A controversy regarding literacy lies at the heart of debates over the current state of American education. In response to the debate, this study reviews and analyzes the literacy theories of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Walter Ong, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, Shirley Brice Heath, and Paulo Freire. The author presents a language arts teacher's perspective on these literacy theories and their implications for her own pedagogy by addressing the following questions: What is meant by the literacy crisis? How is literacy defined by contemporary literacy theorists? What are the implications of these theories for the teaching of language arts? The author concludes that literacy involves a repertoire of social and cognitive practices which inform a critical pedagogy in language arts.
Re-Viewing Literacy:
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Pamela A. Van Develde

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APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy
Professor of English in charge of major

Redacted for Privacy
Professor of Speech Communication in charge of co-field

Redacted for Privacy
Professor of Curriculum & Instruction in charge of co-field

Redacted for Privacy
Chairperson of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy
Dean of Graduate School

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Typed by Pamela A. Van Develder for Pamela A. Van Develder
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The Crisis in Education

The 1980s have given rise to a heated debate over the current state of American education. Proponents of educational reform have amassed comparative data on the performance of American students in an effort to point out to the American public the ills of what appears to be a failing educational system. At the heart of this debate lies a controversy regarding literacy. Reports published under former Secretary of Education William Bennett entitled "A Nation at Risk" and "To Reclaim A Legacy" captured the nation's attention with their highly publicized statistics of declining scores on verbal sections of the SAT and alarming results of students' knowledge of geography and history. Warning against "a rising tide of mediocrity" in U.S. Schools, the national media flashed headlines stating "Johnny Can't Read" and "Johnny Can't Write." A 1986 basic literacy test administered by the Department of Education estimated that 17 to 21 million adults in the U.S. could not read (Bowes 68). Jonathon Kozol's book Illiterate America brought increased attention to this grim picture of educational decline by noting that in 1985 the United States ranked 49th in literacy among the 158 countries making up the United Nations (5). E.D. Hirsch, Jr., who capitalized on the growing hysteria over illiteracy, began a formidable movement in favor of defining (and legislating the teaching of) a standardized curriculum based on a core of knowledge representative of our Western heritage. Underlying
much of the push to reform our schools are the fears that Lynne Cheney voices in American Memory, a 1987 report published by the National Endowment for the Humanities: "In our schools today we run the danger of unwittingly proscribing our own heritage" (7). She further speculates: "Our country's economic role in the world will surely decline unless we improve American education" (10). Cheney goes on to cite "process" as the culprit--"the belief that we can teach our children how to think without troubling them to learn anything to think about" (5). The spotlight on the state of our schools has generated school reform packages as hot topics of political debate in legislatures across the nation--perhaps most notably in the election of our current president, George Bush, who, in a campaign promise, vowed to become known as the "Education President," and whose wife Barbara heads a national campaign for improving literacy.

Research Question

All my efforts as a secondary language arts teacher are focused on the goal of helping students become more literate individuals. Yet confronted by the question of what literacy really means to me and for my students, I find myself in an untenable situation--trying to put into practice a central goal which I too struggle to define. The purpose of this thesis is to clarify and define through an analysis of contemporary literacy theories the perspective of literacy at work in my classroom. This study addresses the following questions: What is meant by the literacy crisis? How is literacy defined by contemporary theorists? What do these theories imply in terms of teaching
language arts? How do these perspectives on literacy translate to the realities of teaching language arts to eighth-grade student?

**Methodology**

Chapter I reviews definitions at work behind the media's and educators' perspectives of the literacy crisis. I present these definitions of literacy as problematic in terms of their varied perspectives. The second part of this chapter describes my view of the literacy problem as seen against the backdrop of my collaborative efforts to write a secondary language arts curriculum.

Chapter II reviews the work of five key theorists whose perspectives on literacy have taken center stage as topics of scholarly debate in the field. I focus on the ideologies of these representative theorists: E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (cultural literacy), Walter Ong (orality and literacy or alphabetic literacy), Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (socio-anthropological literacy), Shirley Brice Heath (ethnographic literacy) and Paulo Freire (critical literacy).

Chapter III moves beyond the description of theories presented in Chapter II to a discussion, evaluation, and synthesis of these theories based on a practical understanding of the needs of my students. My purpose here is to sort out crucial distinctions underlying these views of literacy, present a personal analysis and reaction to each of the theories, and synthesize perspectives on literacy which serve to inform my practice.

Chapter IV addresses my final question: How do these perspectives on literacy translate to the realities of teaching language arts to eighth-grade
middle school students? I include recommendations for creating a pedagogy based on an empowering view of literacy as a repertoire of social and cognitive practices.
CHAPTER I

DEFINING LITERACY

The Literacy Crisis

In spite of the consensus that increased literacy seems to be a major goal of nearly all educators everywhere, there exists little agreement over what is meant by literacy. One writer observes that "there is indeed a literacy crisis, but this crisis needs to be reconceived as a crisis in definition" (Miller 10).

Humanities scholars appeared to heed the national call for a deeper look into the state of literacy in American education. A 1985 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education reads: "Literacy: 'Excitement' of New Field Attracts Scholars of Literature" (Coughlin 1). Experts in the social sciences and noted researchers in English departments across the nation began generating responses to the literacy question in journals such as College English, College Composition and Communication, Review of Educational Research, Harvard Educational Review, English Journal, Research in the Teaching of English, and the Journal of Communication. The field of "Literacy" continues to expand with the recent publication of several books whose titles indicate a growing concern over literacy: Perspectives on Literacy (Eugene Kintgen et al.), On Literacy and its Teaching (Gail Hawisher and Anna O. Soter), Literacy in Theory and Practice (Brian V. Street), On Literacy (Robert Pattison), The Legacies of Literacy (Harvey J. Graff), Awakening to
Literacy (Hillel Goelman et. al), and others. Much of the research concerns itself with the task of defining literacy according to general ideologies which involve ideas ranging from the promotion of literacy as a basic skill to the vision of literacy as a power for transforming society.

When the national media use the term literacy, what is meant usually is the kind of literacy known as "functional literacy." The term "functional literacy" extends back to World War I indicating minimum skills needed for effective soldiering. These skills included "the capability to understand instructions necessary for conducting basic military functions and tasks . . . at the fifth grade reading level" (qtd. in de Castell and Luke 169). The term functional literacy today is viewed broadly in terms of its pragmatic value—as the basic ability to read and write well enough to function in a given society (Scribner 73). The National Assessment of Educational Progress in a 1978 report includes in its definition of "functional" the ability to perform these tasks: "... filling out a driver's license application, reading a train schedule, writing a check, applying for a job, or reading an article from the newspaper" (qtd. in Winterowd 5). Much of what appears in national magazines and newspapers publicizing the "literacy crisis" involves conclusions drawn from standardized tests that we are graduating from our schools individuals who do not possess these basic or "functional" skills.

Academicians in the field of literacy generally agree that literacy connotes something more than just the basic skills of reading and writing and, therefore, demands solutions beyond those of the "back-to-basics" movement. Literacy theorist Robert Pattison issues an even stronger
assertion regarding literacy as a skill by stating that "once literacy becomes synonymous with any learned ability, the word is useless" ("Literacy" 42). The term literacy takes into account a complex set of relationships and attitudes which cannot be remedied by what Mike Rose calls "cognitive reductionism--seeking singular, unitary cognitive answers" to complex issues (267).

One strongly held view of literacy has connotations related to its use in the classical sense--meaning one who possesses knowledge of Greek and Latin. This perspective of literacy, according to Pattison, is typified by the belief that "there are proper ways to teach people to be literate, and when we discover them, we can write proper textbooks taught in proper curricula..." ("Literacy" 43). Patricia Bizzell identifies this kind of literacy as "that which comprises the ways of using language valued by the academy and the upper classes with which it is associated" (141). Ethnographer Sylvia Scribner uses the metaphor "literacy as a state of grace" to describe the "literate individual" as one "whose life derives its meaning and significance from intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual participation in the accumulated creation and knowledge of humankind, made available through the written word" (77). This "classical" or academic perspective of literacy is frequently cited as the basis for "excellence in education" models spurred on by such figureheads as Bennett, Hirsch, and, more recently, Alan Bloom in his book The Closing of the American Mind, along with the plethora of reports issued by the Carnegie Institute on educational reform.

Scribner summarizes the complexity of defining literacy by noting that
"public discussions fluctuate between narrow definitions of functional skills ... and sweeping definitions that virtually reinstate the ability to cope with college subject matter as the hallmark of literacy" (74). Perspectives on literacy vary according to context and underlying assumptions about what it means to be educated. Literacy is not, as Pattison points out, "an immutable constant in the lives of cultures" ("Literacy" 41). What is clear is that no single definition of literacy serves to explain what the public means when it invokes such a term as the "literacy crisis."

