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Liberating Literacy: Uncovering the Ideology and Expanding the Practice

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Literacy is a cultural common denominator. Not just our ability to read but how we read, what we read, and our reactions to our readings can affect our actions and determine our paths. The term "literacy" may indicate merely a set of skills, yet it implies something more complex. The methods and motives of literacy – what we choose to read, if we choose to read, and how we interpret what we read – are as much a part of literacy as the ability to decode. Literacy is a practice, an act that refers both to the applications of skills as well as the conditions under which these skills are applied. It is within this practice of literacy that we may find a variety of options for experience, each with its own culturally determined value. By examining how literacy is taught and how meaning-making and practice are modeled and encouraged, we may recognize a relationship between literacy and culture, between interpretation and experience. This analysis will lead us toward a theory of informed criticism, where popular texts and cultural knowledge are considered to be as valuable as a canonical education. As we examine literacy, a new question arises: will literacy liberate or control us?

Introduction

Literacy is both a utility and a cultural signifier; not only the ability to read, but what and how to read are continually challenged and restructured. In libraries and schools, activist groups challenge and seek to ban works of literature based on its content and its presumed dangerous influence. Teachers and school administrators must temper their curricular reading selections with an awareness of the sensitivities of their community. As we encourage the practice of reading, we must recognize that encouragement does not imply action alone. What to read and how to read it are components of institutionalized advocacy. The definition of "literacy" has expanded and no longer means merely the ability to read; books and acts of reading themselves are subject to judgment, and the application of the descriptor "literate" now privileges a body of classic works. To be considered literate, one must not only know how to read, but also be familiar with a body of classic works. From the ideologies implied by the literary canon and preachers of "cultural literacy", to the discursive communities created around best-selling books and Oprah's selections, reading as a practice is a powerful form of agency.

Glenna Davis Sloan writes that the "truly literate" are not those who know how to read, but those who read independently, responsively, critically, and because they want to (1991). For Sloan, literacy includes not just the ability to read, but also a way to read ("independently, responsively, critically") and a certain initiative ("because they want to"). Sloan, a child literacy advocate, and many of her contemporaries preach a separatism of literary experience predicated on a distinction between Literature (good literature) and literature (popular materials). The continual debate surrounding the preservation, alteration or erasure of the literary canon is evidence of the cultural value we assign to certain texts. John Doherty writes, "the perpetual debate over the academic canon is a debate over the dominant influences in the academy" (1998, 403). That is, the formation of a canon of literature is indicative of what Doherty terms a cultural hegemony that is both mainstream and exclusive. A deconstructive ex-

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amination of the culture of literacy and reading as created and sustained in classrooms may transform the idea of the literary canon and the social paradigm it reflects. This literature review will examine theories of emergent literacy and reader response in terms of Derrida's ideas of deconstruction; it will address the concept of literacy by examining two of its components, literacy instruction and the adoption of a canonical standard that tends to disregard the importance of popular materials. This analysis will lead us toward a revised definition of literacy and a theory of informed criticism, including popular texts and cultural knowledge as valid and valued influences on interpretation and experience.

Derrida argues that any claims about language and the nature of linguistics must be viewed in terms of the bias inherent in the discursive language itself. Deconstruction, the name given to the analysis Derrida advocates, involves first "demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures" to be examined and, second,

> "[marking] the conditions, the medium and the limits of their effectiveness and [designating] rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit." (Derrida, 1997)

That is, our arguments about and around texts are grounded in the very discourse shared by the text and the argument. To remove oneself completely from a text for analytical purposes would involve removing oneself from the language necessary to express the analysis.

When we examine reading under these circumstances – that is, as we recognize our critical discourse as a product of our linguistic situation – we may recognize our discourse as situated within a tradition of criticism and literature that may lie outside of our reading experience. The way we talk about literature and the values we place on classic texts, versus the supposed lack of value assumed in popular works, inform the practice of reading itself. Reading, in terms of this discourse, implies both decoding fluency and an interpretative standard that partials texts into categories ("good" Literature and "popular" literature) and assumes that the truly literate will earn to select reading material from the appropriate category. By deconstructing the practice of reading as it is taught, we begin to view this mastery as the initial step in a process that culminates in guided interpretation and the formation of a canon of literature exclusive of popular materials.

