The Fight’s Not Always Fixed: Using Literary Response to Transcend Standardized Test Scores

A close examination of the writing of three eleventh-grade students labeled as “basic” on the California Standards Test demonstrates how they are developing academic literacy identities that transcend their standardized exam labels.

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Literary art translates feeling into thought and thereby renders the depth of human experience.

—Roland Walter, Narrative Identities: (Inter)Cultural In-Betweenness in the Americas

nancie Arwell noted in a 2010 online Education Week commentary that the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is organizing “an ad hoc task force whose charge is to gather evidence about why literature should continue to be taught in the 21st century” and described feeling “dismayed, but not surprised, that the NCTE was finding it necessary to lobby on behalf of literature.” In 2006, NCTE recognized that “the current era of high-stakes testing has resulted in a narrowed curriculum in many schools, leaving little time or resources for extended interaction with literature” despite a call from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) “to inspire a nationwide renaissance of literary reading and bring the transformative power of literature into the lives of all citizens” (xiii). In 2004, the NEA concluded that “literature reading is fading as a meaningful activity, especially among younger people” (ix).

How can we continue to teach students about the power of literary response when the priority is for them to achieve proficiency on standardized tests, whose scores can only be narrowly descriptive of students’ literacy abilities? Although literary response may be a mainstay in English language arts instruction, we continue to need it, perhaps more than ever, given an increased focus on standardized scores. In this article, I illustrate how three eleventh graders practiced literary response to transcend their standardized test scores and to revise their academic literacy identities.

Lisa, Dominique, and Brandon took the California Standards Test (CST), where scores were assigned at five performance levels: advanced (exceeds state standards), proficient (meets state standards), basic (approaching state standards), below basic (below state standards), and far below basic (well below state standards). The students in this article were designated as “basic” or “below basic,” although their essays on The Bluest Eye (Morrison) provided an intriguing contrast to these descriptions of their literacy abilities. Literary response, in the English class these students participated in, gave students opportunities to rise above their standardized test scores, and they cast themselves, with their teacher Diana’s considerable assistance, into a more literate light. They also wrestled with academic language, and by doing so they were engaged in crucial writing development, even as their growth failed to show in the measurement of a standardized test. Here I present a philosophical argument about literacy identities and the vital role that literary response can play in creating valuable writing assignments.
Adolescent Literacy Identity: Social, Shifting, Agentive

Literacy, when it has taken hold in a life, exhibits a blatant disregard for boundaries. As educators, we hope that students envision themselves as literate and are brave enough to blur the distinction between school and the rest of their lives, even when the curricula seem irrelevant or they get the message that they are incompetent or not literate enough. For students to see reading as part of the stories of their lives, and to use literacy to enrich their lives, literacy must be a part of their identities.

Adolescent literacy identity is shifting, contextualized, and tenuous (Alvermann; Gee and Crawford; Hagood; Neilsen; Reed, Schallert, Beth, and Woodruff). More recently, Cynthia Lewis and Antillana del Valle identified a “third wave” of research on identity and literacy that is becoming increasingly prevalent and builds upon the idea of “identity as negotiated and performative” (313). A complementary component of this view of identity is that it “is not socially determined but socially constructed” (Ivanič 13) and open to revision (Moje and Lewis). This provides students the opportunities to assume various, even contradictory, literacy identities that transform over time. I build upon Paula M. Carbone and Marjorie F. Orellana’s work where they analyzed students’ writing “for indications of how students discursively create their own emerging identities as academically competent and achieving students” (293).

I conceive of an academic literacy identity as the common ground between what students believe themselves to be able to do with, and through, literacy and what others believe they are capable of, with curricula and a standardized test that attempt to “fix” literacy identities in place. Attempting “to reposition marginalized youth in classrooms and schools” (Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore 9) is especially challenging in our current context of emphasis on standardized assessment, given that tests often do not accurately reflect the range of students’ abilities (Wilhelm). Assessments provide, at best, only a passing snapshot, and an often blurry one at that, of students’ academic literacy identities.

Performing Literacy Identities

Lisa, Dominique, and Brandon were part of a year-long study I conducted of their eleventh-grade English classroom in an urban secondary school on the west coast. Their teacher Diana had been teaching for five years. The students knew why I was observing their classroom, saw me engage in frequent conversations with their teacher, and were also aware that I lived in the same community that they did.

My research question was: What role did literary response play in writing a new academic literacy identity? Data sources included classroom observations, students’ in-class writing, and audi-taped interviews with focal students during the final month of data collection. I obtained English grades and standardized test scores for the participating students from the teacher. All names used here are pseudonyms.