The Language Arts Curriculum

In 1987, during the height of Education Secretary William Bennett's reports on the state of education and the publication of E. D. Hirsch's bestseller Cultural Literacy, I joined the language arts curriculum committee of my school district. The atmosphere in our meetings was highly charged with concerns about our students' literacy, but our perspectives on literacy, like the public's, ranged from mastery of minimum competency through skills-and-drills to the development of critical consciousness through social action.

Our task over the next two years was to translate our concerns—in light of what current research in the field was telling us about literacy—to courses of study complete with program goals and performance objectives. Collectively, committee members and I attempted to describe the best of our efforts and ambitions in the classroom. We approached the problem of defining program goals both deductively and inductively as we outlined from research current
theories about cognitive development and language, while identifying from experience, our successful teaching practices. The following themes resonated as the basis for our district's language arts program: writing is a process; we must teach critical thinking skills; the Bay Area writing project is an important model; whole language instruction is the key; we need a multicultural approach to literature; reading is also a process; it's time to emphasize writing across the curriculum.

Translating our ideas to a usable document for classroom teachers was no simple task. What happens when a person reads, writes, listens, and speaks is rife with the complexity of what it means to be literate. The question of literacy became the hinge upon which all other issues depended. Our experiences in the secondary school had taught us that the kind of literacy which concerned us went beyond the functional realm; most of our students could, at least on the surface, read and write. Our concerns about literacy focused on what was happening beneath the surface--how students come to see reading and writing as meaningful activities in their lives; what they do with the information they read and write about. If the specific goals and activities outlined in the curricula did not help students attain increasingly greater levels of literacy, then our efforts were ill-founded.

**Literacy Goals**

Three years ago, in 1988, the work of the committee was published and distributed as the district's official secondary language arts curricula, curricula complete with program goals, performance objectives, and courses of study.
The curricula was organized into two main "strands:"
the expressive (writing and speaking modes), and the receptive (reading and listening modes). We had integrated critical-thinking skills within each "strand" and had broken down into steps the writing, reading, thinking, speaking, and listening processes. We had carefully written objectives which we felt were important cognitive measures of literacy and devised activities which would help students master these levels. (See Appendix A.) Yet for my own part, the research and collegial debate had left crucial questions about literacy unanswered. It seems we had settled too comfortably on literacy as a goal for what I now see as literacy for literacy's sake alone. We had genuflected to the majority of teaching practices advocated by our profession's current literature, but we had not taken the question of literacy far enough to ask: What difference literacy would make in our students' lives? The answer to this question begins with the awareness that the meaning of literacy goes beyond the skill of reading and writing and knowledge of content to what a student does with these abilities. Though we consciously tried to avoid a skills and drills approach to teaching English by striking a balance between emphasis on content vs. process, our curriculum was founded on a prescriptive notion of literacy--a notion that literacy can be measured by the mastery of specific cognitive objectives and skills. We had neglected to acknowledge that literacy embodies a repertoire of practices--both social and cognitive--which enable students to lead fuller, more meaningful lives.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Literacy

In his book *Cultural Literacy*, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. blames problems with the current state of American education on students' ignorance of our cultural heritage. To solve the problem of this ignorance, Hirsch promotes a pedagogy based on a "commonly shared knowledge" (19). Citing statistics based on national standardized test scores as indicators of this increasing decline in literacy, he contends that what is needed "to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world"--basic information which he identifies as knowledge of the Western tradition and canon of great literature (xiii).

Hirsch argues against what he calls the "content-neutral" curricula of American schools, citing the legacy of John Dewey and his followers as root causes for what he sees as an emphasis of developmental skills at the expense of content (xv). Literacy to Hirsch is much more than a skill: it must be grounded in specific content or communally shared information (2). He criticizes what he calls "educational formalism"; the notion that "any suitable content will inculcate reading, writing, and thinking skills" (21). He does not advocate the promotion of knowledge at the expense of skills, but believes "once relevant knowledge is acquired, skill follows" (60). Hirsch sees the lack of emphasis on specific content as an administrative attempt to stay
politically neutral by offering enough diversity to "satisfy the liberals and enough Shakespeare to satisfy the conservatives" (21).

In his plea for a nationally recognized body of knowledge as standard course content, Hirsch stresses the importance of background information each reader brings to the learning process. He draws upon current theories in reading based on the use of schemata (the calling up of prior knowledge) as means for integrating new information into meaningful associations (34). Hirsch concludes that "what distinguishes good readers from poor ones is simply the possession of a lot of diverse, task-specific information" (61).

Hirsch acknowledges that literacy needs change over time; he traces historical developments (primarily the move from an agrarian to an industrial society) which have influenced workers' need for a more widespread literacy (73). Because of these societal changes, he believes the need for defining the "vocabulary of a national culture" is analogous to "fixing a standard grammar, spelling, and pronunciation" (84).

The proposal Hirsch advances for defining this national culture begins with identifying what constitutes the best of Western tradition, which he catalogs in The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy. He answers the argument of those he calls "educational pluralists"--who question the elitist nature of such a list--by positing that mainstream literate culture is the "most democratic culture in our land" and is the "only available ticket for full citizenship" (21). Hirsch acknowledges that multicultural education is "laudable" but "should not be the primary focus" (18). He also concedes that the initial creation of a list such as his is somewhat arbitrary--"similar to setting up any standard"--
and that such a list will continue to evolve naturally (78).

Hirsch's book focuses much more on a rationale for placing specific content at the heart of curricula rather than the means by which this information should be taught. He does advocate that schools also provide what he terms "intensive education," where works are explored for their deeper meaning beyond just the "transferring" or transmission of information from teacher or book to student (128-30). Hirsch also encourages the teaching of survey courses that "cover large movements of human thought and experience" (132) and seems to be in favor of requiring memorization as a primary means of learning: "According to the anthropological record, all cultures whose educational methods have been reported . . . have used early memorization to carry on their traditions" (30).

Hirsch devotes little attention to other perspectives of the debate over what it means to be literate. His opening sentence in the preface clearly states his view of literacy as the possession of "basic information needed to thrive in the world" (xiii). "Our children" according to Hirsch, "can only learn this information by being taught it" (14).

Orality and Literacy

Father Walter Ong's respected study published in Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word challenges contemporary understandings of literacy by looking at the characteristics of oral vs. literate societies. Ong refers to oral societies as being of primary orality—people unfamiliar with writing or untouched by literacy (6). Literacy, in the sense Ong uses it, stems from its
original meaning, "literae" or letters, so without literacy is without letters or writing--analphabetic. The book's subtitle, "The Technologizing of the Word," indicates the construct of logic Ong uses to trace the evolution of language from its genesis in societies of primary orality to our contemporary world of literacy and secondary orality--a kind of orality which includes the change of consciousness brought about by writing (122).

At perhaps his boldest, Ong makes this assertion: "Technologies of the word do not merely store what we know. They style what we know in ways which made it quite inaccessible and indeed unthinkable in an oral culture" (155). More than just an historical analysis of language, this work examines the thought processes reflected in the shift from orality to various stages of literacy which Ong describes as having "transformed human consciousness" (79). A central premise of his theory is the belief that oral societies are less capable of higher cognition than print societies and that the advent of print brought about cognitive change. (Sylvia Scribner, Michael Cole, and others refer to this belief as the Great Divide theory.)

Ong forewarns his reader that understanding the dynamics of these shifts in consciousness from primary orality to writing, print, and electronic media requires a somewhat radical restructuring of our modern-day frames of reference--from aural to visual--as it is difficult to view orality without putting it into the context of writing. Writing must be viewed as more than mere spoken language in a visible form (17). Ong maintains it is only through writing that we have come to know the concept of study; people who have only orality had no or few visual organizers for their thought (9). Since
this distinction is fundamental to the thesis Ong presents, he carefully outlines the key characteristics which distinguish oral cultures from literate ones.

In Ong's view, the role of memory in an oral culture is quite apart from our contemporary linear conception of memory. Drawing upon Milman Parry's detailed study of Homerian narratives for his examples, Ong illustrates how memory plays a different role in an oral society. Memory is mnemonically based in standardized formulas, themes, and patterns. Cliches, maxims, and repetition of themes are valued as a way of passing on knowledge (19, 23). Memory is much more in tune with auditory relationships and rhythmic meter. As a consequence, "fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration" (24).

