English in the Classroom and the World

Language is a powerful means of understanding and acting on the world around us. Paulo Freire describes the transformative power of Brazilian peasants learning to read and write. In their memoirs, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Mike Rose, and Malcolm X relate the power of literacy to move them beyond the limited worlds they knew. Yet such stories may not seem related to the students and classrooms we see every day. Some students seem to believe that what they are learning is related only to the “here and now.” How can all students learn the power of language that transcends the limits of a single class in a single school?

The editors of the two books reviewed in this column address that question. The first focuses on workplace literacy, the second on language issues in Canada. Reviewer Allene Cooper is Director of the Writing Certificate Program and teaches document production and technical editing at Arizona State University. Before moving to the university level, she taught high school reading and English. Reviewer Gerald Delahunty is associate professor of English at Colorado State University, where he teaches primarily undergraduate and graduate linguistics courses, including a language class for preservice teachers.

Expanding Literacies: English Teaching and the New Workplace.
Reviewed by Allene Cooper
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We English teachers have recently had to ask ourselves difficult questions about what to do with the time students spend in our classes. Should we teach Nathaniel Hawthorne or Gwendolyn Brooks? Alexander Pope or the Pima creation accounts? The grammar of English or college prep research writing? Expressive writing or persuasive writing? Now, with the call for education reform by the general public, business and industry, and government groups, we must ask ourselves, Should we prepare our students to read and write for college or for the workplace?

The authors of each of the chapters in Expanding Literacies: English Teaching and the New Workplace aim to answer that question. Editors Mary Sue Garay and Stephen A. Bernhardt argue for an “expansion of traditional notions of English . . . that maintains a commitment to a strong liberal arts foundation and . . . to humanistic goals” (ix). Reformed English classes would aim to help students prepare for the literacy skills of a changing workplace. Classes would include “continued instruction in reading” (xiv) with a new emphasis on the “close connection between text and situation” (xv). Students would come to understand the “complex organizational setting,” “the politically charged nature of texts,” and the “real consequences” of different and subtle readings (xv).

Expanding Literacies argues also for teaching workplace writing and offers practical suggestions to help teachers and schools make changes in curriculum.

Expanding Literacies has eighteen essays divided into four sections. In Section One, essays describe workplace changes and the literacy reform initiatives aimed at helping students meet them. In Section Two, authors focus on specific workplaces and describe exactly how workers must write and read on the job. Section Three, which comprises nearly half of the book, contains practical classroom activities that integrate workplace reading and writing activities into liberal arts curricula. In the final section, authors illustrate partnerships between business and education and suggest ways schools can work with industry to prepare students to succeed after high school.

All teachers will probably be interested in the essays in Section One: Considering the New Literacies. In these chapters, authors expose the tensions and oppositions that...
some English teachers feel toward basic skills and vocational education. Essays trace the history of these feelings and discuss why industry, government, and members of the public are calling for education reform.

Teachers of literature and college placement writing will find “Of Work and English” by Mary Sue Garay and “Work in Transition: Trends and Implications” by Stephen A. Bernhardt and Bruce W. Farmer illuminating. The authors describe industry-related literacy skills necessary for students’ future employment. Authors argue convincingly that in a technologically-based service and information economy, our students will need oral communication, computer and writing skills, and the ability to continue learning in a constantly changing environment. Additionally, movements such as “concurrent engineering” (62), where work is restructured around outcomes rather than organizational functions, and “Total Quality Management” (TQM), which emphasizes the involvement of every worker (63), require high levels of reading and writing skills from every employee, not just from managers.

Even, or perhaps especially, those teachers who are not persuaded by the book’s central argument will find Garay’s essays interesting. In “Toward a Working English for Twenty-First-Century Schools and Colleges,” Garay describes movements both inside and outside the education community that aim to reform English education and “develop new visions” (21). She reports that the SCANS document (the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) includes, among others, the following competencies and personal qualities needed in today’s workplace: knowing how to work well on teams and with people from culturally diverse backgrounds; knowing how to allocate time, money, and materials; knowing how to acquire and evaluate data, think creatively, and solve problems; and knowing how to continue learning. Garay also summarizes the vision of language competence called for in the NCTE/IRA Standards. Briefly, students are to read and comprehend literary and nonliterary print and nonprint texts that reflect cultural and temporal diversity. Students should be able to read for information and to interpret and critique. They should be able to “communicate effectively [speak, write, visually represent] with different audiences for a variety of purposes” (Standards qtd. in Garay 31). Garay’s essays include, as do all chapters in Expanding Literacies, practical suggestions to implement the changes to help our students succeed at work.

