Editorial

Literacy: whose complex activity?

Once one has mastered an ability to read fluently the process suddenly appears to be transparent. In fact this is precisely the way fluency is defined. As successful readers we don’t want the flow disrupted by any conscious “monitoring” awareness of the remarkable complexity that marks what we do as we go about making sense of the squiggles on the page. Thus rather than immediately thinking about reading as an active, ongoing hypothesis-testing procedure, it is comforting to believe that reading involves little more than establishing straightforward connections between symbols and meanings. With this belief firmly in place, instruction can be routinized and the resultant “learning” assessed mechanically through the unproblematic testing of how well children are able to relate sign to referent. How convenient to remove all the uncertainty of literacy behaviour through some direct scheme of decoding and comprehension.

Yet, once we turn to our own deep engagements with the task of reading we quickly see we have grabbed the tail of some worthy and imaginative beast. From the level of sound to the level of discourse we draw on often unfathomable reservoirs of knowledge and experience to make the vast majority of decoding and comprehension hypotheses or “guesses” come out “correctly”. Then suddenly around the corner of the next sentence we discover a guess that needs reconstruing. Otherwise, the immediate constituent we are processing leads to incoherence. Let’s say we are working our way through the following string of words: “Using such interactive signals while reading aloud models for the student writer…” Choosing the hypothesis that *models* is a noun modified by *reading aloud*, we soon discover that this will not fit with the rest of the sentence. So we go back and see that *models* is meant to be a verb.

At these lurching moments – and the possible *miscues* seem endless – we become aware of just how much is going on all at once during any act of reading. This is perhaps no more glaringly evident than when we find ourselves struggling with a text outside of our area of expertise – we know all the words, but are clueless as to what is going on. Still, it remains easier to conceive of an act of reading as involving the “out there” being taken inside the brain by the reader, rather than the result of a complex transaction whereby reciprocity is subtly negotiated among text, context, and reader.

This easy conception, however, does not serve developing readers well, regardless of how attractive it might appear. But to keep the complex view of literacy practice prominent in the mind of an easily distracted public requires hard work. It involves telling over and over again stories of readers immediately anchored in the processes of both cracking and employing the codes of comprehension. We need to document such stories in order that the purveyors of simplicity not get the upper hand in our schools. For in the end what should be an empirical matter is always already clouded by self-interest, self-delusion, and the struggle to maintain political power. Education it seems is only partly about the learning of skills and knowledge; equally important is perspective and the husbanding of resources in ways that either invite individual agency or muffle critique and dissent so as not to question authority.

Debates about reading and how to teach it in other words are marked by contrasting views of the function of literacy in both the private and public domains: a literacy of *control* in which the meanings of texts are transmitted directly to passive audiences versus a literacy of *transformation* in which meanings exist to be contested so that readers take their place as active participants responsible for the social conditions that surround them in an evolving democracy.

As the editors of this special issue, our call for papers was intended to encourage researchers and practitioners to share work on reading that provides more insight to just how educators might support the complexities of the reading process in the arena of teaching. What are some of the many ways in which children are successfully being engaged with the complexity of literacy learning, and what evidence is being gathered to demonstrate such learning? How in fact do we see beginning learners match words with the world and thereby expand their sense of what is possible?

The contributors to this special issue have engaged with the topic in different ways, but not always in ways the editors had foreseen. In the call for papers, for instance, we mentioned the Simple View of Reading – now firmly embedded in UK government policy – as an example of the reductionism that sometimes bedevils discussions of literacy, especially in government directives. The Simple View of Reading describes reading (or rather Reading Comprehension) as the product of Listening Comprehension and Decoding.
This definition, however, leaves out of account many aspects of reading, learning and becoming literate, from the role of the text in the whole process, to the diversity of the learners and what they bring to their learning.

Still, several of our contributors have focused their contributions closely on the issues raised by the Simple View of reading, exploring the relationship between language comprehension and decoding in detail. In their defence of the simple view, Stuart, Stainthorp, and Snowling draw on a large number of behavioural studies which, they argue, show that word recognition and language comprehension are two essentially distinct processes, both necessary to text comprehension. They see the process of reading with comprehension as essentially sequential, the search for meaning coming into play only after words have been identified. They do not, however, argue for attention to language comprehension to be delayed until the learner has achieved the “fluent and automatic word recognition” that is the goal of phonics teaching. What is important is that the dynamic interaction of these two processes be maintained during instruction so that the complexity of comprehension does not play second fiddle to the “relatively easy” teaching of word reading skills.

Basing her article on a range of behavioural and brain-imaging studies, Goswami takes a contrasting view. While agreeing that establishing the relationship of the visual symbol to the phonological representation of a word is central in learning to read, Goswami argues that learning to read English presents something of a special case. When identifying new words, children learning to read in languages with simpler word structures and more consistent spelling systems make effective use of phonics focused on the phoneme level, of the sort that Stuart, Stainthorp, and Snowling recommend. But children learning to read English have far less success using this strategy alone. When they encounter unknown words with more complex structures and spellings they construct analogies with words already familiar to them, drawing on their knowledge of chunks of such words, rather than individual grapheme/phoneme correspondences. So already children who are moving toward reading fluency are able to expand beyond the rote boundaries of sound-letter correspondences, in part because of their intention to decipher more complex meaning relationships that mark the terrain of mature reading behaviour.

