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The Power of *Authentic Literacy*

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives.

—Richard Vacca

Imagine . . . all students, regardless of socioeconomic circumstance, having spent most of their class time in English, social studies, and other courses closely and carefully reading, rereading, discussing, and writing about the ideas in various texts. Imagine every student graduating from high school having analyzed and imitated excellent examples of adult writing and having written countless close literary analyses, essays, grant proposals, business plans, and position papers on multiple political, scientific, and cultural controversies—after carefully reading and discussing two or more conflicting documents on innumerable engaging issues.

As ambitious as this vision may sound, we have more than enough time—12 years!—to provide an ample amount of such experiences, which would shatter achievement records, reduce dropouts, and ensure college readiness and graduation rates at levels never achieved. Many students would graduate from high school educated as well as or better than many current college graduates. If such experiences were common—and they could be—our schools would be second to none.

The lifelong consequences of good—or poor—literacy skills are monumental. Whether we acquire them in science, social studies, or English, they affect not only school success, but intelligence itself—our ability to think. Authentic literacy, rightly acquired, profoundly affects students' life and career options, their understanding of the world, their facility with concepts and ideas. These intellectual abilities pervade every subject area. For these reasons, we need to have the deepest and most complete understanding of what literacy is and how students can best acquire it. Effective literacy strategies are far simpler than much that we've been told.

The Way Up and Out

In his classic book, *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose describes his school experience growing up poor in east Los Angeles. In his family's tiny house, he shared a bedroom with his parents. Rose attended school in a state of "somnambulism"—of sleepy, bored frustration. For him and many of his classmates, school was a place of "embarrassment, not challenge" (1989, p. 31). He saw his own probable future in the "ravaged hope," the lack of curiosity and passion so sadly characteristic of the adults he grew up around (p. 47).

Until, that is, he entered the 10th grade. That's when Jack MacFarland became his English teacher. MacFarland—without the benefit of "standards"—taught to the very best standards we find in state assessments. He did this by teaching English in a way that is entirely at odds with conventional literacy instruction.

Rose and his classmates began to read a multitude of books, articles, and essays—in class—and to talk and write about the issues raised in their reading. MacFarland was constantly asking prepared questions as his students "wrote and talked, wrote and talked" about what they read, closely and purposefully, every day (Rose, pp. 32–34). This simple formula—reading, writing, and talking—was the heart of their English instruction. It is the heart of authentic literacy.

Years later, Rose realized that MacFarland had provided a "prep school curriculum" for him and his fellow members of (savor the irony)

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the "Voc. Ed. Crowd" (pp. 32–33). In a single life-transforming year, Rose received the kind of authentic literacy education that he could have been getting for 12 years. It allowed him, against all expectations, to become the first member of his family to attend college. He is now a professor at UCLA.

Generous amounts of close, purposeful reading, rereading, writing, and talking, as underemphasized as they are in K–12 education, are the essence of authentic literacy. These simple activities are the foundation for a trained, powerful mind—and a promising future. They are the way up and out—of boredom, poverty, and intellectual inadequacy. And they're the ticket to ensuring that record numbers of minority and disadvantaged youngsters attend and graduate from college. We have yet to realize how much is at stake here.

Literacy, Liberation, and Opportunity

Rose grew up with a vivid sense of limits about his academic capabilities, which professions he could pursue, and which circles he could move in. But close reading, talking, and writing, in redundant abundance, changed all that. They rid him of his "sense of exclusion." Rose observes, "Jack MacFarland had saved me . . . and revitalized my mind." For the first time, Rose "felt freed, as if I were untying fetters" (pp. 46–47). This breakthrough paved the way for his future success. But as we'll see in the next chapter, prevailing language arts instruction actually *prevents* the poor—and poorly educated—from ever making this transition.

Rose, now literate, learned to *think*—to accurately and effectively weigh words and articulate ideas with skill and clarity. In this sense, the majority of students are indeed "on the boundary." Some are caught between a dismal and barely adequate education. Others are on the boundary between a mediocre education and one that more richly equips them for the intellectual demands and opportunities of the university, of professional and intellectual life.

When I taught English at a state university, I saw plenty of students on the boundary at the higher end. Although they were able to

get into college, most of them wrote poorly. Critical and analytical reading and discussion, though engaging, was new for them. Almost half would never graduate, even with remedial help.

Wherever students are on this continuum, their intellectual and professional prospects can pivot hugely on how much reading, writing, and talking they do during their K–12 years.