Literacy as behavior

Literacy is a learned behavior, the function of which is not limited to a mere question of ability; the act itself, and the circumstances mediating the act, deserve to be examined. Judith Meece, in a textbook surveying child and adolescent development, writes of the nature of literacy:

> All individuals, except those with severe disabilities, learn to speak their language, but literacy – learning to read and write – must be taught. (Meece 2002)

Clearly, reading and writing is not a primal form of communication; speech and aural comprehension are the biological communicative imperatives. Here, Meece distinguishes between the ability to use and understand spoken language and the capacity to understand a graphic representation of the same. This distinction between the two forms of communication (speech and writing) is especially important to note as we look to Derrida's criticism of Aristotle, Rousseau and Hegel, who privilege spoken communication above the written word.

Quoting Aristotle, Derrida writes,

> Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. (Derrida 1997)

The purity of writing may be called into question as we – in Aristotle's opinion – read through a veil of our own interpretation. Reading, according to Derrida, becomes in these terms, "derivative, accidental". That is, to Derrida, Aristotle's privilege of the purity of the spoken word limits the potential for experience found in reading. Derrida argues that reading is neither derivative nor accidental. Reading and literacy (its exhibition) are the products of interior relations with text and the external framework in which the text is presented. Literary education seeks to mold the interior process through skills education and guide the new reader through prescribed frameworks of interpretation.

If literacy is, as Meece writes and Derrida supports, a deliberate act of decoding and analysis, it becomes imperative to examine the circum-

stances surrounding the development of this skill. Literacy as a behavior is not only a set of skills; literacy includes our own conceptions of the importance of those skills and their use. Where illiteracy implies a lack of choice for an agent (i.e. a non-reader cannot choose to read a text), literacy implies both an ability to read and a choice to read (or not). Formalized reading curriculums become the first field to explore when discussing literacy; however, the cultures surrounding these curriculums – school and family cultures – influence the success of these prescriptions for learning.

Emergent literacy

If literacy is to be studied as the product of both formalized instruction and cultural influences, emergent literacy theory is a natural frame of literacy study. Emergent literacy is the term coined by educator Marie Clay to refer to imitative practices children exhibit prior to formal reading instruction. This theory of skill acquisition emphasizes the connection between reading and expression (written and verbal) and recognizes that literate behavior can begin in tandem with spoken language development. David Lancy writes,

> "Emergent literacy places the onset of literacy at shortly after birth ... Becoming literate, in this view, occupies every waking moment throughout childhood." (Lancy 1994)

As a child is immersed in a world of aural stimulation, it begins to imitate what it recognizes as sounds, the organization of which eventually develop into speech. Similarly, a child may imitate reading behaviors by holding a book and turning pages, following words on a page with its finger or by re-telling a story. The conventions of literacy are being learned with every interaction with print; however, the representative nature of the text itself may not be initially apparent.

Emergent literacy represents the space between an ability to decode and adult reading ability. The emphasis on practice, on imitative behavior, is stressed in emergent literacy; that is, the process of discovery, the pathway to reading, is as important as mastery and fluency. Developmental psychology has been cited to further support the structural ideas of emergent literacy. Piaget's hierarchical theories of development coincide with the progressive philosophy of emergent literacy. As Piaget's theory of cognitive development supports a cumulative acquisition of cognitive skills, emergent literacy identifies a collective set of practices that shape ability. Emergent literacy builds on itself; the act of reading a simple text with an adult, or even inventing a text based on the illustrations in a book, lead to eventual self-correction and increased ability.