Lisa: “It’s Like Telling a Story to Me”

Not surprisingly, Lisa, an African American female who was then 16 years old, did not take a test score as an authoritative last word on the presence of literacy in her life. High school students are writers in other contexts outside of school and they engage with literacy in “complex, multifaceted, and multimodal” ways (Bean and Harper 393); Lisa’s depiction of her literacy practices illustrated this. She described literacy as part of her identity “‘cause I use it to express my feelings—like talking to my friends, I use a different language but if somebody was to approach me, someone that I wouldn’t know, I would use a different language. Also, if I’m writing to somebody, if I want them to understand how I feel about a situation or tell them about myself, then I use writing.” Her response portrays literacy as plural, context-dependent, and enmeshed in a tangle of social relationships that include imbalances of power, a conception that is reinforced by more general theories about academic identity construction (Hall; Ivanič; Sarup; Walter; Yun).

Lisa reported that she “was always a B or a C” in English. She mentioned that she “like[d] writing essays” because “it’s like telling a story to me.” The Bluest Eye essay had been her favorite that year because “we dealt with the issues that girls are going through today,” and these were things she could
“relate” to. She went on to remark that she didn’t “know how to express” her feelings except through the act of writing. She described her ideal English class assignment as one that taught “students how to be able to express their feelings on paper.” Lisa mentioned that she had been writing poetry “since [she] was little because [she] watched [her] mom do it.” When I asked what she wrote about, she replied, “How I feel. Basically how I feel, how people act around me. Life, period.”

Lisa and I also discussed the relationship between literacy and power in society. She believed that “higher class people use it to their advantage.” She described it as part of her identity because she “use[d] it to express [her] feelings” and that we need literacy “in order for us to get through in life.” She said she often went “blank” when faced with standardized testing, but couldn’t elaborate on why that occurred. Lisa was identified by the CST as “below basic” at the end of her eleventh-grade year. Despite that, she prided herself on doing well in school, remarking that English had become “one of [her] best subjects” that year, and she planned to go to college. As of this writing, she is attending college.

Diana’s assignment for The Bluest Eye essay was “designed to help you analyze an author’s implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject (California Language Arts Content Standards 2.5 & 3.2).” Of the three topic choices, Lisa chose “beauty,” the prompt for which appears here:

Beauty—as mentioned in the afterword to The Bluest Eye, the novel “pecks away at” (reveals and challenges) an “outside gaze” (that of the dominant white society) that causes “the damaging internalization of assumptions of . . . inferiority” that are at the heart of Pecola’s belief in order to be beautiful, loved, and accepted she must have blue eyes. Analyze Morrison’s treatment of this subject. Cite examples of “internalized inferiority” in terms of beauty, not just with Pecola, but other characters in the novel as well. Finally, discuss your own experiences with the model of “beauty” you encounter on a daily basis—is it a model that allows for vast individual variation, or is it a model that sets a standard that very few can actually achieve? For extra credit, refer to specific evidence from the video A Question of Color.

A reader owns connection in a way that may well be beyond the reach of assessment, and Lisa utilized personal connection and relation to begin her essay:

Growing up in my day I have had some experiences with the model of beauty. On a daily basis I see myself striving to fit the standard of beauty that very few can actually achieve. At times I see myself wanting to be like what I see on TV, in the magazines, and in other photographs.

She also used personal relation in her conclusion:

The events in the novel are basically the same thing that happens in today’s life. There are still people who try to fit the standards of beauty. People who experience intraracism and poverty and other struggles [sic]. So, yes I can relate to what goes on in the novel.

In her literacy study, Mellinee Lesley described how her students “made personal connections . . . as a way to establish interpretive authority” (188). Lisa employed a similar strategy in her essay. Even though the directive to “discuss your own experiences with the model of ‘beauty’” came at the end of the essay prompt, Lisa began with personal relation in her first sentence: “Growing up in my day I have had some experiences with the model of beauty.” She also ended with connection: “So, yes I can relate to what goes on in the novel.”

Lisa wrote both sentences in a conversational tone, rather than a distant one we might expect from a formal school essay; I take that as a sign of a student wrestling with academic writing for whom a more informal tone might lend greater confidence; drawing on personal connections can increase confidence, too. In another instance, Lisa began to explain a quote from the novel with the phrase, “Claudia is revealing to me that,” which also indicates a response grounded in personal relation.