Thanks to these two articles we imagine a generative debate initiated surrounding the Simple View, a debate in which the contribution from Kirby and Savage helpfully summarises both the arguments that support the Simple View and some of its inadequacies. As Kirby and Savage point out “The SVR was not initially developed as a model for teaching and learning.” Although they make a case for some of its potential in the classroom, it remains true that we need a richer model of reading and literacy to inform and inspire effective classroom practice. Otherwise, teachers will be left with the burden of imposing an external system instead of using its framework to teach in partnership with the individual child’s needs and views of comprehending the new worlds that texts make accessible.

For an account of learning to read that is sufficiently responsive to the complexity of the process from the point of view of the learner we might well begin with Inquiry into Meaning (Bussis et al., 1985), a report of a longitudinal study which still serves as a benchmark in reading research. For the Inquiry into Meaning researchers it was not enough to look at reading from the point of view of a static system or model: they saw the need to consider the dynamic of what happens as children develop the complex skill of learning to read. In studying this learning process they are led by the evidence to consider in detail children’s approaches. In particular, how willing was a child to take some kind of leap into the unknown? Those who could begin “to guess, to err, to venture” were able to get beyond simple decoding, in part because they were not afraid to question the often stultifying presence of the printed page. Further, the researchers clearly demonstrated the crucial role played by the text in children’s early reading – both in terms of its content, especially its emotional content, and in terms of its style – the pleasurable literary styles, rhythms and patterns that supported and provoked the learners.

The researchers in Inquiry into Meaning viewed reading as one example of skill learning, and brought to their investigation a wider view of what is involved in human learning than that which is often found in reading research. Similarly, in her recent book Proust and the Squid, the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf considers reading as just one example of how the brain learns:

There are few more powerful mirrors of the human brain’s astonishing ability to rearrange itself to learn a new intellectual function than the act of reading. Underlying the brain’s ability to learn reading lies its protean capacity to make new connections among structures and circuits originally devoted to other more basic brain processes that have enjoyed a longer existence in human evolution, such as vision and spoken language. We now know that groups of neurons create new connections and pathways among themselves every time we acquire a new skill. (Wolf, 2008, pp 4 – 5).

Wolf succeeds in linking neurological evidence about how reading works with a passion for literature. Her enthusiasm for reading aloud is an example of this – she argues that it lays down the circuits in the brain that are necessary for learning to read. And to widen
the circle of conversation, Wolf’s book also provides a fascinating anthology of literary extracts that celebrate the transformatory power of reading and its ability to take us into other lives and worlds. Accordingly she convincingly demonstrates how a reader’s intentions serve to activate, and in turn are activated by, the text’s invitation to enter a dialogue of human potential and agency.

The contribution of neuroscience to our understanding of learning more generally (Greenfield, 2000) and literacy learning more specifically (Goswami, 2004) is the evidence of neural plasticity and human adaptability. We create our own brains based on the learning opportunities and experiences that we seek out and that are provided us. That the individual mind is unique and that the individual’s learning environment is so significance point to the importance of attending closely to individual learners, their identities, and their particular opportunities to learn to be literate - a message that complements long available evidence from sociocultural studies of literacy (e.g. Bussis et al., 1985 and Solsken, 1993).

Complex views of reading explore the interrelationships between child, teacher and text in the reading classroom, recognising that what is read is never neutral – it always affects children’s reading attitudes and readiness to read. Lever-Chain’s article provides a useful commentary on the limitations of basing education policy on reading models that foreground decoding, in the interests of driving up standards. By exploring five-year-old boys’ attitudes to reading her research discovered that: “According to the boys’ views, reading had become a school task associated with standards which needed to be met. Ideas about their own competence had begun to form alongside concepts of task difficulty. Several boys, ignoring content, mentioned their preference for short and easy books. Matthew had already formed an idea of his own capacity and limitations “I can’t read, only school books”.

Lever-Chain’s argument against current topsy-turvy government priorities focuses on how an overemphasis on “standards” causes teachers to neglect how classroom practice needs to pay attention to promoting positive attitudes to reading. Even home reading has changed in line with school reading becoming more didactic, more focused on accuracy, less concerned with children’s responses and tastes. In short, what is at risk is not higher test scores, but the loss of agency and independence in a whole generation of readers. Dependent literacy, it seems, is much more amenable to the one-size-fits-all psychometric brush stroke.

Recent studies have shown clearly that UK pupils, while performing better on literacy tests, have a decreased tendency to read for pleasure. Marian Sainsbury, commenting on an NFER survey of reading attitudes in KS2, concludes: “. . . enjoyment levels have declined. We have no direct evidence from this survey of the reasons for the change, but it is possible this is also related to the drive to improve standards. . . . Children are learning skills and reading material that has usually been chosen by the teacher rather than themselves. There may have been less emphasis on the sheer pleasure to be gained from books.” (TES December 2003).