Arthur Applebee, a child literacy theorist, looks to the paradigms designed by Piaget to chart reading ability and readiness. Applebee links reading ability to Piaget's stages of development, hypothesizing that as a new reader grows, his capacity to understand types of texts increases. Applebee, instead of emphasizing progressive skill acquisition, focuses on text type as determinate of growth. At early stages of development, Applebee posits, children begin to understand the concept of the narrative; as they reach adolescence, a more analytical understanding of a text is developed (Applebee 1978). Emergent literacy emphasizes story telling and re-telling and reinforces the concept of narrative structure inherent in textual comprehension.

Emergent literacy, in contrast to skill-based literacy education, situates literacy learning within a literature rich environment. While skill-based education encourages phonics drills and maintains that "reading and writing are learned by young children as a series of abstract, separate skills in a decontextualized fashion", emergent literacy advocates maintain that reading is best learned when developed in "real-life settings for real-life activities"(Teale 1995). Many emergent literacy proponents use the whole language approach to teaching reading or couple whole language with some phonics acquisition. Whole language learning, like emergent literacy, occurs within a literary context; students learn to use context clues and their knowledge of narrative to inform their decoding. Specially constructed basal readers form the canon of literature for students immersed in skill-based instruction. These readers are written using a controlled vocabulary that may be designed to include phonetically similar words or to incorporate a specific word list. While basal readers may be part of the whole language curriculum, whole language instruction utilizes literary texts to mimic the "real-life activity" of emergent literacy.

Culture and literacy

Because childhood experiences, particularly those surrounding the home and family life, are varied and distinctly unequal, the amount of time spent "becoming literate" is equally varied. If, as emergent literacy maintains, literacy learning is not developmentally compartmentalized and relegated to the classroom, the un-standardized home environments in which children may be exposed to literate behaviors contribute to later ability and motivation. Though the rudiments of reading may be taught in public schools, the value placed on the skill itself may be related to the socio-economic status of the family of the new reader.

Lancy and Talley note a correlation between literacy mastery and socio-economic status and theorize a self-perpetuating link between the two statistics. Quoting a 1987 report by Stedman and Kaestle, Lancy and Talley write,

> "literacy has both a vertical and horizontal dimension. Vertical refers to [ability] level ... and horizontal refers to applications." (Lancy 1994)

If application of reading is not promoted outside of the classroom, the skill itself may be limited. The failure of many families to recognize the application of literacy is what Lancy and Stedman term "symptomatic of a permanent underclass" (ibid.). As near low literacy level readers enter the marketplace, the narrow perception of the applicability of their reading skills stymies them in low-level positions with little hope for advancement.

Lancy's theory of supportive literacy development follows a developmental model posed by child development theorist Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky, learning is optimized when a lesson or skill is modeled, a process termed "scaffolding". Parents, teachers, and even peers may model literate behavior; the example is the motivation, not the lesson. Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding is the closest developmental model related to emergent literacy practices. Modeling literate behavior may be as simple as reading aloud at home or including a child in the creation of a grocery list. Vygotsky does not impose parameters on the practice of scaffolding; as emergent literacy insinuates literacy into nearly every activity, opportunities to model or scaffold are as present in the home as in the classroom. The availability of mentors within a community of new readers may be evidence of the value a local culture places on literacy. If we presume learning to read is an immersive process, that literacy is not limited to the classroom, we must recognize the cultures that influence or impede progress within a learner's community. Learning to read can be seen as a form of cultural scaffolding; the importance placed on the process creates the attitude through which the practice is perceived.

Research into the correlation between home environment, socio-economic status and literacy development points strongly to the relationship between culture and literacy. Toomey and Sloane argue that

> "children's family environments are rather more predic tive of their school learning than are indicators of their socio-economic status." (Toomey and Sloane 1994)

Toomey and Sloane, too, emphasize the importance of scaffolding as a technique to induce learning in the home. In their study of home environments and their relationship to reading, Toomey and Sloane identified five types of familial support systems and placed them on a continuum of effectiveness. Families labeled "supportive-sophisticated", "supportive-un-sophisticated" and "supportive-independent-minded" were deemed effective while families considered "supportive stressed" and "noncoping" did not reinforce literate behavior at home. While Toomey and Sloane use their data to conclude that family support, not socio-economic status, is a greater determinate of literacy, the descriptions of the family support (or non-support) systems included socio-economic factors. The "supportive-stressed" families were deemed by Toomey and Sloane (1984) to be interested in education support at home but were

> "often ... overwhelmed by more pressing survival needs (custody issues, domestic violence, sickness, supporting extended kin, financial problems, etc.)."

