In an era of excessive high-stakes testing and a blind embrace of technicism, literacy not only matters but may represent one of our last hopes to salvage our already feeble democracy. By literacy, however, I do not mean to resurrect the empty cliché that reduces literacy to the mechanical learning of reading and writing skills to meet the requirements of our complex technological society while sacrificing the critical analysis of the social and political order that generates the need for reading and writing in the first place. This approach abstracts methodological issues from their ideological contexts and consequently ignores the interrelationship between the sociopolitical structures of a society and the act of reading. This has given rise to a social construction of “not seeing” parading under the rubric of scientific research that, at least in education, could be best characterized as the “painfully obvious.”

Take, for example, an empirical study that concludes that children who engage in dinner conversation with their families achieve higher rates of success in reading. This study would not only be academically dishonest but also misleading to the extent that it ignores the class and economic assumptions that all children are guaranteed daily dinners in the company of their parents and siblings. What generalizations could such a study make about the over 12 million children who go hungry every day in the United States? What could this study say to thousands of children who are homeless, who have no table, and who sometimes do not have food to put on the table they do not have? A study that made such sweeping and distorted generalizations about the role of dinner conversations in reading achievement would say little about children whose houses are without heat in the winter—houses that reach such dangerously cold conditions that a father of four children remarked: “You just cover up and hope you wake up the next morning” (Kozol, 1996, p. 89). If the father really believed the study results, he would suggest to his children that they have a conversation at dinner the next day since it would be helpful in their reading development—should they be lucky enough to make it through another freezing night alive.

The idiocy of this type of reading achievement study points to how literacy is constructed as a set of practices that function to disempower those who, through an accident of birth, are not part of a class structure where literacy is a fundamental cultural capital. Instead of studies that recycle old assumptions and values regarding the meaning and usefulness of literacy, I want to argue that literacy is not a matter of mechanically learning to read in the dominant academic discourse that still informs the vast majority of literacy programs and manifests its logic in the renewed back-to-basic emphasis on technical reading and writing skills. Literacy cannot and should not be viewed as simply the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant academic discourse, particularly when the academic discourse is taught out of context, denying learners who are not middle and upper class the class nuances that are imperative in reading success. The in...
ability to name class structure not only reproduces the false myth that we live in a classless society but also puts the language of the curriculum beyond question. As a result, for example, working-class English speakers as well as linguistic minority students often find themselves in a pedagogical entrapment that, according to Lilia Bartolomé (1988),

contradicts much of the “common sense” presumption that in school settings teachers actually teach students more “academic ways” of communicating and yet the students simply fail to acquire these more advanced communication skills. It is commonly accepted that the academic discourse that relies on linguistic cues such as precise vocabulary and unilateral structured syntactic and rhetorical structures is more efficient in an academic setting. Unfortunately, the reality is that academic discourse conventions are seldom explicitly taught to working-class, linguistic minority students. Furthermore, there is also a tendency to glorify and romanticize a particular type of academic language discourse that is inaccurately referred to in the literature as “de-contextualized” language. (pp. 3–4)

A “de-contextualized” language is a figment of our imagination, socially constructed to present the academic discourse as a superior discourse. The real de-contextualization occurs when class and racial barriers deny subordinate students access to the class structures where the dominant academic discourse predominates and when the teaching of the academic discourse to subordinate students presumes that their linguistic and cultural capital must be eradicated before they can acquire the much-heralded academic discourse.

Although I understand that to deny working-class and linguistic minority students mastery of the dominant academic discourse constitutes a form of cultural suicide, such acquisition must take place as part of cultural production and be viewed as integral to the ways that working-class and linguistic minority students produce, transform, and reproduce meaning. Thus, literacy must be seen as medium that constitutes and affirms the historical and existential moments of lived experience that produce a subordinate or a lived culture that includes, obviously, the language through which a subordinate culture is produced. Hence, literacy is an eminently political phenomenon, and it must be analyzed within the context of a theory of power relations and an understanding of social and cultural reproduction and production. Only through literacy for cultural production can subordinate students realize that the acquisition of the dominant academic discourse should not be mystified and must be always viewed as a necessary tool to further develop one’s capacity for critical and independent thinking.

The mastery of dominant academic discourse through literacy for cultural production should be understood as a weapon for subordinate students to defend themselves.

blindly embrace literacy for domestication that anesthetizes one’s capacity to think independently and critically. Literacy for domestication produces almost an aversion to thinking as demonstrated by pop artist Britney Spears’s remark, “Sundance [film festival] is weird. The movies are weird—you actually have to think about them when you watch them” (Time, 2003, p. 21).

Literacy for domestication in our society is what Adolph Hitler had in mind when he noted “What good fortune for those in power that people do not think” (Macedo, 1994, p. 36). Against the crippling effects of literacy for domestication, educators and concerned citizens who yearn for a truly cultural democracy should accept only literacy for cultural production—a form of literacy that matters to the degree that it leads to the creation of critical capacities used for self-defense and liberation. Literacy matters if, and only if, it is viewed as a democratic right and as a human right.

References


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