Thus the elephant in the classroom in all discussions of the teaching of reading. Surely, if a concentration on the “best” way to teach decoding and to raise scores ends up producing a disaffected readership, then we need to reconsider our premises. Yet how do responsible teachers resist this trend when ironically those in power seem not disturbed by the development of readers who are disaffected? Such a struggle lies at the heart of democratic relationships vital in any society, for to turn off a reader can be tantamount to breeding a disengaged citizenry, one well able to decode messages but never involved enough to critique the possible flaws these messages contain in the first place. Reading for test scores takes us away from reading for direct participation in our democratic institutions. Remaining disengaged from the text translates into readers who lose interest in critiquing the fatal textual errors being propagated by those holding the reins of political power. Of course children who already come from privilege go on to experience the literacy of transformation. Our concern as teachers is with all those whose circumstances force them below the line, at risk of too easily becoming ensnared in the literacy of control.

No one doubts that reading is a human activity; but just how this activity functions socially within institutions of power is where lines are drawn in the various reading wars that characterize controversy amid the struggle for an appropriate education policy. Just what are the consequences of failing to recognise the fact that there exist a wide range of human responses to beginning reading, and that these responses are fundamentally influenced by prior experiences and attitudes, by the texts that children are offered, by the interaction around those texts, and by the nature of teachers’ pedagogies?

Kenner, Al-Azami, Gregory, and Rugy looked at the role that bilingualism plays in the reading development even as it extends to second and third generation children whose English is stronger than their mother tongue. Basing this activity on Bengali poetry, and comparing a Bengali lullaby with a North American lullaby, led to dialogues with parents around the Bengali texts, a deepening of cultural knowledge, and the development of children’s own Bengali poems, translated into English. This rich description of how schools can draw on and explore the linguistic and cultural heritage of children in the interests of their literacy development once again indicates the poverty of any conception of literacy learning that omits crucial consideration of who the learners are,
along with what the texts are that they are expected to learn from.

This issue of *Literacy* concludes with two articles that explore the rapidly changing basics of the literacy environments within which reading occurs today. Just what are the implications for teachers, researchers and policy makers who seek to prepare students for success within technologically sophisticated communication systems? Are we taking sufficient account of students’ growing proficiency in these new areas where the reading and writing of multimodal and digital texts predominate? Do we really know what and how these students are learning in such contexts or how they can best be supported? What exactly are the literacy strategies being used by pupils as they negotiate online texts and how are these strategies similar and different from those they use for traditional print-based texts?

Walsh’s analysis of the nature and classroom practice of multi-modal literacy, and Syverson’s challenge to the view of literacy learning as a linear, sequential process point to new ways of attending to students and the communication environments that mark their worlds. While no one should confuse inside the classroom with these hypertext worlds that attract students’ attention outside, Walsh provides us with powerful cases to illustrate that the divide need not be as great as it is currently. The text as a site of creation and interrogation might involve as she notes, “[combining] traditional literacy practices with the understanding, design and manipulation of different modes of image, graphics, sound and movement with text.”

Syverson’s vision of complexity is also a plea for acknowledging the rich diversity in text and student that already characterizes our post-modern democratic societies. Failing to act on this recognition, failing to find room for emoticon or graphic novel, hip-hop or text-messaged narrative, means that worn-out linearity yields all too readily to the “medical model” of assessment that accompanies it. This in turn leads to a deadening proliferation of testing, which gets us further and further away from seeing the unique processes of individual readers on display as they sit in front of us clamouring to be taken seriously. Intelligent procedures, such as *The Learning Record*, have long been in existence to capture the pyrotechnics of any present reading act a child may exhibit, but as Syverson notes, we continue to turn our backs on how valuable such record keeping can be as a way of informing reading instruction.

In the end, it will come down to the chalk face. Or perhaps the blogosphere of concerned educators. David E Kirkland, for one, issues a strong challenge to literacy teachers at all levels, should we genuinely believe that democratic relations need to be fostered from the beginning of schooling. If students are to learn from us, we must embrace reciprocity and be willing to stay open to the rapidly transforming means and forms of electronic communication that permeate their culture. “As we ELA [English language arts] teachers begin to recognize a changing world, it must be clear to us that students are not bystanders in the midst of change. They are trailblazers, forging a path toward postmodernity, resisting and affirming resistance to high modernity, and ushering in the post-modern moment in language and literacies within the multiple contexts of youth cultures – some Black and some hip-hop but both as dynamic as they are radical. The brave among us will follow them”. (p. 74).

In short, if we cannot see our need to pass the literacy tests – which our own students implicitly place before us – through careful and sincere listening and observation, our own apparatus of assessing the conventional literacies will continue to lose its purchase and relevance. Should our society end up getting the tests it “deserves”, what will this say about the condition of our democracy? Still, how might a concerted dialogue about literacy as a complex behaviour eventually overthrow the dominion of the simplistic view wherever it continues to prosper?

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References