This sort of literary response possibly gave Lisa a means by which to begin to assert herself as a competent writer. I’d also like to share a portion of her essay that may be controversial, due to the number of errors:

In this novel Pecola is an eleven-year-old Black girl who believes that she is ugly and that having blue eyes would make her beautiful. On page 45 in the novel the narrator points out that “as long as she looked that way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people.” In this quote again it shows how Pecola felt ugly because she didn’t fit the standards of the dominant White
society. In the dominant White society they promote that to be beautiful is to have blue eyes, long blonde hair, and money. Which made people in the lower class materialistic. Also to be Black was to be ugly. If you are not White then you are in the category of ugliness. The closer you are to the color of whiteness the closer you are to beauty.

Even though Lisa was able to provide quotes from the novel to support her analysis, she jumped around. The above segment, and her overall essay, reads like a draft, which itself could be the most constructive way to view the process of Lisa becoming a more powerful writer, a process that included instances of both success and failure. It is most helpful to view these instances as occurring on a continuum of response, rather than as isolated events (like standardized test performances). Even as she did not yet possess “a full toolkit of skills for production of an academic essay” (Carbone and Orellana 297), Lisa responded to a complex literary text, as opposed to a simpler one that might be part of a remedial curriculum aimed at “basic” and “below basic” students.

Two More Writers Revising Their Identities: Dominique and Brandon

Dominique, a 15-year-old African American female, rarely talked to her peers outside of group work, and she reported that her peers thought she was “a goody two shoes” because she was “always quiet and doing [her] work.” She often brought her own book to read in class when she had free time. When I asked her if she thought that reading and writing were part of her identity, she responded that she did: “I just like to read and I just like to write—I don’t know how to explain it but I like to do both whenever I have a chance.” Dominique reported getting books from the local bookstore and from a website with books by African American authors. She received a score of “basic” on the CST.

Like Lisa, Dominique wrote her essay about beauty in The Bluest Eye:

Morrison examines the intra-racial conflict about beauty with her characters Maureen Peal, Claudia, and Frieda. When Claudia says, “The thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful, and not us.” Claudia means that that they could not hate Maureen Peal for being beautiful, they hate the person and/or thing that made her so beautiful and not them. They hate whatever made Maureen beautiful because it did not make them beautiful, and for that they wondered why.

Dominique summarized the quote from the novel and then expressed the bewilderment that Claudia and Frieda felt: “for that they wondered why.” She understood that they are struggling to comprehend the much-larger societal web of racism as it manifests in appreciation of one child’s “beauty.” A “basic” writer might have stopped at summary. In her next paragraph, Dominique also complicated the seemingly simple term of “ugly.”

Morrison examines the conflict of beauty with her character Pecola Breedlove. The narrator says, “as long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people.” The narrator means that as long as Pecola is ugly to other people, she is forced to be with her family, who to other people are also considered ugly and who have ugly ways. Pecola does not try to make friends because she doesn’t know how people are going to accept her and feel toward her.
Like Lisa, Dominique assumed authority by stating what “the narrator means” and by making the interpretive jump from “looking” to “being.” As Dominique saw it, the conflict of beauty that Morrison explores does not end at the physical characteristics of light skin and blue eyes but extends to “ugly ways” and affects how other people perceive and treat Pecola. In her phrase “as long as Pecola is ugly to other people,” Dominique explicated the complexity of ugliness in this novel: Pecola is judged as unattractive and she can be unkind to other characters. Would someone who attempts such complicated interpretive moves be accurately labeled “basic”?

Brandon, a 16-year-old African American male in the class, was also assigned a score of “basic” on the CST. He enjoyed group work in English class and also reported that even though he didn’t enjoy reading outside of school, he visited four to six sports websites daily in what he described as “a tradition” (and he conceded that he was actually doing a fair amount of reading on those sites). Brandon planned to attend a community college and wanted to become a sports journalist. During an interview with me, he remarked, “I see [Diana] as the perfect English teacher ‘cause some teachers here don’t know what they’re doing, and they just give you answers. In a way she prepares you for the real world.” As I discuss later in this article, Diana struggled with finding a balance between preparing students for the CST and helping them become writers for life (that is, encouraging the students to see writing as part of their identities).

Brandon also began his essay on beauty in The Bluest Eye with personal relation:

There you are on the couch watching music videos. All of a sudden you see a Fat Joe video filled with all of these perfect light-skinned girls dancing and then you think, why are there not any darker colored girls on there? But then you think or is it because the dominant white society perfect, light colored females rather than darker colored females just because lighter colored girls represent more “beauty?” Sometimes as a person because I am dark skinned, I feel that I might not fit in with the dominant white society all of the time because I am not superior to them. Because I am not beautiful.