A central conclusion he draws from his observations is that oral societies are less analytic and introspective than alphabetic cultures. Recalling his thesis that writing gave us the concept of study, Ong tells us that in an oral world there is no visual material to manipulate, take apart, and evaluate; analysis for the society of primary orality is too risky--it requires stopping and breaking up thought into its different parts. Orality does not lend itself to such an objective undertaking (69).

Another significant distinction he makes between oral and literate societies is that the oral world has a unique sense of the past and future. Because they "know no lists or charts or figures" (98), their perspective is more subjective--less distanced and more dependent on human interaction.
He views oral cultures as more communally involved because speech and human contact are necessarily linked (42). As a result of this immediacy, knowledge is created "within the context of struggle" in daily living (43).

Ong relates the role of memory in primary orality to the unique characteristics of narrative. As a reflection of the daily struggle, narrative plot is most often concerned with the agony of heroic figures in bizarre settings as a way to illustrate dramatically cultural lore, maintain the audience's attention, and provide for easier memorization.

Ong's thesis is based on the premise that the transformation from oral societies that knew no writing to early literate societies (Mesopotamia) brought about very gradual changes in the transformation of thought processes (95-6). The first major change occurred as a result of new ways to store information through record keeping. The use of lists, calendars, charts, indexes, and dictionaries allowed the "psychic mind to become more spatially organized" (24).

Changes in narrative were slow, thus Ong describes societies during the late Middle Ages as "residually oral." Early writing still mirrored oral traditions as texts often opened with "Dear Reader"--a tradition in vogue even into the early part of this century. When texts came into greater use and "Learned Latin" became the basis of educated language study, Ong maintains analytical thought grew more complex. He shows how the study of rhetoric mirrored these changes when elocution contests became based more on writing, for "writing reconstituted the oral spoken word in visual space" (123).
Ong highlights the advent of the printing press in the sixteenth century as a more dramatic "technologizing of the word"—words became commodities sold in the form of books (118). He distinguishes between writing and print by characterizing writing cultures—cultures without the technology of print—as more residually oral-based in terms of thought processes. With print, literacy becomes more objectified, exemplified by the "Dear Reader" salutation being replaced with a "Title Page" (126). Reading became a more private affair and begins, according to Ong, to feel more neutral as texts in the eighteenth century paralleled changes in the modern world—the quantification of knowledge through observation (127).

Ong points out the parallel that exists between these shifts from residual primary orality to literacy and the field of literary criticism: criticism in the 1800s focused on the contextual perspective by looking at the historical and biographical background of a work which were crucial elements in oral narrative but less so in literate culture; in contrast, the New Criticism of the 1930s shifted its emphasis to an objective explication of the text itself and therefore "suffered the illusion that writing is a closed system." Ong questions the notion that "language must be consistent" and points out that oral cultures never had this problem (169). He praises Reader-Response critics for their awareness that "the text has no meaning until someone reads it and to make sense it must be interpreted" (162). Ong advocates a blend of these two perspectives where the contextual and textual frames of reference give us "proximity and distance" in order to understand the workings of the human mind (175).
Ong's perspective on literacy is based on classical definitions of what it means to be a literate individual; he cites knowledge of written rhetoric and Learned Latin as key factors dividing oral and literate societies (108-9). He measures literacy as the "evolution of human consciousness" (178) and sees writing and reading as cognitive acts which "engage the psyche in strenuous, interiorized, individual thought inaccessible to oral folk" (153).

Socio-anthropological Literacy

Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole's *The Psychology of Literacy* presents a cross-cultural analysis of the cognitive effects of literacy. The unique population of this study--the Vai, a 1200 person society in West Africa--allowed Scribner and Cole to undertake a comparative study of three subgroups: English literates (schooled people), Vai script literates (unschooled), and non-literate (unschooled) (19). Other variables of Vai culture included literacy in three scripts: English, Arabic (Qu'ranic), and Vai. The Vai and Arabic literacies which flourished outside Western schools made it possible for this study to separate the effects of schooling on cognitive development and contrast these unschooled literacies with characteristics of the nonliterate population (15, 113).

Scribner and Cole's study of the Vai is a response to the Great Divide theorists (see Jack Goody and Ian Watt, Eric Havelock, and Walter Ong) who "look upon literacy as the key ingredient in the packet of social change which separates primitive from civilized, concrete from abstract, traditional from modern" (235). By including in their study the context of social practices and
cultural analysis within the framework of cognitive development (55), Scribner and Cole attempt to go beyond the work of the Great Divide theorists in discovering how schooling and literacy under certain cultural conditions affect intellectual functions (9).

The authors acknowledge that the study of Vai literacy involved a restricted kind of literacy. The descriptive nature of this study encourages the observation they make that "literacies are highly differentiated," depending on the technological sophistication of the society and the function of literacy in that society (238). Yet the authors find no evidence to support the notion that "literate societies process information about the world differently than those without literacy" (7).

The dependent variable in Scribner and Cole's study of the Vai was cognitive performance (21). A list of cognitive tasks and indicators was developed to measure the consequences of nonschooled literacy and schooled literacy (38). In order to test literacy's impact on cognition, nonliteracy factors such as urbanization, family context, and modernity were studied as separate variables (47). One of the challenges of this study was to "bring evidence of localized and specific changes into relation with scholars' theories about literacy and thought" (234) using a theory of cognition as the basis for assessment. Vygotsky's theory of higher psychological functions involving memory, taxonomic categorization, logical reasoning, abstract thinking, and reflective knowledge formed the basis for assessing cognitive ability (115).

The authors further define cognitive developmental change as the emergence of new qualitatively distinct intellectual capabilities, availability of
these capabilities for performing tasks in a variety of content domains, and the capacity to engage in hypothetical reasoning or abstract learning (113). The central focus of their study was to determine if these kinds of cognitive changes could be observed in literacy that takes place outside of school and, if so, what factors could be attributed to this differentiation (113).

After two years of studying the cognitive consequences of literacy, Scribner and Cole determined that the functional uses of literacy represented a crucial variable in determining the outcome of these consequences (163). Functional application of reading and writing or what the authors refer to as the "concept of practice" guides the way they seek to understand literacy: "literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script, but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (236).

By including the concept of practice as a crucial variable in their study, Scribner and Cole are able to cast the meaning of literacy in a different light as compared to the cognitive theorists whose studies did not take into account the effect of culturally organized practices. Scribner and Cole approach literacy "as a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it" (emphasis mine 236).

A major conclusion generalized from this study is that literacies are highly differentiated. Ability to read and write in one language does not necessarily involve the same kinds of knowledge and skills in another language--as evidenced by different cognitive outcomes between Arabic and Vai script literacy (88). A second major conclusion drawn by the authors
involves the cognitive consequences of schooling vs. the acquisition of a written language outside of schooling: "knowledge of reading and writing skills does not have the same intellectual consequences as schooling" (252). The authors attribute this effect to the wide range of activities that take place in school besides those involving writing (255). Chief among these activities is the kind of teacher-student dialogue that takes place in the classroom; discussion about reading and writing gives students practice with abstract decontextualized thinking (255). A central difficulty faced by the authors lay in mapping out specific activities (outside reading and writing) taking place in or out of school which lead to intellectual consequences. Other factors such as family context, religion, careers, multi-lingualism, and urban experience are also linked to determining the final effects of literacy (252).

The authors maintain that their conclusions challenge theories of literacy which hold that written language is a prime factor in social change and that the acquisition of a written language has psychological repercussions (235). Analyses between literate and non-literate populations among the Vai revealed results "in direct conflict with claims that deep psychological differences divide literate and nonliterate populations" (251). This assertion is supported by the evidence that "on no [cognitive] task did we find all nonliterate performing at lower levels than all literates" (251). Performance factors on tests of logic showed the highest correlation to be the effects of schooling (127).

An examination of the Scribner and Cole study of the Vai raises certain fundamental questions regarding definitions of literacy. The recognition that
literacies are highly differentiated is somewhat problematic in terms of generalizing their findings to contemporary American culture, unless the analogy holds that literacy in our culture must also be viewed as differentiated (see review of Heath's *Ways with Words* in this chapter). Recognizing variations in literacy requires there be an accepted measure or working definition of how that assessment is made. Scribner and Cole determined variations in literacy by describing the function or use of language activities in specific contexts within Vai society. They stress the concept of use as critical in understanding the cognitive consequences of literacy in any context. Use or function is closely tied to motivation and may be the single most controlling variable in determining the outcome of literacy learning; the authors observed that cognitive skills were shaped by the range of cognitive practices (259).