Toomey and Sloane's research, while concluding that "family environment measures show stronger connections with children's literacy than SES", may reveal colinearity between SES and family support that bodes investigation.

Reader response theory

While emergent literacy theory situates literacy within an environment of varied linguistic practices, all of which contribute to the development of reading mastery, reader response theory examines the relationship between the reader and the text and hypothesizes that the nature of this relationship is central to textual comprehension. Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt are prominent in reader response theory; both examine the gap between reader and text, the space bridged by interpretation. This space is subject to manipulation; reader response recognizes the influences culture imposes on a text, as well as the culture imposed by the text itself.

In a summary of his work, Iser writes,

> "If the virtual position of a work is between text and reader, its actualization is clearly the result of an interaction between the two." (Iser 1980)

We may refer back to emergent literacy theory as we contemplate the nature of the interaction of which Iser writes. Who mediates this process and how is this interaction explained? By seeking to transfer literacy into daily practice, emergent literacy superimposes a traditional narrative, a structure of sorts, over experience. If emergent literacy concerns itself with reading ability (Lancy's "vertical literacy"), reader response pushes the nature of literacy into the interpretative plane (Lancy's "horizontal literacy"). This environment of interpretation must include not only text, but also any situation over which a narrative is imposed. Iser does not contextualize interaction; however, the product of the relationship between work and reader cannot be independent. If we view literacy learning as both skill acquisition and cultural indoctrination, we cannot presume that reader response occurs within a contextual vacuum. A reader brings his own experiences with literature and within culture to a text; his reception of writing is shaped by a synthesis of his extratextual knowledge and the situation described by the text itself.

Iser credits the text, not culture, with the ability to guide a reader to meaning; this control "cannot be understood as a tangible entity", claims Iser, but its influence is evidenced by the text (Iser 1980). According to Iser, the interpretive function is housed within a text's structure and revealed via the narrative. Iser (1980) writes:

> "[T]here are four main perspectives in narration: those of the narrator, the characters, the plot and the fictitious reader."

The reader's role is built-in and as intrinsic to a work as the unfolding of events within the narrative. The mastery of narrative convention and decoding predicate the ability to respond to a work in this way. Thus, all texts must impose an interpretation, the decoding of which is as much a part of literacy as phonemic representation.

Rosenblatt, like Iser, privileges the relationship between the reader and the text, though her hypothesis allows for greater fluidity within interpretation. Rosenblatt critiques the traditional mode of literary interpretation, writing,

> "To demonstrate 'understanding' of a work has been primarily a matter of paraphrasing, defining, applying the proper rubrics." (Rosenblatt 1995)

According the Rosenblatt, standardized "rubrics" are secondary to reader generated meaning. This meaning is predicated on a relationship between reader and text, an empathy with the narrative that Rosenblatt terms "the poem". The poem, in this context, is

> "an event in time ... The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality ... he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order ... which he sees as the poem." (Rosenblatt 1994)

Thus, interpretation of a text is grounded in reader identification with a work; disturbance of or refusal to recognize the poem distances a reader from a text and condemns much literature to unreadability.

A competent teacher may bridge the distance between reader and text; however, Rosenblatt recognizes that cultural values inherent in a text can be transferred to the discourse surrounding the work and vice versa. Rosenblatt writes,

> "The teaching of literature inevitably involves the conscious or unconscious reinforcement of ethical attitudes "

and,

> "Literature can play an important part in the process through which the individual becomes situated to the cultural pattern." (Rosenblatt 1995)

This cultural pattern may be reinforced through exposure to what Rosenblatt repeatedly refers to as "good literature" or "great works". Perhaps subtextually, Rosenblatt supports a literary canon, the values of which – if properly introduced – strengthen a culture of readers.