His beginning resembled a story, and he used “you” to engage his reader. The present-tense narration and “all of a sudden” led his attempt to place the subject of his essay in a more recent context. He anticipated “your” thinking and described his connection to it. He even ended on a starkly personal note: “I am not beautiful.” He made the connection between a certain conception of beauty and being “superior.” This was the work of a student who, despite struggling with academic English, attempted to analyze the intersection between beauty and racism.

Like his classmates, Brandon made sure to include direct quotes to support his interpretation, and he bracketed quotes with his own thoughts, striking a balance between inclusion of his own voice and details from the novel:

In the novel a young lady named Pecola Breedlove faces adversity in trying to be beautiful. Her belief in order for her to be beautiful, loved, and accepted is to be as beautiful as the other girls in the dominant white society. A good quote to support this argument is “it had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (pg. 46). This represents how she wanted to be beautiful. Even though she didn’t really want to fit in, but she knew to fit in and be loved, she had to be beautiful.

Brandon understood that Pecola wanted to look differently so that her life would change radically (or so she hopes), and he also understood that it was not a simple matter of fitting in, as he indicates in his last sentence. She wants to be beautiful but doesn’t want to necessarily be absorbed into an unjust society that values a certain physical beauty above all else. Brandon’s wrestling with academic writing illustrates the extent to which the fight is not always fixed: basic students can rise to the high expectations of both caring teachers and challenging texts and alter aspects of their academic literacy identities.
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Teachers Caught between Goals

Test scores are proxies for what people actually do in the real world and we would do well to begin putting more weight on accounts that are closer to real world experience.

—Brian Street, “New Literacies in Theory and Practice: What Are the Implications for Language in Education?”

While classroom essay writing might not be the real-world experience that Street has in mind, Diana’s assignment did provide students with the chance to position themselves as competent readers and writers and to bring in their own personal experiences and viewpoints while doing so. In our current educational climate, teachers may be forced to make curricular choices that they feel are shortchanging their students. After this class had ended, I mentioned to Diana the prominent role that the standards and preparation for the CST seemed to play, and I asked what informed her lesson-planning. When creating lessons, Diana stated that she asked herself What do we need in order to survive in this democracy? and her beliefs around this question formed the basis of her curriculum. Her overarching goal was to teach students to “read critically and to interpret what they read,” and she also believed that “literature has a lot to teach us.” She felt she was “guessing” about the content of the CST and said that, “I feel like this is product [the CST] and there’s no accounting for process.” Even though she felt that “students should be able to test other’s arguments and strengthen their own,” she did not feel they would be assessed on that.

Diana felt a pull between preparing students for life and preparing them for a test: “it feels like I’m giving the kids something important no matter what they do after high school . . . at the same time I feel like I’m slighting them by not doing that stuff that might help them do better on the CST.” This statement becomes poignant when we recall Brandon’s comment that he believes she “prepares you for the real world.” Even though this preparation might not have shown up on the CST, students saw the value in it. I try to pass this important lesson on to the preservice teachers I work with now.

Surpassing Standardized Exam Labels

I worry that students like Lisa, Dominique, and Brandon might accept such labels like “basic” and “below basic” as the “official” description of their literacy abilities. In addition to adding specificity to the standards, educators have the responsibility of giving students the opportunity to achieve academic proficiency above and beyond a one-dimensional designation, especially a harmful and inaccurate one. Literary response can help students develop academic literacy identities that belie their standardized test scores, as The Bluest Eye essays of these three students demonstrate.

Roz Ivanič described one of the students she studied as being at the mercy of someone else’s definition of literate: “It is as if she had the identity of ‘person-who-is-able-to-read’ taken away from her” (125). Lisa, Dominique, and Brandon found themselves in a similar situation in school where test scores had fixed them as “below basic” and “basic,” respectively, and they attempted to take their identities back in acts of “reactive agency” (Bruner 41) that redefined their academic literacy identities. By examining “students’ texts as indicative of how students are attempting to succeed” (Carbone and Orellana 295) and going beyond standardized test labels, we can open pedagogical possibilities for building students’ academic literacy identities.

By examining the results of encouraging students, we can learn more about how students can become powerfully literate, despite what standardized test scores might decree.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In “Narrative Structure and Perspectives in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” students first respond to the complicated narrative structure of Toni Morrison’s Beloved by visually representing the novel’s nonlinear organization. The different student representations of Book 1 (ranging from the symbolic to the chronological to the abstract) then give rise to a discussion on the centering and marginalizing of details from the text—both in literal and figurative senses. Next, students are guided through close readings of the three different accounts of the infanticide that Sethe commits, with the goal of making evident the ways in which identity and bias shape how characters, authors, and readers see and choose to represent the world. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/narrative-structure-perspectives-toni-1156.html