They contend that their study opens the door for further research into the area of determining which schooling practices induce more complex intellectual functioning. Verbal interaction in the classroom was noted as a significant factor in promoting abstract reasoning. The influence of the family, religion, and urban development was also noted as important variables; these factors must be considered in terms of the way they affect literacy development. Scribner and Cole recommend further research to examine what life experiences and literacy practices outside schooling are determining factors in increasing cognition.
Ethnographic Literacy

Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* takes an ethnographic look at three communities in the Carolina Piedmonts during the 1970s. Her study provides a detailed analysis of how language acquisition and use affect success in school and how teachers might use this understanding to create more successful experiences for students both in and out of the classroom. A central concern motivated this study: "What were the effects of preschool home and community environments on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in the classrooms and job settings?" (2).

Basing her study on ethnographic methods, Heath spent ten years describing and interacting with families, schoolchildren, teachers, and other community members as a means of recording their social history and the cultural context in which language interaction takes place. The study focuses on two rural communities a few miles apart from one another: Roadville and Trackton. Roadville is described as a white, working class community primarily employed by the local textile mill; Trackton is a black working class community whose members are also employed by the mill or do local farming (1). The third group studied Heath refers to as the "mainstreamers" (236) comprised of black and white school-oriented townspeople in charge of most of the decision-making in the larger community of Gateway. This group provides an important contrast for the cross-cultural comparison Heath makes in terms of variations in language and socialization. Heath is also careful to point out that this study is not focusing on socioeconomic or racial
differences but rather views the "various approaches of these communities to acquiring, using, and valuing language" as "products of their history and current situation" (10).

The results of this study revealed several significant factors which affected the ways children in the three communities learned to use and value language. Heath argues that these factors are "dependent on the ways in which each community structured their families, defined the roles that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that guided socialization" (11). She further defines differentiating features to include:

the boundaries of the physical and social communities in which communication to and by children is possible; the limits and features of the situations in which talk occurs; the what, how and why patterns of choice which children can exercise in their uses of language and the values these choices of language have for the children in their communities and beyond (144).

Although factors differed greatly among the three groups studied, Heath does not use these differences to classify or judge the communities in terms of their "literateness" with regard to "certain universal characteristics" (230). Characteristics most highly and commonly valued by schools--the ability to infer, expound, abstract, generalize, synthesize, etc.--are not the basis of her measurement of literate abilities. She describes each community as literate, yet recognizes the "forms, occasions, content, and functions of their reading and writing differ greatly from each other, and each varies in degree and kind from patterns followed by the townspeople" (231).
Her summary highlights crucial distinctions in the ways children from each of these communities negotiate school experiences. Children from Roadville are generally confined to social (language) interaction within the boundaries of the community. They are exposed to more reading than writing and tend to view the written word as a "fixed authority" (234). Schooling is valued as a means of getting ahead, but there is little interaction between the school setting and the home or neighborhood environment. The kinds of socialization that take place in childhood years provide readiness skills for the early years of schooling, but as learning becomes more decontextualized these students experience greater difficulty in school and begin to see less relevance between schooling and their home lives.

Trackton children's social interactions are also bound to the small community in which they live. Their interactions are less structured than those of Roadville children; children play multiple roles and there are more "discontinuities" in the ways they learn to "listen, observe, practice, . . . and participate" in language events (348). Reading and writing experiences are highly limited and their practice rarely modeled or extolled—leaving their view of the written word as less fixed and more open to negotiation (234). Schooling is valued but there are few readiness skills in place when these children begin school because their patterns of learning language do not fit the more predictable patterns of "mainstream" children (343). Trackton children are more in need of finding their own "schemata" for testing their perceptions because the adults in their world have not "monitored . . . what and when they should learn" (353). These children are more likely to be
discouraged learners in the school setting because they experience failure in the “initial sequences of the school-defined hierarchy of skills” (353).

Children of the "townspeople" more closely represent what Heath refers to as the "mainstream" ideal (237). Social interaction cuts across community boundaries and often includes voluntary associations and outside institutions (241). Exposure to the written and oral word abounds as the "physical and verbal environment of babies is oriented to literate sources" and "mothers treat their babies as conversationalists and potential literates" (247).

Dialogue, stories, discussion, and the negotiation of meaning all play a central role in the socialization of these children. They place high value on schooling especially in terms of individual achievement and as a natural means of continuing to develop the "necessary skills for achieving school and job success" (262). These children's lives also include preschool or extracurricular activities which reinforce what their parents view as necessary means of enriching their children's lives. Perhaps most critically for these children, their parents "assume that what happens at school and at home are linked, and they make possible a variety of activities, resources, and authorities to support these links" (350). Consequently, "most children from townspeople families succeed in school" (350).

Heath cautions her readers to look beyond the surface when drawing conclusions about the role of talk in these children's lives; it is not the quantity but rather the quality or kind of talk that makes a difference in the way language experiences are perceived and handled by these children.
Townspeople children enter school with the "skills of labeling, naming features, and providing narratives on items out of their contexts" and can "retrieve this information to mediate the relations between the categories . . . and features of items and events" (351-2).

Heath includes important information on the role of teachers as co-researchers and ethnographers in this study. Teachers played an active role in gathering descriptive data "to inform their motivations, practices, and programs of teaching" (13). Teachers began as ethnographers of language interaction that took place in their own homes and workplace to help them understand their personal ways of using and valuing language and how this perspective colored their judgments of students' "ways with words" (266). Teachers then began the task of recording and analyzing difficulties and differences in students' patterns of behavior in order to learn, as one teacher put it, "what they have, not what they lack" (314). Students also became ethnographers of the classroom and the community in order to help them link the kinds of language experiences that take place outside the classroom to ways of knowing within the school setting. Teachers came to envision school as a place where children could "capitalize on the skills, values, and knowledge they brought there, and to add on to the conceptual structures imparted by the school" (13). The goal was to help students recognize how they came to know what they knew and to translate these ways of knowing into successful means for "acquiring, integrating, and controlling knowledge" both in and out of school (342).

In the epilogue Heath explains that by the 1980s most of the teaching
practices described in her study were no longer evident in these schools. She attributes this change to the highly publicized crisis-in-education reports which have led to increased bureaucratization, less teacher autonomy, and more emphasis on external standards (356-7). She acknowledges that these teachers' success was tied to the time, circumstance, and even geography of the setting (341), yet she clearly states the value of this kind of cultural bridging in any context by closing with this admonishment:

In any case, unless the boundaries between classrooms can be broken, and the flow of cultural patterns between them encouraged, the schools will continue to legitimate and reproduce communities of townspeople who control and limit the potential progress of other communities and who themselves remain untouched by other values and ways of life (369).

Heath sees the value of her work in the Carolinas as confirmation of the need for educators to communicate respect for the varied "ways with words" students bring to the classroom. Her vision of literacy is one that confirms and enriches the life experiences of learners and teachers.

**Critical Literacy**

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire emphatically states in his book co-authored by Donald Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*: "There is no pedagogical experience that is not political in nature" (115). Knowledge, according to Freire, can never be viewed as value-free and this reality requires the "progressive educator" to be constantly reflecting on social, historical, political, cultural and economic factors which empower or
disempower people (132). Because the notion of illiteracy is generally assigned to the disenfranchised or subordinate groups, Freire asserts that literacy must be analyzed "within a context of power relations" (142). The question that educators must constantly be asking is "in favor of whom and what do we promote education?" (38).

Most literacy programs, according to Freire, are aimed at preserving the status quo or what he has termed "cultural reproduction" (145). The philosophical basis of cultural reproduction is to pass on knowledge in a predetermined way as though "facts are finalized, rigid, and ready to be digested" (79). He sees this as a pedagogy of answers rather than questions which views students as receptacles waiting to be filled (54). Freire refers to this pedagogy of answers, which operates from the perspective that knowledge can be transmitted from teacher to student, as the "banking concept" of education. He believes that the rigidity of this kind of curriculum is most often designed to benefit those who wrote it: "Once intellectual parameters are set, those who want to be intellectuals must meet the requirements of profile dictated by the elite class" (122). Freire cautions that the voices of those who do not meet the requirements of the ruling class are silenced and become labeled as the illiterate among us. Denying the political reality of this silencing, according to Freire, leads to the view of students as objects who are to blame for not meeting these standards.