Like Rosenblatt, Glenna Davis Sloan believes in the value of reader response theory as an interpretative tool. Sloan, however, encourages a generation of critical readers, who not only experience a text, but also impose judgments on it. "Criticism begins in the experience of literature and in personal response to it", writes Sloan (1991). Sloan criticizes the use of basal texts to teach reading; like emergent literacy theorists, Sloan advocates the use of real literature to teach reading, not short stories created using controlled vocabularies. A value judgment is inherent in this advocacy, however, as Sloan applies this definition to literature: "unique writings that demonstrate excellence of form and expression" (Sloan 1991). According to Sloan, only what she deems "genuine literature" will influence young students to become readers and critics.

Deconstructing reading

In a criticism of reader response theory, Pam Gilbert asserts:

> "Reading is not an innocent activity. Readers are situated in culturally determined discursive traditions and the effects of these traditions determine the nature of the reading a text will be given." (1987)

These limiting discursive traditions may be what Rosenblatt recognizes when she cites the power of literature to reinforce "ethical attitudes". These traditions may also be formed in part by the emergent literacy environment, the nature of which, theorists argue, is shaped by local culture. Gilbert questions the ultimate validity of readers' responses and the pluralist interpretative community reader response theory supports. According to Gilbert,

> "texts become what they become because of the way they function in discourse." (1987)

Sloan's labeling of a text as a unique literary offering may exemplify the attitude Gilbert decries. Literature is deemed literature by cultural chance; an examination of the circumstances which create a work's label or designation is as intrinsic a part of its value as a traditional literary analysis. Like Sloan, Gilbert encourages the creation of a community of critical readers; however, the text should not be the only thing critiqued. "By fostering in our students a genuinely critical stance towards language and its discursive formations, we foster 'producers' not 'consumers': active participants rather than passive recipients", Gilbert (1987) writes.

Criticism of text involves a metacritique of the critical discourse itself, an examination of the area outside the interpretive zone constructed and labeled by Iser and Rosenblatt.

Annette Patterson, Bronwyn Mellor, and Marnie O'Neill continue Gilbert's argument against passive reader response criticism, echoing the argument that literary analysis and comprehension is not limited to a text, but is instead a product of the interaction between the text and its situation.

> "Readers construct readings, not as originators of meaning, but as human subjects positioned through social, political, and economic discursive practices that remain the location of a constant struggle over power." (Patterson, Mellor, and O'Neill 1994)

Thus, a text cannot be isolated from the circumstances in which it is read, an argument reminiscent of emergent literacy theory. Through both framings, literature emerges as a unique artifact, colored and shaped in part by the culture that created it. Our deconstruction of the ideology of literacy reveals a binary definition of the practice that tempers the influence of a reader's culture with the text itself.

Stanley Fish acknowledges this dual basis of literacy and interpretation in his seminal essay "Is there a Text in this Class?" Fish (1980) writes

> "The obviousness of [an] utterance's meaning is not a function of the values its words have in a linguistic system that is independent of context; rather, it is because the words are heard as already embedded in a context that they have a meaning."

Within this framework, interpretation becomes not just the result of a culturally situated reader's interaction with an innocent text; instead, we acknowledge the text itself as susceptible to cultural influence. Ultimately, Fish (1980) writes,

"authority depends upon the existence of a determinate core of meanings because in the absence of such a core there is no normative or public way of construing what anyone says or writes."

This core is situational rather than ubiquitous; however,

"to be in a situation is already to be in possession of ... a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are already in place; and it is within the assumption of these purposes and goals that any utterance is immediately heard." (Fish, 1980)

Our situations may be inescapable; however, the certainty of their existence and the impact our positions within must be acknowledged. What does it mean to be literate in these circumstances? Literacy implies the sum total of our experiences with text – including the process by which we become "experienced" with texts – are determined and shaped in relation to and in response to a distinct cultural situation.

