and Douglass provide an account of literacy's potential to empower individuals and reconstruct the world.

Thomas was born into a prominent Quaker family of Baltimore just prior to the American Civil War. As a young woman growing up in a morally conservative, religiously orthodox environment, Thomas was prepared for a life of emotional restraint and familial devotion. Daily, she read passages from the Bible which her family accepted as the literal words of God; yet by her early twenties she emerged as an independent woman capable not only of earning a Ph.D., but of passionately loving another woman. A yawning chasm existed

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[22] Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15-57.

[23] This section was inspired by the scholarship of Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "Nous Autres: Reading, Passion, and the Creation of M. Carey Thomas," *The Journal of American History* 79 (1992), 68-95. Also, Daniel Royer, "The Process of Literacy as Communal Involvement in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass," *African American Review* 28 (3), (1994), 363-374.

[24] Deborah Brandt, *Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 32.

between the life which Thomas was born into and the life which she created for herself. Literacy was the means by which she bridged that chasm.

Leaving home to attend college at Cornell, the young Thomas discovered “Heretical texts which challenged the Quaker [faith].”[25] Herbert Spencer’s theories of evolution and positivism equipped her to mount an intellectual challenge to the Christian doctrines which she had already in her heart rejected. Declining a life of marriage which would have doomed her aspirations for a career as an intellectual, Thomas was drawn to the love of fellow student, Margaret Hicks. The two girls spent evenings together reading the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne, who for them “explored and exploded” the boundaries of love and passion.[26] Together they read “Sapphics,” a poem in which Swinburne takes readers to a women’s school devoted to the worship of the goddess Aphrodite. “Saw the Lesbians kissing,” the poem reads, “lips more sweet… Mouth to mouth and hand upon hand, her chosen; fairer than all men.”[27] Thomas’ surviving reading lists inform us that she sought out a host of poetry and literature dealing with homosexual love and eroticism. With the help of these books she discovered previously unimagined outlets for her passions, amplifying her understanding of her own sexual responses to women.

The key to Thomas’s self-creation was the connection of her reading material to her emotional life and social relationships. Her literacy was not simply a private mental technique, but a means by which she pursued a richer and more meaningful articulation of life. The externally-derived texts which she read did not stifle her inner creative forces, but rather provided avenues for expressing those forces in union with her partners. Socrates would have marveled at this young woman’s ability to graven the word through experimentation and interpersonal dialogue unto her mind and soul.

Frederick Douglass offers an equally impressive, but altogether different picture of literacy. Integral to the young Douglass’ “promethean seizure of literacy” was a prior critical understanding of his situation as a slave. [28] He would learn to read and write while already possessing the intellectual faculties necessary to put his literacy skills to their full social and emotional use. Unlike most of the older slaves, who believed that *God* had ordained them to bondage, Douglass realized that *humanity* was responsible for his wretched condition.

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[25] Horowitz, “Nous Autres,” 74.
[26] Ibid., 80.
[27] Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Sapphics,” The Poetry Foundation (1904), http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=174569 (accessed August 1, 2009).
[28] Thad Ziolkowski, “Antitheses: The Dialectic of Violence and Literacy in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* of 1845,” in *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass,* ed. William Andrews (Boston: Hall, 1991), 149.

Thus, when he began to practice his literacy, he did so as a means of participating in the broader public discourse about the institution of slavery. Douglass became, in his own mind and soul at least, a free man engaged in the work of the world.

Reading weekly abolitionist publications such as the *Liberator,* Douglass's "soul was set all on fire." [29] In 1845, the publication of his *Narrative* aimed to reproduce that selfsame effect in others, "inviting his readers to place themselves in the deep pine woods and feel on their own pulses the ineffable horror of slavery."[30] Through literacy, Douglass sought to create a community that rejected slavery not just on logical or political grounds, but from a shared phenomenological sense of disgust. Most saliently, we cannot localize Douglass' literacy merely within his brain. Instead, his writing was wielded as a mighty weapon in a public war of ideas.

Neither Frederick Douglass nor M. Carey Thomas read or wrote merely for the sake of amusement or recreation. Both *did* something in the world with their letters, exemplifying the Pragmatic maxim that *mind is a verb.*[31] Ontologically, Douglass's literacy cannot be located as a private act within his mind. Rather, it must be seen in its full social consequences and as a potent salvo into the struggle for human freedom. Likewise, an understanding of Thomas's literacy requires us to recognize how significantly and specifically it changed her life.

Although neither Thomas's nor Douglas's literacy is inherently incompatible with contemporary educational methods involving externally-derived materials, grammar drills, and tests, by contrast students in our schools today are developing habits of treating reading and writing as mere mechanical strategies for scoring points on tests, the dire consequence of which may be that they never imagine literacy's potential to be anything more and thereby lose out on the great potential of literacy to guide them toward a fuller and more meaningful articulation of life. An education that does not offer this cannot pretend to be anything more than the oppressive tool of hegemonic complicity of which critical scholars warn.

Conclusion

> *"I want to change the face of reading instruction across the United States from an art to a science."*
> *– Susan Neuman*

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[29] Ibid., 151.

[30] Royer, "The Process of Literacy as Communal Involvement in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass," 371.

[31] Ray Carney, "When Mind Is a Verb: Thomas Eakins and the Work of Doing," in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture,* ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 377-403.

Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, 2001-2003[32]

There may be a way in which reading and writing can be approached scientifically, although not in the way I take Neuman to mean it. In the above quote I hear an iteration of governmental calls to base educational practice on repeatable and generalizable results of clinical-trial-model research. This research, in the fashion of the old Soviet Union, seeks to identify a one-best-way of instruction, an 'idiot-proof' formula that any teacher can parrot in front of any class to yield a uniform desired result. Education—and literacy education particularly—can never be scientific in this sense. Instead all that we can hope for is a scientific approach to education in the sense that it is disciplined, prudent, and freed of old superstitions. On this understanding, school teachers are not functionaries waiting for the priesthood of scientists (educational researchers) to pass down easy solutions to their problems. They are all rather scientists themselves, experimentally and reflectively engaged in the flesh-and-bones (intellectual) challenges which the classroom presents each day.

The greatest challenge to literacy education is simultaneously a challenge to our greater culture. What we need are not new technical methods, but instead greater conceptual sophistication and understanding of the methods we already possess. Somehow we must avail ourselves of the wild and improbable idea that thinking is an act confined to the space between our ears. It can also be, as Socrates conceived it, a shared, dialogical activity. So must be literacy.

[32] Susan Neuman, quoted by Diana Schemo, "Education Bill Urges New Emphasis on Phonics as Method for Teaching Reading," *New York Times* (January 9, 2002). Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/09/us/education-bill-urges-new-emphasis-on-phonics-as-method-for-teaching-reading.html (accessed March 1, 2010).