Freire's assessment of many contemporary approaches to teaching literacy is that they "all ignore the way language may confirm or deny life histories and experiences of people who use it" (149). He describes the
"Academic Approach to Reading" as focused on classical definitions of the intellectual. This approach emphasizes decoding skills, vocabulary development and literary interpretations of the "Great Books," all of which leaves out the language of students (146). The "Utilitarian" or back-to-basics approach, designed to help the functionally illiterate attain minimum skills required for the marketplace, "sacrifices critical analysis of social and political order that generates need for reading in the first place" (146). A third approach, what Freire terms the "Cognitive Development Approach" based on the philosophy of Jean Piaget and John Dewey, takes students through the reading process by "analyzing and critiquing issues raised in the text with increasing levels of complexity" (147). His criticism of the "cognitive" approach is that students' life experiences are largely ignored and that too much emphasis is on the "objective world" rather than the subjective world of the student. The last model he critiques is the "Romantic Approach," similar to Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, which he compares to the cognitive development model except more emphasis is placed on the affective response of the reader. Freire's concern with this approach is that it "fails to make problematic class, conflict, gender, or racial inequalities . . . and assumes all people have the same access to reading" (148).

By contrast, Freire sees these models as lacking a theory of literacy based on "cultural production," where the language and reality of students are validated as meaningful social, historical, cultural, and economic factors. Freire's literacy programs put students' realities--their cultural universe--at the center of the curriculum as a means to help students see themselves as
part of history, as knowledge makers (79). The concept of learning to "read the word and the world" is from this vantage point--the relationship of the world to the learner (106). Students begin with the understanding of their own word rather than the "chosen word" of the curriculum. Cultural production becomes the "way in which people produce, transform, and reproduce meaning". Freire sees culture as the result of individuals' efforts to create and recreate the world through a process of creative assimilation (142).

"Critical literacy" for Freire means empowering students to "look at the relations of how meaning is produced" and to "theorize how meaning, experience, and power are part of the human agency where meaning takes place" (11). This kind of literacy requires a pedagogy which leads students to question the "historically constructed nature of experience" and to understand the "political nature of limits and possibilities that make up the larger society" (7). Students assume a critical posture by questioning "how and what constitutes the consciousness of the world" (49).

Because context is crucial to the development of "critical literacy," he begins with identifying "generative themes" of the learners (127). These themes reflect the daily culture of the group and become powerful tools for problem-posing and questioning their world. He believes by exploring these themes and related issues, students come to read the word and the world and to see their role in it as history makers. This perspective allows them to "reclaim experiences devalued in everyday life by the dominant culture" (157). Freire concludes that it "is only after they have a firm grasp on their world that they can begin to acquire other knowledge" (128).
CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

**Distinctions Among Theories**

A crucial distinction among these theories is that each operates from widely divergent views of literacy. Hirsch and Ong evaluate literacy on a single continuum ranging from illiterate to literate, a continuum based on an historical analysis of Western tradition which carries with it hierarchical assumptions about intellectual development. Their theories of literacy are more prescriptive than descriptive, leaving out the contextual understanding of language interaction—"the embeddedness of language in social relations" (Bleich 81). The Great Divide theorists focus their attention on the surface features of language which may be seen as their single greatest weakness--their consideration of literacy as a single, stable, measurable thing (Hartwell 8). This narrow view of literacy leaves little room for consideration of the situational dynamics of language practices. Because the social scientists, Scribner, Cole, and Heath (and Freire fits here too), situate their studies in the context of learners' lives, their views of literacy are more descriptive--less narrowly prescribed. By investigating the cultural and social variables which impact learning, literacy is viewed by the social scientists as a complex web of relationships that can not be viewed in isolation from human experience. Their studies conclude that "whatever changes reading and writing may bring seem to result instead from the interaction of these skills with the context of
their acquisition" (emphasis mine Walters et al. 863).

In outlining the general assumptions that lie behind these views of literacy, familiar dichotomies present themselves: content vs. skill, substance vs. form, consumption vs. production, monism vs. pluralism, orality vs. literacy. These dichotomies serve only to alienate one theoretical camp from the other, creating a situation where the meaning of literacy is funneled into either side of the dichotomy leaving little room for exploring the rich complexity that lies among the schools of thought. The division between Hirsch's emphasis on knowledge acquisition and Freire's focus on the subjective world of the learner should not simply be looked at as opposing views of the consumption vs. production argument. This false dichotomy limits the possible contributions each theory has to offer toward re-envisioning literacy. Scribner and Cole's study of the Vai, complemented by Heath's work in the Carolina Piedmonts, presents compelling counterpoints to the Great Divide theorists' work (represented in this study by Walter Ong) by suggesting that "those who do not read and write may still be literate in important ways" (Pattison, "Literacy" 46). Viewed only as either/or propositions, a good deal of substance is potentially lost from the context these theoretical frameworks were based upon.

Context may very well be the key operative word. A sophisticated understanding of any of these four theories requires the reader to situate herself in the setting in which the study took place. Variables unique to the work of each of these studies played a critical role in shaping their perspectives on literacy. It is not helpful to view these theories as polar
opposites; rather, we should recognize that the researchers are looking at different data from different points of view.

Analysis of Theories

A significant indictment against Hirsch's argument in Cultural Literacy raises the question of context regarding his view of history; Hirsch fails to acknowledge the processes by which society creates history. Jay Robinson in Conversations on the Written Word poses the question to Hirsch this way: "If I take the contexts in which I work as given to me--as not subject to my acting upon them--I abdicate my personal responsibility as a professional and misuse such power as accrues to that role" (111). Or as another critic of Hirsch puts it, "the public can assimilate this culture but cannot participate in its creation" (Feinberg 134). Hirsch misses the point that knowledge is socially constructed by never questioning how this canonical knowledge came into being.

A second limitation of the context of Hirsch's work is his reference to what many of his critics call the "glorious" past. Romantic notions of past generations' literate abilities color Hirsch's view of current social realities as well as past ones. Wayne Booth reminds Hirsch that "as recently as fifty years ago, only about one-third of Americans even entered high school, let alone graduated (13).

Hirsch is correct in stating that there exists a national crisis in terms of literacy and education, but he equates literacy with the "possession of an expanding pile of information" rather than with an "expanding range of
experiences and the resulting capacities to encompass deeper and broader and richer experiences" (Booth 17). He focuses on the ills of the contemporary American educational system by using for his data nationally standardized tests and assessment tools which are known to have clear limitations in terms of their implications. Standardized tests rarely give students the opportunity to demonstrate the kind of knowledge required for critical literacy. Knowledge is more than information-retrieving: one must interpret knowledge and relate it to prior experiences in order to assimilate it and begin to think critically about it. Although Hirsch insightfully acknowledges the importance of background knowledge, his proposals for educational reform negate the multi-cultural experiences of a large majority of American students.

To be culturally literate is a worthy aspiration. Hirsch recognizes that education has a moral mission—"to achieve greater social justice and effective democracy" (2)—but the key is the means by which we pursue this kind of literacy. The means determine the quality of the end. If the end for Hirsch is to be measured by successful recognition of items on a list which represent a monistic view of our culture, then his definition of literacy is suspect from the start.

Ong's thesis in Orality and Literacy rests its assertions on an historical analysis of the development of Western culture from a primarily oral society to an alphabetic one. This historical context makes it difficult to assess the role individuals played in shaping the modes of thought he associates with increasing levels of literacy (Scribner and Cole, "Unpackaging Literacy" 73).
Because Ong, like Hirsch, bases his conclusions on social and cultural phenomena as evidence of literacy rather than an investigation of the functions of literacy in a given society, the generalizability of his thesis to contemporary social circumstances (including influences on literacy outside schooling) poses as a limiting factor.

Ong’s fundamental view of literacy is based on classical learning; his perspective is that of the academician who carefully views literacy as a sequence of intellectual stages. By using theories of cognition based on hierarchical reasoning for his assessment of what qualifies as literate thought, Ong concludes that societies without print are less analytic—therefore nonliterate (69). Ong’s harshest critics take issue with his description of oral societies as less objective, less distanced, less abstract—as simply less. This conclusion is clearly limited by the narrow view of literacy which Ong uses for his analyses. Given the view of literacy as represented by the social scientists (Scribner, Cole, and Heath) as both a cognitive and social practice, Ong’s oral/literate dichotomy is too polarized.

Ong offers several lucid arguments regarding the indeterminacy of meaning. He praises literary criticism theory which acknowledges the relevance of the critic’s orientation and contextual reading of a work (162). His concept of “interiorization” (151) as a conscious manipulation or reconstruction of the world that lies between the reader and the writer parallels my understanding of critical literacy or what Freire refers to as “reading the word and the world.” Ong would disagree with Hirsch by saying
that it is not just enough "to know"; the ability "to style" information is the heart of critical thought (155).