In Section Two: The New Workplace in Context, four essays take us into the world of work outside school walls. Sally K. Robinson found in the manufacturing world that even workers at the most basic level need to be able to read technical documents and write memos and business letters. They need to develop improved oral and visual communication skills and to be able to work in self-directed teams.

Carolyn Boiarsky and Sarah Liggett explain the effects of miscommunication in the nuclear power industry. They offer specific suggestions for helping students acquire “situational and political literacy” (128) and for showing them how to collaborate to solve problems. Paul R. Meyer and Patricia Teel Bates list educational requirements and literacy duties of workers in the healthcare industry. Beverly Sauer describes how reader response, gender studies, literary and cultural theories, and sociocognitive research in decision making can be applied in English classrooms. This helps students traverse physical and legal risks associated with the OSHA Hazard Communication Standard.

In Section Three: Classrooms Sensitive to the New Workplace, eight essays provide ideas for classroom activities and tell the stories of districts and teachers who have made workplace literacy a part of their curricula. This section is the heart of Expanding Literacies, and teachers will find many helpful suggestions.

Gregory Johnson and Robert Taylor, for example, show how to combine nonfiction texts with traditional literary works to expand students’ reading abilities. They suggest combining Elie Wiesel’s Night with excerpts from Stanley Milgram’s Obedience to Authority, reading affirmative action law along with Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger of Memory, and supplementing young adult literature with professional psychology articles.

Mary Helen Stenauer and Janet Hyden describe “project” activities requiring collaboration, audience consideration, research, and high level writing skills. Students work in teams to create products such as forms for use in a nursery school, pamphlets for home safety, and guides for success in school programs. Larry Mikulecky translates the SCANS skills into specific classroom goals: In one project, a team of students develops an anthology...
of writings which they plan, write, collect, type, and publish.

In two final chapters in Section Four: Bridges between Education and Business, writers make recommendations for forming partnerships between schools and local industry. Partnerships often aim at “improving student achievement, employability, and self-esteem; lowering the dropout rate; enriching staff development; and improving community relations” (343). A few such successful partnerships have included combining forces to gain government grants, sharing knowledge about management techniques and computer technology, and obtaining business scholarships and awards.

Expanding Literacies: English Teaching and the New Workplace helps us answer the difficult questions we must ask ourselves about our curriculum. Not only does the book help us put the questions and issues in context, it offers timely and practical ideas and activities that combine English teachers’ humanistic leanings with our desire to help students succeed in their life’s work.

Language in Canada
Reviewed by Gerald Delahunty
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Some Americans (of the US variety) are convinced that Canada is on the verge of falling apart because it has two languages whose speakers are at each others’ throats. For these Americans, Canada provides cautionary tales about the dangers of bilingualism, a topic of concern as US schools attract a more diverse population. Of course, because these people rely on media accounts that report only the most sensational events, they are generally quite vague about the realities of the Canadian situation. Well, there’s no excuse for being vague about them any more. John Edwards’ Language in Canada is an excellent and timely book that provides a detailed, up-to-date account of Canada’s linguistic and cultural issues, going far beyond the simple notion that these issues begin and end with the aspirations of the more radical Quebecois and the Anglophone reactions to them.

Language in Canada is a companion to Language in Australia, Language in the British Isles, and, most pertinent for US readers, Charles Ferguson and Shirley Brice Heath’s Language in the USA. The book’s relevance is, as Edwards writes in his introduction, that

the Canadian scene—precisely because of its linguistic and cultural complexity, now under an intense sociopolitical microscope—can illuminate many issues of importance in other settings. Canada is a ‘receiving’ country, in which multilingualism and multiculturalism are deeply embedded in the social fabric. This suggests that events, issues, and policies here may be of interest in other contexts where many immigrants mingle, and confront a “mainstream.” (11–12)

The articles in this book focus primarily on the sociolinguistic aspects of these issues.