Implications for library service

The library as a cultural institution has served to encourage and promote specific experiences with literature. These experiences include the reading of canonical works as well as the guided interpretations of these works. That these experiences are mediated by a certain cultural imperative cannot be ignored. Library historian Jesse Shera (1976) has written,

"The American public library was rooted in the classical tradition ... the faith in universal popular education and the perfectability of man,"

while noting that,

"The traditional role of the library as a part of the communication system is the preservation and transmission of the cultural heritage ... The library, then, reflects a particular 'world view.'"

How is this worldview encouraged and maintained in what some would decree to be an institution of free thought? We may look to Iser's theory of reader response to interpret this position.

Iser's theory of the communication between reader and text mirrors the relationship between library and user. If we superimpose an image of the user-library relationship over the image of the reader-text relationship, we may give new labels to the players Iser has named in his theory of transaction. As Iser hypothesizes the presence of four main perspectives in a narrative (narrator, characters, plot and reader), we may hypothesize four perspectives in the library: the reader/information-seeker, the collection/information source, the intellectual problem, and the librarian/library. Here, the reader/information-seeker serves the same function as Iser's reader; the library collection assumes the role of Iser's characters and plot; the librarian, as representative of the library, becomes the narrator. In Iser's theory of interaction, a fixture of the narrative he terms the "blank" serves to foster the relationship between reader and text and to encourage a relative understanding of the text itself.

Because a reader cannot engage in what Iser calls a "dyadic interaction" with a text, his understanding of a text is dependent on his projection of ideas and circumstances meant to fill in the spaces left "blank" by the author or narrator. This "dyadic interaction" presumes that a reader and a text are partners in meaning making and interpretation. In this way, an author is able to exert control over a reader's interaction with his text. According to Iser (1980),

"What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light."

According to Iser, reading is an active process of interpretation and problem solving, as a reader seeks to make sense of the blank spaces in a work of literature. Though Iser maintains that this interaction is unique to a reader-text relationship, this theory of blanks and meaning making is analogous to the information-seeker's relationship to his search agency, in this case, his library. That the library, as an institution filled with a collection determined by experts (librarians/narrators), does contain "blanks" (areas where information must be manipulated to fit the specifics of a query), speaks to the interpretations imposed by the institution on its users.

As purveyors of an increasing amount of information and as masters of the technology that frames this information, librarians and libraries are in the position of making meaning for the masses. Though an earlier idea of literacy in-

cluded merely the ability to read, reproduce and understand text, the ability to create meaning, to interact with the "blanks" present in an information exchange, adds a new facet to this definition. These blanks represent an inequality between librarian/library and information-seeker and may be the result of illiteracy, lack of technological savvy, or even unfamiliarity with a print resource. The "blanks" in an information system are not unlike the anomalous states of knowledge that information researcher Belkin proposes exist within any system of information exchange. The user's awareness of the presence of these states of knowledge inform, to some degree, both the user's perception of his information need as well as his prediction of the type of information required to fill it. Belkin writes:

> "A user, who has some goal or problem, recognizes that that goal places her/him in a problematic situation; this leads to recognition by the user of an Anomalous State of Knowledge (ASK) ... this ASK eventually is embodied as a request or problem statement which initiates the information system." (1984)

As a reader confronted with a "blank" looks to the surrounding text to provide clues as to how to fill this empty space, an information seeker looks to the librarian to guide him to and sometimes interpret the information source which may provide material to fill in this space.