Scribner and Cole's *Psychology of Literacy* presents the most specifically situated context as their study takes place in the unique setting of the Vai culture in Liberia. Yet because of the uniqueness of this setting, critics are also left to question its relevancy to the American social setting. Descriptive cross-cultural studies are always subject to skepticism regarding the specificity of their findings. Just as dichotomizing may prove helpful in establishing perimeters within which theoretical frameworks may be drawn, comparative studies such as this challenge old paradigms and encourage valuable new ways of viewing old problems.

The specific focus of Scribner and Cole's study makes possible a detailed ethnography which places context as a critical variable allowing the authors to conclude that there is "nothing in our findings that would lead us to speak of cognitive consequences of literacy with the notion in mind that such consequences affect intellectual performance in all tasks to which the human mind is put ("Unpackaging Literacy" 86). In other words, the Great Divide theory is weakened by their findings. This conclusion expands notions of what qualifies as literate practices especially in terms of writing, and should certainly call into the question the deification of expository writing which schools so often insist on as a necessary measure of logic.

The authors' use of distinct factors such as the nature of Vai schooling, work, and predominant societal values, allows them to draw significant analogies to current dilemmas faced by American educators today. Scribner
and Cole's distinction between schooled literacy and non-schooled literacy as simply different in kind rather than in quality challenges old assumptions about literacy's connection to reading and writing activities—especially those typically associated with school. Their analysis of social values and use of language as factors shaping the kinds of literacy practices Vai people developed, provides a crucial framework for understanding literacy practices of all human beings.

Scribner and Cole's study of the Vai set the stage for social scientists to assess literacy as a social practice as well as a cognitive one. In Double Perspective, David Bleich warns that "any attempt to 'teach' literacy is unlikely to succeed unless, somehow, existing patterns of literacy . . . are recognized and actively engaged" (76). Shirley Brice Heath's study provides just such a model by recommending that teachers base their practice on ethnographic data which describes the different kinds of literacies different social settings promote.

Heath's observations as a social scientist challenge Hirsch's data on literacy by pointing out that even though standard assessments of reading and writing skills may fall below a past standard, increased linguistic abilities are likely to be improving in an area not measured on national tests—or perhaps improving in contexts outside the school setting.

A major contribution of Heath's study lies in her assertion that dichotomies which attempt to describe distinctions between schooled and non-schooled literacy serve only to further alienate and silence voices which contribute to society's vision of itself and its future. Her invitation to
educators and students to become ethnographers of their own language practices as a means to understand and explore our multiple and multicultural "ways with words" encourages a complex re-visioning of literacy as the "fullest blossoming of varied and particular social expression" (Brandt 137).

Paulo Freire's work takes place in the setting of Brazil with the underprivileged classes of a predominantly socialist society. This context has limited his audience of mainstream educators in two ways: the problem of functional illiteracy is somewhat limited in scope; the ideological problems of education in a third world nation may be viewed as too dissimilar from our own. Yet Freire advises all educators to ask "in favor of whom and what do we promote education?" (Freire and Macedo 38), so that to apply this theory to the context of the American educational system requires a critical analysis of the system itself. Freire would have us examine the nature of oppression in any social context and ask what forces silence or alienate our students. The ability to "read the world" then is the ability to understand how the world works politically--to peel away the myths to enable students, as Henry Giroux suggests, "to reclaim authorship of their own lives (Freire and Macedo 6).

Proponents of Freire defend the universality of his methods and theory (he is reluctant to distinguish between the two) because of his belief in empowerment and liberation for all people through education.

Like Heath, Freire argues that "the context of the learner is crucial to the development of critical literacy" (Freire and Macedo 127). He challenges educators to become grounded in the world of the learner as a means of
helping, as one American Freirian educator explains, "students locate their experiences socially . . . by probing the social factors that make and limit who they are and . . . help them reflect on who they could be" (Bigelow 437).

Perhaps Freire's most vociferous argument lies in his attitude toward what he refers to as the "banking concept" of education. He is strongly against the notion of knowledge as a disembodied chunk of data "transmitted by one who acquired it to one who still doesn't possess it" (Freire and Macedo 41). Freire's insistence on "problem-posing"--problematizing experience and exposing the shared nature of conflict--stresses the need for teachers to be leaders and participants in shared inquiry rather than "mechanical answer-givers with a pre-set syllabus" (Shor 2). In this regard, Hirsch and Freire's view of literacy are nearly diametrically opposed.

Freire points out that the myths of technology and science--especially prevalent in the United States--as answers to all that ails us, make it more difficult to promote uncertainty and subjectivity which lie at the heart of the questioning process. Thinking and feeling are so frequently dichotomized in our culture that schooling is naturally focused on the objective world of thought rather than a meaningful blend of the affective (largely social) and cognitive as critical aspects of learning. He speaks to the importance of community in the classroom--a community of learners whose voices give shape and meaning to the world and their reading of it.
Conclusions

Mixed messages abound in educators' discussions of the literacy crisis. That there exists a crisis is evident, but the means for addressing the crisis are too often narrowed to prescriptive measures and attempts to standardize educational programs. We need to look beyond the dichotomies of literate/illiterate and thinking/feeling in order to see literacy as more than acts of cognition. The "culture" in cultural literacy is grounded in the act of thinking and feeling human beings who create and re-create ways of valuing language. We have the responsibility as teachers to help students become active participants in "culture-making" by creating classrooms where shared inquiry into the ways we value language takes place.

Context plays a crucial role as a complicating factor in determining literacy and its meanings. Cultural and social characteristics of students' backgrounds as well as the dynamics of the school setting are factors which educators must carefully analyze. In this sense, teaching is a political act. We must look at and question conditions which oppress and devalue our students' literate potential. As Robert Mackie reminds us in the introduction to Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire, "literacy is not acquired neutrally, but in specific historical, social, and cultural contexts" (1).

In the broader context of the United States, literacy practices and their meaning are as diverse as the communities they represent, as evidenced by Heath's ethnographic study of three communities in the Carolinas. Yet schooling in America strives to be relatively homogeneous in its practices as part of the legacy of our commitment to provide free and equal public...
education to all. If public education were to pursue the kind of nationally standardized curriculum advocated by Hirsch and Bennett, it is likely we could not meet the needs of those outside the core of mainstream society. The question further remains whether the literacy needs of those inside this circle would be met by a knowledge-based standard which seems to ignore important literacy practices which are not easily measured.
CHAPTER IV

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Realities of the Classroom

John Szwed offers a crucial observation for educators to consider: “It is entirely possible that teachers are able to teach reading and writing as abstract skills, but do not know what reading and writing are for in the lives and futures of students” (14). To come to terms with the underlying question Szwed poses—“what reading and writing are for in the lives of [my] students”—it is critical for me to review the context which gives rise to the literacy practices at work in my classroom.

The students I teach are representative of a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, middle to upper-class mainstream society. Although physical and emotional differences among the students I teach can be startling, the differences, nevertheless, represent the norm for the average 13-14 year-old adolescent. One-third of the 75 eighth-grade language arts students I teach rank 95 per cent or above the national standard academically; they are labeled intellectually gifted. About one-tenth of my students fall far enough below this national standard to be labeled handicapped learners. The context which is the focus of my concerns about literacy largely excludes problems commonly associated with teaching the oppressed or disenfranchised.

The school district in which I teach is above average in funding, facilities, and commitment to education. Most of my students and their
parents place a high value on education; parents play active roles in their children's schooling and, according to a 1991 Differential Aptitude test, at least two-thirds of my students plan on earning a bachelor's degree. School records reveal attendance issues are a problem with about 10 per cent of the students and the transient rate is lower than 5 per cent. About one-third of my students' parents have been divorced (below the national average), yet fewer than half of those live in single parent homes. Less than 10 per cent live below the poverty level, and almost 10 per cent live in households with six figure earnings. Statistics on drug abuse among students and their families have been difficult to assess: a 1990-91 Benton County survey on drug and alcohol use among eighth-graders revealed that about 20 per cent had tried alcohol, less than 10 per cent marijuana, and less than 5 per cent had tried stronger drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines, or heroin. Repeated use or addiction to any of these drugs appears be affecting a population of less than 10 per cent. Drug abuse in families seems to match the national norm as does evidence of sexual and physical abuse.

None of these variables--divorce statistics, drug and alcohol abuse, income levels, or attendance problems--stands out as a unique factor in affecting the literacy outcomes of this population (although it is crucial to acknowledge the effect these factors have on an individual's self esteem which may impact literacy indirectly). As the Heath study revealed, significant factors associated with language learning involve the kind of language environment the student grows up in, the educational levels of parents, and factors outside the family such as community involvement,
religious practices, peer relations and the impact of the media. These factors influence the perspective a student develops in terms of motivation to learn, the purpose of learning, the self-concept of the learner, and attitudes toward the content of learning (Szwed 20).