Although the Canadian and American linguistic pictures are different enough to make unreliable any categorical predictions for the US that are based on Canadian experiences, the two countries are nonetheless similar enough that Canadian lessons may be learned by Americans. As US secondary classrooms become more culturally and linguistically diverse, teachers will find the information, and particularly the perspectives, presented in Language in Canada very helpful.

This book contains an editor’s introduction and twenty-six chapters, which fall neatly into two groups. The second group is easier to describe. Modeled on Anthony Beltramo’s profile of the linguistic situation in Montana in Language in the USA, chapters 16–26 describe the linguistic situations in Canada’s eleven provinces and territories, beginning in the east and ending in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon Territory. They include the position and status of the most important regional varieties, the interpenetration of linguistic and cultural issues with wider social and political currents, and the relationship between Canada’s multicultural and multilingual “mosaic” and group identity (11).

The first group of chapters is more varied. Mackey provides a very accessible historical survey of Canada’s sociolinguistic history from precontact to the present. Castonguay’s statistical study argues
that, even though 92 percent of Canadians speak either English or French, “the fading Canadian duality” is “making way for an ethnically more diversified, yet more broadly English-speaking population”—a trend that “is having a profound impact on Canadian identity” (58–59), as English and French grow more territorialized, with English use declining in Quebec, and French use declining elsewhere in Canada.

The next two articles in the first group survey the history and current status of official policies on multilingualism and multiculturalism. Canada is officially multicultural within a bilingual framework. Quebec is officially Francophone, though Francophone Quebeccois feel that their language and culture are under continuous, serious threat from English. As a result, they have attempted to protect their linguistic and cultural interests with legal bulwarks. As is only to be expected, attempts to impose monolingualism generate energetic reactions. “English only” advocates, take note!

Noels and Clément examine “how the socio-political climate influences language learning,” particularly in programs designed to promote “harmonious and efficient interaction between citizens from diverse cultural backgrounds.” They argue that “the government's interest in cultural diversity supports language programmes that are designed to encourage cultural retention, particularly identity maintenance, and social integration, involving equitable and respectful interactions among cultural groups and their members” (102).

The next two chapters describe the history and current status of aboriginal languages. Canada is home to eight language families and three isolates, of which only three languages are rated as having excellent chances of survival: Cree, Ojibwa, and Inuktitut. In this respect, the fate of Canada's indigenous language is similar to that of a great many languages around the world. Of the 3000–5000 languages in the world, perhaps only a few hundred are safe from long-term danger.

The remainder of this group includes four articles on French (the phonology of its Canadian dialects and its situation in Quebec, New Brunswick, and outside of these two provinces); two articles on English (its Canadian dialects and its situation in Quebec); and two articles on language teaching in Canada (the teaching of heritage languages and French immersion). Immersion is Canada's best known language teaching innovation, and in his article Fred Genesee describes its current status and variants and assesses its pedagogical outcomes, including its impact on students' attitudes and actual use of French.

This is a well-conceived, well-edited, and handsomely produced volume. Even though the contributors come from disciplines that range from linguistics through educational psychology—including statistics, sociology, political science, English, and Slavonic studies (even including a language commissioner)—the book is clearly written, with accessibility to nonspecialists in mind, and with only minimal repetition of material from one article to another. It describes, to paraphrase Mackey, a new concept of Canada that is developing as the twentieth century draws to a close (35).

Related Web Sites

Readers interested in resources for more information on workplace literacy should visit the following sites to find numerous useful links. Remember that addresses on the Web change; if you cannot access one of these sites, you can try finding the new address by putting the name of the site as your search term in an Internet search engine.

**Links to Adult Education and Workplace Literacy**

[www.albany.net/~bmarino/links.htm](http://www.albany.net/~bmarino/links.htm)

Well-organized and easy-to-read annotations are provided for Government Links, International Links, National Links, and New York State Links regarding adult education. The information should also be valuable to secondary school educators.

**National School-to-Work Learning Center**

[www.stw.ed.gov](http://www.stw.ed.gov)

More than 170 links to national and international sites provide background on school-to-work initiatives, teaching activities, and ample information.

**Center for Applied Academics**

[http://cfaa.bridges.com](http://cfaa.bridges.com)

The lesson plans on this site are interesting and well-done. Developed by and for teachers in British Columbia, they are highly adaptable to US classrooms.