As in Iser's theory, the librarian assists in bridging the gaps between what is understood and what is questioned and provides clues to or points out an application of the sought information. While a "ready reference" question may lead an information seeker to the exact data he requests (the capital of the state of Virginia, for example), a query with a less "ready" answer (what career opportunities are available in information science, for example) may require more mediation. The decision whether or not to accept the guided meaning itself falls on the shoulders of the information-seeker; however, is his literacy complete enough to warrant his acceptance or refusal of the result of this interaction? Though an information source is "correct", can the failure to bridge these blanks in understanding lead to a perception of incorrectness? When does the interpretative responsibility fall on the librarian/library and when can it be assumed by the information-seeker? These questions infer an imbalance of power intrinsic in both Iser's theory of literary interaction and our theory of information seeking. Within Iser's theory, the reader is given the tools to balance his understanding; however, the narrator/author's control of those tools will lead the reader, ultimately, to an author/narrator-constructed reality. Increasing literacy may serve to even the imbalanced scales in the information-seeking process; libraries must accept this challenge to foster and encourage multiple literacies if the power relationship is to be equalized.

Cultural literacy

While Belkin theorizes that human/human information interaction requires repeated iteration and re-structuring of the information need to yield effective results, practitioners must recognize that information needs are often addressed through systems interaction. We have already stated that a user's cultural experiences determine his perception of the usefulness of literacy; we may theorize that these experiences also shape his determination of information authority – that is, which medium to trust as the most effective information source. Meyrowitz theorizes that medium analyses may lead researchers to determine what characteristics shape a user's perspective of both the medium and the information contained within. "Macrolevel medium theory," writes Meyrowitz (1998),

> "explores such issues as how the addition of a new medium to the matrix of existing media may alter the boundaries and nature of many social situations, reshape the relationships among people, and strengthen or weaken various social institutions."

Librarians and libraries should consider the shifting perspectives of users as Internet tools become available to the public and instruction in their use becomes necessary.

As libraries offer Internet instruction to novice users, medium theory tells us that we cannot ignore the perceived authority assigned to this tool by its users. Because the Internet can be a source of both credible and non-credible information, the goal of instruction, as worded by Vincent (1999), should be

> "to develop minds that can create meaning, not merely become more and more proficient at processing received information."

That is, instruction should also include not only skills acquisition, but also tips on determining accuracy and gauging authority. That information seekers may be called upon to not only find information, but to determine its credibility speaks to a new definition of literacy. Vincent (1999) calls this skill

> "cultural literacy: an awareness of power relations, shared assumptions, ideological signifiers, and other cultural realities that constitute life as such in any given culture or subculture."

As Lancy and others hypothesized, a cultural component does exist in the acquisition of literacy. As the definition of literacy expands to include a certain element of credibility judgment, we must look to the culture within which the literate or literacy-seeking person is situated and compare it to the culture in which libraries are housed. The recognition of disparity or similarity here, concurrent with our recognition of the cultural basis of literacy, can expand and enhance library service.

Conclusions

As we look to readers – as individuals and as representatives of groups – to re-frame our own concepts of literacy and the interpretative acts associated with the practice, we may approach a theory of "reception aesthetics". In her definition of this analytical concept, sociologist Wendy Griswold (1993) writes that,

> "the reader never comes to a text as a blank slate but instead places it against what Jauss (1982) termed a 'horizon of expectations.'"

This is to say that a reader's reaction to a text is partially a product of past reactions and experiences; the "expectations" a reader brings to a text are cumulative as well. Though the expectations to which Griswold refers are in part a product of a reader's individual experiences, his level of literacy and his experiences with texts may be culturally determined. These two components of the expectation horizon are symbiotically related. A reader's perception of his experience (his internal narrative) is shaped by his conception of a narrative structure, as instilled during literacy learning, itself a culturally mediated process. The frequency of his encounters with literary representations of his experience – voiced in his language, slang or dialect – may add credibility to his experiences themselves. That certain experiences with literature are favored in certain situations (e.g. reading Chaucer is more valuable than reading Carolyn Keene) implies, thorough association, a hierarchy of experience.

Stanley Fish confronts this literary value system linguistically, arguing that a distinction between "literary" and "ordinary" language invalidates its own argument.

> "The very act of distinguishing between ordinary and literary language ... leads necessarily to an inadequate account of both", writes Fish, and "A distinction which assumes a normative value at its center is continually posing a choice between that value and something else." (Fish, 1980)

To privilege "literary" language and "literary" texts above "ordinary" language or popular texts implies a concrete and universal value judgment over all language. If literacy is to be determined by our interactions with "literary" texts, as Sloan and Rosenblatt imply, what, then, do our interactions with "ordinary" texts constitute? And, what do our own linguistic productions amount to?