The view of literacy my students bring to the classroom is as varied as the perspectives on literacy put forth by the theorists discussed in this paper. In an informal survey, I asked my students to describe what the word literacy meant to them; their responses range from the very functional—to be able to read and write—to highly sophisticated expressions of learning to interact meaningfully with the world through communication. (See Table 1.) Each response reveals answers to what my students believe reading and writing are for in terms of their lives, and, therefore, impacts their level of motivation and receptiveness to the kinds of literacy valued in the classroom.
Table 1

Sample Eighth-Grade Student Responses to the Question: What Does Literacy Mean to You?

1. Literacy means to me to be able to explore the unknown of books and open your mind to everything around you. If you're literate you can do anything! Not only for yourself but for others too.
2. Literacy is knowing the true meaning of language and using it wisely.
3. A deep thought which is incorporated into our society with reading and writing. It could also mean to be able to learn new stuff.
4. Being able to express ideas, and being able to really dig down deep in yourself to find key ideas.
5. Literacy is a good thing. If we didn't have it we wouldn't be able to get a job.
6. Being able to write and read.
7. Being competent enough to comprehend daily life.
8. Literacy is the freedom to express yourself. If one is literate he is able to push himself beyond the limits and accomplish all that he deserves.
9. Literacy means to be educated in something. Not just school. You can be literate in sports, art, and many other areas.
10. I think it means you are an intelligent and studious student. The person would probably have a good attitude toward school.
11. Literacy is a person's ability to work and cope with a society's rulings.
12. It is being able to take numbers, facts, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, ideas, thoughts, and communicate them all to another person through words.
13. Being able to understand deeply thought out poems and stories others don't really get the point of.
14. Literacy is mastering the mechanics of language.
15. Literacy is the ability to read, write, and understand your language and culture. A person must strive to be as literate as possible but there may be a practical limit to how literate we should be. If one person in the world were completely literate, he or she would have no one to talk to.
Redefining Literacy

When I began the research for this thesis in 1989, my personal definition of literacy was very much tied up in what Scribner and Cole refer to as "schooled literacy." As a student myself I excelled in conforming to the standards of what many researchers in this study have termed "academic literacy"—my knowledge of literature is well-informed by the canon of great works; I have mastered the expository essay and also know how to teach it; I am familiar with educational psychology and theories of cognitive development; I have a strong interest in the arts, speak a second language, and view the history of rhetoric as a fascinating study of human communication; in short, I am, by most accounts, a successfully "schooled" individual. What this means to me as a teacher—something I am just beginning to acknowledge—is that my vision of literate practices is inherently skewed by my own experiences as a student. It is difficult to separate my vision of what it meant for me to learn to read, write, and think critically from the progression of developmental skills deeply embedded in the educational system's view of literacy (which for me translated into earning an A in AP English). My home life prepared me for this kind of literacy, schooling reinforced it, and this legacy is being perpetuated for the majority of the students I teach.

While my view of literacy has been strongly grounded in academics, I have made sincere efforts to invite all students to become as Frank Smith suggests "members of the literacy club" (2). This goal is laudable but I must question whether the club I entice students to join validates the literate
practices students bring to the classroom. I see now that I have sent mixed messages to students by asking them to draw upon their own experiences to help them make reading and writing more meaningful, while at the same time--without realizing it--trying to make the experiences of my students conform to a standardized sequence of cognitive skills whose mastery, I believed, was the only way to achieve lifetime membership to the club.

Albeit, my colleagues and I are perhaps more enlightened than teachers of past generations--we could pass the "cultural literacy" test of research trends in teaching English--but, as Deborah Brandt so aptly describes, "literacy has less to do with overt acts of reading and writing than it does with underlying postures toward language" (emphasis mine 129).

There is nothing inherently wrong with a language posture that endorses "schooled literacy"; in fact, parents, the community, the business world, colleges, and universities expect high school graduates to have mastered the kinds of specific content and skills which constitute "schooled literacy." Much of the school reform measures currently implemented or under consideration advocate more accountability, more knowledge mastery, more critical thinking skills. Hirsch's entire argument is predicated on the belief that schools don't require enough of this kind of literacy. The goal is not to reject or deny the importance of cognitive skills or cultural knowledge; students need to be able to draw on skills and knowledge which enable them to think critically in many contexts. But schools also must recognize that this version of literacy--mastery of specific cognitive skills and content knowledge--is only one kind of literacy important to the hopes and dreams of
our students.

James Boyd White defines literacy as "not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances, but the ability to participate fully in a set of intellectual and social practices" (emphasis mine Robinson 17). I underscore the words "ability to participate fully" and consider these words from Jay Robinson and Patricia Stock as a more meaningful "posture toward language" which informs my practice:

In the world we inhabit with students, one is not made literate or taught to become so; one chooses to become literate, in circumstances where choice is made available; one learns how to become literate by using words in situated actions that are rendered personally meaningful by social and intellectual practices that are socially meaningful. No one becomes literate who does not see some opening, however small, toward active participation in a literate world that is part of the reality in which he or she lives. No one becomes literate who does not glimpse, and then come to feel, some possibility, no matter how tightly constrained, to shape the meanings that inevitably control one's life (Robinson 313).

Significantly, Robinson and Stock open with the phrase "the world we inhabit with students"--too often teachers build walls that separate them from the students' world. In the microcosm of the classroom, teachers must work to tear down those walls by becoming co-investigators of language and its uses. To create "circumstances where choice is made available" means to acknowledge students' perspectives on literacy--their views of what reading and writing are for. As a teacher I must look for ways to encourage students to engage in literacy practices that are more than just intellectually meaningful--practices that help students root their experiences in the larger
Heath's recommendation to have teachers explore their own ways of using and valuing language to uncover their own "underlying postures toward language" is fundamental to a meaningful understanding of literacy. Questioning these postures is what Freire advocates when he talks about a "pedagogy of questions" rather than answers, so that as educators we "try to learn and relearn with our students how experiences emerge from our daily lives" (Bruss and Macedo 10). A teacher's definition of literacy—his "underlying posture toward language"—communicates a strong message to students about potential for learning and, consequently, shapes the visions students have of themselves as language learners. Teachers must acknowledge that literacy embodies a repertoire of practices—both social and cognitive—which enable students to lead fuller, more meaningful lives. Without giving literacy meaning in the context of the learner's life, the result may be alienation and disempowerment.

Recommendations

There are no simple formulas, methodologies, or pre-packaged lesson plans for teachers to follow that will create the kind of classroom where multiple literacies flourish. Pattison maintains that he does not "believe the complex relations that make up literacy can be reduced to anything less than the total of weirdly different human minds talking and writing to one another" and goes on to suggest that the "more diverse linguistic methods we
use to probe the more diverse subjects, the more literate we will be in the end" (45).

One of the great difficulties in designing a language arts program is to capture this diversity on paper—the challenge becomes how to describe, without being prescriptive and reductive, learning outcomes that are necessarily open-ended. (National and state school reform measures face the same challenge.) Methods of evaluating diverse literate practices and knowledge also become problematic: standardized tests are too narrow a measure of the complexities of effective language use and their continued use as indicators of literacy reinforces the teaching of narrow literacy outcomes. Courses of study should be written in more descriptive terms—terms that acknowledge the importance of a teacher’s assessment of students’ language use and include multiple kinds of literacy—rather than formats which reduce literacy to performance objectives and skill sequences.

To understand effectively the literacy needs of students, teachers must question and describe the kinds of learning taking place inside and outside the classroom as a starting point on which to build increasing levels of literacy. By paying attention to the existential world of the learners—their daily realities of home life, friends, hobbies, interests, and social activities—teachers situate their pedagogy on the concreteness of students’ experiences. We become researchers or ethnographers of our own classroom by focusing less on prescribed curriculum guides and canned lessons and more on students’ existing language uses and understandings of the world.

Students also need to become researchers into the ways they use and
value language in their daily lives as a starting point for their own understandings about literacy. Students can investigate and record the reading and writing histories of themselves and others in the community. Teachers should encourage students to speculate on the factors that influenced these “histories” and to predict what role reading, writing, and speaking may play in their future lives. Students need to situate the role and function of language in an experiential dimension as a concrete foundation for further learning.

A good rhetorician knows her audience--their interests, their values, their history, their social condition. When teachers begin by becoming ethnographers in their own classroom, they play the role of a good rhetorician. By coming to know our audience, we begin to hear the silent themes that inform their lives and can help students gather tools that help them see how they fit into the world. Teachers and students need to become collaborators in investigating their own theories and values, and to jointly consider questions like what is literacy and what is it for.

