Engaging adolescents in literacy learning

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"Let's not marginalize adolescent literacy" is the theme in Richard Vacca's (1998) commentary on the plight of adolescent literacy in our society. Citing the Standards for the English Language Arts (1996), he calls attention to the fact that adolescent literacy is critical because "To participate fully in society and the workplace in 2020, citizens will need powerful literacy abilities that until now have been achieved by only a small percentage of the population. Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language" (p. 5). To achieve this goal requires continued focus on adolescent literacy especially because our definition of a literate citizen is broader and more demanding today than it was generations ago. Consequently, greater demands in literacy learning are also being placed on adolescent learners. So, how do we engage adolescents in literacy learning in ways that will prepare them to become literate citizens in a global economy?

In this article we discuss two research studies: "The construction of meaning and identity in the composition and reading of an architectural text" by Smagorinsky, Cook, and Reed (2005) and "Stirring up justice: Adolescents reading, writing, and changing the world" by Singer and Shagoury (2006). These articles provide us with opportunities to reflect on the complexity of adolescent literacy, understand the development of adolescent readers and writers, and discover new and better ways to engage adolescents in literacy learning.

ENGAGING ADOLESCENT LEARNERS: THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

"The construction of meaning and identity in the composition and reading of an architectural text" by Smagorinsky, Cook, and Reed (2005) is a case study focusing on author-reader relationship in investigating reading as a cultural process. According to this perspective, "culture provides the overall goals, values, and notions of appropriate action in settings that sanction the use of tools in particular ways (Leont'ev, 1981; Wertsch, 1985, cited by authors) and of the kinds of signs and texts that people produce through these tools." (p. 73) These constructs are central to the researchers' conception of composition and reading. In understanding these constructs the researchers discuss their theoretical framework including insights on meaning in composition and reading that we found helpful. First, settings, the social environment in which human action takes place, is part of the cultural process. Second, composing and reading are social and not solitary acts with a range of interrelated cultural factors mediating both composition and reading practices. Third, the concept of semiotic perspective suggests that signs and texts are not restricted to language but are multimodal (Kress, 2000). Fourth, authors and readers invoke same textual conventions in constructing meaning from text. Smagorinsky (2001) refers to this as the "Transactional zone of meaning construction." Lastly, readers decode and encode texts through their "instantiation of interpretive conventions, experiential images, and other conventional and personal knowledge.... Thus, readers who lack enculturation to the textual codes will not have access to the meaning potential that texts are inscribed to suggest." (pp. 73, 74)

In this study the researchers considered an architectural drawing to be a text, therefore, in order to read it also requires knowledge of "how it is inscribed with meaningful codes, including iconic, numeric, and verbal." (p. 74)

They also identified three types of tools that may be
The researchers invoke Ackerman and Oates' (1996) argument that "an architectural text codifies social activity and can be read by those enculturated to understand its codes." (p. 75) This is supported by an earlier premise that readers decode and encode texts through their "instantiation of interpretive conventions, experiential images, and other conventional and personal knowledge...." (p. 74) The researchers wanted to understand "how a text of this sort is produced, inscribed, codified, and read within the context of a particular disciplinary culture and classroom, itself nested within a variety of other settings." (p. 75)

The case study involved Rick, a 19-year-old senior community high school student in an architectural design class, and Bill, Rick's Drafting II teacher. The task was to design an architectural drawing of a house according to specifications that Bill described as follows:

They are to design a house from 1,250 square feet to 1,800 square feet. There are restrictions, single story, must have two-car garage, must have at least one full bath, does not have to have a formal dining, but must have a kitchenette, like a breakfast nook. Must have two bedrooms, three quarter brick veneer. (p. 78)

Instead, Rick decided to design a house with three rooms shaped like stop signs and three octagons, illustrating his preference for inefficient angles and open spaces. From Rick's perspective his design was justified in that he did not want to do something that looked average and uncomfortable for him. An excerpt of Rick's retrospective protocol read: "I didn't want everything tight, compact.... A lot of the houses, and even the houses that won state, looked tight and uncomfortable to me... I don't like feeling cramped in. I am extremely claustrophobic and I don't, I wanted something large." (p. 84) On the other hand, Bill read Rick's design as a violation to the sense of uniformity and disrupted the neighborhood style. An excerpt of Bill's interview read: "Suppose I like a Spanish look to a home, well, I wouldn't want to put that in the middle of a Cape Cod neighborhood." (p. 84) The negotiations that occurred between the author and the reader throughout the case study were crucial to this research.

Data sources include observations and field notes throughout most of the duration of the course, Rick's tape-recorded think-aloud episodes while drafting at home, interview with researcher based on the series of drafts and final architectural plans he produced during the semester, and an audiotape of a feedback conference between Rick and Bill while Rick was working on his drawing. (p. 78) Three types of codes were used to analyze data—setting as social context in which Rick learned to use the tool, problem to be solved through and attendant to text production, and tool employed to solve goal-oriented problems. The researchers coded the protocols for the kinds of problems Rick was attempting to solve. An example is the economic codes that produced tensions between Rick and Bill, such as Rick's arrangement of space, which Bill believed to be wasteful. They also described the schematic tools that contributed to tensions between Rick's and Bill's reading of meaning into Rick's drawing—cultural mediators (what Bill called "common sense" and design conventions) and images based on Rick's personal experiences (mental maps-mental image or mental pattern, narrative-stories Rick produced, and vision-what made up good design). (p. 78)

The results include patterns of recurring tensions between writer's (Rick's) goals for his drawing and reader's (Bill's) expectations. The researchers found that "Rick's projection of the house design in relation to his lifestyle needs was quite different from Bill's sense of convention and market pragmatism." (p. 82) Consequently, there were tensions between writer's inscription and reader's encoding.