Why not examine every interaction with text with the gravity reserved for "literary" offerings? By acknowledging the validity of the expectational horizon with which we greet any work, we validate the experiences of the variety of readers that select the text. Perhaps a new source of critique could arise from the construction of the space between the reader and the unread text. By analyzing the reader's relationship with a text from an information science perspective, by labeling the reader as "user" and the text as "system", we may approach a needs-based model of literacy that takes into account the uniqueness of reader experience. Fish (1980) writes,

> "[Ordinary language] confirms and reflects our ordinary understanding of the world and our position in it ... [and] for precisely that reason it is extra-ordinary."

The needs-based model of literacy may analyze the value of the touchstones, which lead a reader to a text, ordinary or literary, and hypothesize the nature of the "understandings" an interaction with text may confirm or challenge.

If literacy is an ideology or, at least, has an ideological component, library service must also be seen within this ideological framework. If our job as librarians is to assist patrons in the rectification of "anomalous states of knowledge", we must be aware of the context of their information search prior to an attempt to fill in this information "blank". Additionally, we must recognize any source bias held by both information seekers and information specialists, and seek to overcome this bias in our service. Training for both librarians and patrons in information seeking and the evaluation of information sources would help each party as an information need is addressed. This means that traditional Internet instruction, which tends to focus on the mechanics of information seeking (from basic mouse-using issues to using a search engine), is only a small part of a curriculum that must be offered. Library tutorials that offer tips on evaluating information found on the web would both encourage independent information seeking by individuals and combat any ideological bias that could infuse the answer to a user's reference question. These information evaluation tutorials would include instructions on interpreting web addresses (for example, recognizing the suffix designations of .com, .net, .gov) as well as tips for discerning information from Internet advertising, and keys to determine the authority of an Internet based information source. The skills taught in these classes inform a new type of literacy, one that recognizes the potential for authoritative variety and involves specific, critical reading skills to determine the ultimate usefulness of any source.

In an anthropological analysis of literacy as a phenomenon, James Collins (1995) writes of the implied legacy of literacy:

> "Literacy in the modern era has been associated with profound ideological promises (i.e., enlightenment and social progress) as well as with ideological dangers, for illiteracy signifies economic stagnation, political decay, and cultural disorder."

That we are situated in a culture that values print and media literacies, allows us to make judgments against other, illiterate (read: savage) cultures. Concurrent to the existence of this value continuum of behavior and implied ability lays a literary value scale which judges texts, placing text types and discourse within a hierarchy of quality. The weight a culture places on its definitive texts, its written laws, its tradition of literature is all a part of the ideology of literacy. Collins (1995) continues,

> "How literacy is defined ... and who controls the content of and access to bureaucratic files ... shape the possible subjectivities of individuals and groups."

Thus, literacy, including concepts of information authority, accuracy and access, can be seen as a political ideology of sorts, extending beyond the intentions of the imitative practices of emergent literacy to an agency inherent in text selection and interpretation.

To examine the structures supporting the concept of literacy, we may look to the disciplines of cultural studies, literary theory, education, and information science. John Stuart Mill's essays on liberty may form a base of operations from which this analysis is constructed. Mill implies that liberty is an idea created in anticipation of anarchic destruction, a necessary check against an equally necessary governmental authority. While protection against this governing tyranny is necessary, Mill (1859) continues to write,

> "there needs to be protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose ... its own ideas and practices."

Literacy is an intrinsic part of both this tyranny and the revolution; literature may be used to reinforce and destroy ideals and cultures. Perhaps literacy is a concept created in anticipation of intellectual anarchy, and the canons and cultures surrounding reading serve not to liberate but to control. If, as Gilbert suggests, reading has lost its innocence, is this an observation, a lamentation, or a call to arms?

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