Heath talks about breaking the boundaries between school and students’ lives as a means of validating the literate practices--the ways of knowing--students bring to the classroom. Constantly probing for ways to open up this space where even the least disenfranchised student senses incongruity, allows students to enter the conversation and begin to see themselves as active participants in their own critical literacy. The reality is, as Robert Pattison sardonically points out, that we do not live in a world where "ordinary citizens read Henry James on the subway, write each other
epigrammatic epistles, and engage over dinner in well-informed debate about disarmament and Baryshnikov's interpretation of Twyla Tharp” (47). As teachers, we must start paying more attention to and valuing uses of language already thriving in our students' lives that confer significance on their reading and writing in the classroom. (See Table 2.)

Table 2
Examples of Socially Significant Adolescent Language Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notewriting</th>
<th>Letter writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Song writing</td>
<td>Poetry writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal writing</td>
<td>Reading adolescent literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking on phone</td>
<td>Participating in clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading manuals and guides</td>
<td>Writing skits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatizing</td>
<td>Arguing with adults and peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Making inferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing</td>
<td>Planning itineraries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing</td>
<td>Language making--slang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor making/comparisons</td>
<td>Exaggerating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding irony</td>
<td>Fantasizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critiquing television, music, films, and advertisements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An integrated approach to language use which includes the literate practices of students both inside and outside school reinforces the vision of literacy as a repertoire of social and cognitive practices. The more we can model and engage in natural language interaction in the classroom, rather than artificially separating reading, writing, listening, and speaking into units
of study, the narrower the gap between school and "real life" literacy. Students deserve multiple opportunities to engage in each of these language practices in a wide variety of formats.

Gerald Graff and William Cain in their article "Peace Plan for the Canon Wars" assert that "the best solution to the conflicts over the canon, the curriculum, and the culture is to teach them" (312). A successful language arts pedagogy begins with the shared experiences of students and integrates shared cultural knowledge through the works of the "great canon" and other literature which speaks to the themes in students' lives. Students interact with texts both as consumers and producers of language; they share rough drafts of reading and writing and engage in debate over relevancy and meaning as a way to make sense of the world both individually and socially.

How we use language to communicate to students plays a large role in shaping students' attitudes toward learning. Teachers need to listen to the language interaction going on in their own classrooms. Dennie Palmer Wolf in her book Reading Reconsidered asks us to consider whether our language is primarily used as a "means of control, a way to report information, or a medium for inquiry and delight" (11). The kinds of questions we ask determine to a large degree whether we are inviting students into the conversation or reinforcing boundaries between students' ways of knowing and what Freire calls a "pedagogy of answers." Do we use open-ended questions that solicit real answers or the ones with answer keys in the back of the teacher's guide? Do we ask questions which encourage students to share what they do know or questions which are meant to reveal their lack of
understanding? Are students asked to write their own questions and explore their responses with one another? If we value real questions, we have to be willing as teachers to risk not knowing what the questions are or where they may take us. One of the indispensable qualities of a teacher, Freire says, is "not to be absolutely sure of any 'certainties'" (Bruss and Macedo 9).

Using a writing workshop pedagogy allows teachers to focus less on language as a "means of control" and engage more in language as a "medium for inquiry and delight." When teachers write and share their writing with students, the language gap between them begins to give way. When teachers allow students the freedom to make choices about their own writing, students take more control of their learning. When students use free writing and response journals as activities for experimenting with their own voices, they use their literate practices. When we communicate to students our belief that they are skilled and practiced thinkers, they begin to value their own thoughts and risk authorship. By creating a classroom where the focus of learning emanates in part from students' "ways with words," students not only enter the conversation, but learn ways to create and re-create the conversation.

Patrick Hartwell in his article entitled "Creating a Literate Environment in Freshman English: Why and How" offers suggestions for transforming our classrooms into an atmosphere where, Freire implores, "students have the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy" (Freire and Macedo 151). Hartwell emphasizes the need to "establish a new language base in the classroom" which includes "new roles for both learners
and teachers" (12). He presents a comparison between what represents more traditional "controlling" language roles, and this new "empowering" language base in an adaptation of a table originally published by Rita Brause and John Mayher. (See Table 3.) Although the dichotomy he uses describes polarities which are somewhat extreme and, therefore, false in actual practice, this table is useful as a measure for determining where the majority of language interaction in the classroom lies. By creating a classroom which shifts the majority of language interaction to the empowering side of the spectrum, we help students begin to see themselves as individuals who have important contributions to make. Empowerment happens when students stop feeling, as William Bigelow writes, "that their lives [do not] have anything important to teach them" (439).
Table 3
Distinctive Characteristics of Language Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Interactions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--comfortably paced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--negotiated focus and methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--responsive to individual's expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--evaluative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--time-pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--imposed focus and form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--predetermined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Language**

"Can we go...?" Do you mean...?"
Why...?" "How would you like...?"
--equality in quantity

"I want you to..."
"Tell me..."
--different quantity

**Effects of these Differences**

--growth through experimentation
--assurance/independence

--intimidation
--insecurity/dependency

**Authority**

--earned

--imposed

**Implicit Philosophy of Language Development**

--Language develops as product of participating in activities

--Language develops through explicit teaching

Carefully examining our assumptions about literacy opens the door for change and that sometimes means changing what's comfortable. Ann Berthoff posits that we must constantly "reinvent our own classroom" (Freire and Macedo xiii). The debate over literacy is, as one writer put it, "a debate over society's vision of itself." We must strive to create classrooms where not only teachers, as Freire admonishes, but students can "become conscious individuals who live part of their dreams within their educational space" (Freire and Macedo 126).

The theories I have reviewed in this study offer diverse approaches to an understanding of literacy and its teaching. Hirsch reminds us of the communicative importance of a shared discourse—communal knowledge which lends insight into the human condition; Ong raises our awareness of the complexity of our technological world and its cognitive impact on the literacy and orality of our students; Scribner and Cole challenge our ethnocentric perspectives on literacy by revealing that different contexts foster different kinds of literate practices; Heath encourages us to appreciate the richness of our language and its uses and the complex linguistic relationship between schools and communities; Freire deepens our understanding of the existential nature of literacy and its power to transform individuals and society through critical thought and action. Each of these theories deserves consideration for effective pedagogy in the language arts classroom.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A

Eighth Grade Language Arts Objectives

The language arts program I teach is based on an integrated approach to reading, writing, speaking, and listening (or viewing). We see students only one period a day; there are no separate reading and writing courses. The content of all the district’s middle school language arts courses is linked to the social studies taught at each level; American history is the eighth grade social studies course. This interdisciplinary link is strongest in the area of literature. We choose novels, short stories, and poetry which complements themes in American history. Because much of the writing students do is in response to literature, the interdisciplinary focus influences writing topics as well.

Students are taught writing as a process. They learn several strategies to employ for each stage of writing: prewriting, rough drafting, revising, editing, and publishing or sharing. We encourage students to explore different topics within a specified range, yet the format for most of their writing is predetermined by the curriculum. Instructional goals for writing at the eighth grade level state that students will develop skills in writing narratives such as autobiographies and biographies; develop skills in expository writing by writing a multi-paragraph paper with clear topic sentences and supporting details; develop skills in creative writing by experimenting with elements of the short story, poetry, and drama; and develop skills in persuasive writing by using emotional appeal and logical argument. Students are also to maintain a writer’s notebook to experiment
with writing ideas and develop fluency. As students engage in writing assignments, they work in small groups in a workshop atmosphere especially for the revising, editing, and sharing of their work. The curriculum encourages teachers to use a mini-lesson format to teach language conventions such as spelling, grammar, usage, and punctuation as they apply to students' writing rather than being taught as isolated skills.

Informal listening and speaking are a natural part of the writing stages as students read their papers and give oral feedback to one another. More formal speaking assignments include delivering informative and persuasive speeches, participating in debates, performing a dramatic reading, and giving oral book reviews. More formal listening skills involve notetaking from lectures, films, or interviews, and taking tests orally.

Instructional goals for reading emphasize a process approach similar to writing. Students are to understand that reading is a process that helps them define their own values and experiences and those of others by: recalling and elaborating upon prior knowledge; interpreting the work in light of their experiences and those of the author or main characters; evaluating their responses and those of others; and sharing or presenting their responses. Specified reading skills include the ability to identify and discuss literary terms; recognize and appreciate a variety of genres in literature; use self-questioning and predicting to identify and clarify purposes for reading; and extend their vocabulary by studying words in the reading context.