When we were deciding on research articles to review, we thought it best to choose ones that not only address the theme on engaging adolescents in literacy learning but also think outside the box. This research article clearly meets the criteria. What we find significant about this study is that it supports the notion that reading and writing are a reciprocal transaction between authors and readers. In this case, the tensions between Rick and Bill resulted from the "kinds of competing goals and Bill's reluctance to recognize Rick's sense of style and notion of economy as legitimate in the context of the task. Both brought different intertextual images, cultural practices, and motives to their joint activity in producing Rick's architectural text.... contributing to what we [researchers] understood to be a larger project in which he [Rick] was engaged, that being his ongoing development of an identity and life trajectory." (p. 84) We can relate this notion of author-reader relationship to Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional model of the literacy process in which she theorizes that reading is a carefully orchestrated relationship between reader and text. The aesthetic and efferent stances are played out in Bill's response to Rick's text. In both stances Rick drew on his own past experiences, connecting to the architectural text from the standpoint of economics as well as his sense of style, and
becoming actively engaged in the unfolding of the text.

The study also invited us to reflect on the changing literacies, including the semiotic perspective suggesting that signs and texts are not restricted to language but are multimodal (Kress, 2000) or the discourse perspective—literacy as mastery of a secondary Discourse involving print (Trier, 2006). This expanding field of multiliteracies poses a challenge to ways we engage adolescents in their literacy learning.

Singer and Shagoury (2006) write:

Teaching a diverse population of adolescents to be writers, readers, and active citizens requires fundamental changes in how we approach curriculum development, teaching strategies, and student roles in the classroom.... Literacy and individual action are at the heart of this curriculum.... When the relevance of reading and writing is demystified for students, they begin to understand its power in their lives. (p. 318)

In their article: “Stirring up justice: Adolescents reading, writing, and changing the world” Singer and Shagoury (2006) describe a study about a high school curriculum that encouraged ninth graders to explore issues of activism and progressive social change, and provided them with multiple perspectives in understanding and defining activism. (p. 321) The goal of the study is to ascertain how the creation and completion of a social activism unit, Stirring Up Justice, could become a study of literacy in action by using a diverse range of students as key informants.

Two research questions that align with the theme of our article captured our interest: First, how can adolescents use literacy practices to have agency in their world? Second, what teaching practices support a diverse student population to expand their reading and writing abilities? (p. 318)

The curriculum unit, Stirring Up Justice, addressed these questions in many ways. It immersed students in a range of literacy events. The researchers designed multiple workshops using a variety of genres—poetic, persuasive, imaginative, expository, and narrative—to guide students in their learning about activism. Through reading and writing workshops, students learned how to read and write skillfully and critically. These workshops provided students with a wide context and a variety of examples of individuals who have used literacy as a tool to create change. (p. 322)

Books were also at the heart of the curriculum. Students were presented with an eclectic collection of titles to meet the needs of a diverse group of readers with varying skills and interests. Accessibility of books was taken into consideration so as not to exclude any student from participation or success in the unit. Students also contributed their choices to the booklist. Students read selected autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs of individuals who have worked to create positive social change—all these aimed at dispelling prejudice, building community, and introducing students to different and new ways of understanding heroes. They were exposed to required texts and books of choice. (pp. 324, 325)

Finally, the curriculum viewed reading, writing, and reflection as integrative processes. For example, the students would read about their favorite activists, write expository articles about them using creative leads, historical timelines, or personal connections, and reflect on how these activists created and inspired change. The integration of these different literacy events laid a foundation for students to begin thinking about the kinds of issues that touched their own lives and ways they would like to influence change. (pp. 329, 330)

Clearly, the students who participated in the implementation of the unit, Stirring Up Justice, succeeded in exploring issues of activism and progressive social change, and in understanding and defining activism. Singer and Shagoury (2006) write:

The students' passion and commitment to their ongoing projects demonstrated both political imagination and ability to use literacy to exercise agency in the world. Not only did the students have grounded definitions of social activism, but they also grew to see themselves as individuals capable of influencing real and effective change in their lives.” (p. 338)

What Have We Learned?
The two articles highlighted for us insights into the complexity of adolescent literacy, the development of adolescent readers and writers, and led us to discover new and better ways to engage adolescents in literacy learning. We learned the importance of a culturally responsive curriculum that engages adolescents in a wide range of literacy events incorporating a variety of texts and media. We recognized the complexity of the expanding definitions of literacy and texts. We learned that in order to meet the literacy demands of an increasingly diverse population of adolescents in our classrooms we need to employ not only "typical academic literacies" but also more "personal literacies", as well as articulate different kinds of "high culture" academic texts and "popular culture" media texts (Trier, 2006, p. 521). We recognized the value of students' knowledge and experiences as they immerse themselves in reading, writing, and reflecting as integrative processes. We were reminded that literacy is a social event and students' active engagement in their literacy learning can transform their perceptions of themselves as readers and writers.

Adolescents' perceptions of how competent they are as readers and writers, generally speaking, will affect how motivated they are to learn.... Thus, if academic literacy instruction is to be effective, it must address
issues of self-efficacy and engagement. (Alvermann, 2001, p. 6)

Finally, we learned that with passion and commitment, we can engage adolescents in literacy learning in ways that will prepare them to become literate citizens in a global economy.

REFERENCES