Higher-Order Literacy Demands

Literacy expert Richard Allington, president of the International Reading Association for 2005–2006, has commented forcefully about this clear connection between authentic reading and writing experiences and students' personal, intellectual, and professional prospects. The "information age," he writes

places higher-order literacy demands on all of us . . . these demands include synthesizing and evaluating information from multiple sources. American schools need to enhance the ability of children to search and sort through information, to synthesize and analyze the information they encounter. (2001, p. 7)

But, alas, Allington's research, like other studies we'll cite in the next chapter, reveals something deeply troubling: such intellectually substantive reading, writing, and talking are exceedingly rare in most classrooms. We should be alarmed by this fact. As Ferrandino and Tirozzi point out, literacy determines who will—or won't

garner respect from peers and authority . . . it speaks to the larger societal issues of access and equity. In our society, being literate opens doors—and opens them wide. (2004, p. 29)

This kind of literacy goes way beyond "decoding" or "fluency," which are only the beginning of literacy. Test scores themselves show that most students who can read and decode are systematically denied the opportunity to acquire the kind of higher-order literacy that can make such a difference in our lives. The majority of every audience of teachers I've spoken to has acknowledged that we have a serious problem here.

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Deborah Meier, the legendary inner-city principal, knows real literacy from its inferior substitutes. Her charter schools in New York and Boston have sent high proportions of disadvantaged and minority students to the best colleges. Very high proportions of these students graduate (Meier, 2002). She explicitly advocates the kind of literacy we'll describe here, which has enabled a remarkable number of students to break the bonds of class and race and become "powerful members of the ruling class." Such intellectual empowerment, she tells us emphatically, should be the "non-negotiable, central goal of public schooling" (Matthews, 2004, p. 3). For Meier,

The question is not, Is it possible to educate all children well? But rather Do we want to do it badly enough? . . . There's a radical—and wonderful—new idea here: the idea that every citizen is capable of the kind of intellectual competence previously attained by only a small minority. . . . Children should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other peoples' ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on this most complex world. (2002, p. 4)

Such a rigorous, intellectually robust education is eminently within the reach of our students (as I hope the questions and activities in Appendix A will help to make clear).

Habits of Mind

For Meier, intellectual, social, and economic power, the kind we desire for our own children, comes from activities any student can engage in tomorrow morning: large, daily doses of what Meier calls "deep reading," writing, and argument (more on this in a moment). In combination, these activities can animate students' interest in the ideas and people they encounter in texts—in other words, the characters and historical figures whose actions and remarks they can evaluate, condemn, or defend. Every day of their school lives, students should be reading texts critically, then weighing evidence for or against people, ideas, and policies, and forming opinions. These activities foster a set of essential, intellectual "habits of mind," as Meier and author Ted Sizer call them. These practices include the ability to

- Critically examine evidence in a text.
- See the world from multiple viewpoints.
- Make connections and detect patterns among ideas and perspectives.
- Imagine alternatives. (What if? What else?)
- Understand relevance: (What difference does it make?)

“What difference does it make?” is a question we often neglect to consider, which may account for why English is usually students’ least favorite course.

This last point is important. If we took this analysis seriously, it would prevent a host of inane practices—endless time spent learning arcane literary terms, overanalyzing metaphors, and identifying elements such as “climax,” “plot,” or “rising action” (as though anyone ever reads that way). We should be focusing on how students feel about characters, on their thoughts and informed opinions about the themes and controversies in literature and nonfiction—as they write and talk about them.

Institutionally, we do not yet realize that 12 years of generous, daily amounts of *in-school* reading, writing, and discussion, built around good questions (shared and refined by teams and networks of teachers), would create unimagined intellectual, academic, and professional possibilities for our children.

This framework belongs in every subject and discipline. Certainly history and social studies provide some of the best opportunities for such text-based inquiry. Neil Postman suggests that English—language arts—is an especially natural place to foster these invaluable habits and capacities (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 54).

It is through reading, writing, and talking that students most directly and effectively acquire a facility with what Lisa Delpit calls the “dominant discourse” (1995). It is the language of the educated, the language of the ruling and decision-making class. Those who master this language can influence others and are the least susceptible to being manipulated by those who wield language for unwholesome purposes.

Literacy liberates. Delpit begs us not to water down literacy education for anyone, regardless of their race or social class, because only the truly literate

have the ability to transform dominant discourses for liberatory purposes. Many who have played significant roles in fighting for the liberation of people of color have done so through the language of the dominant discourse. (1995, p. 163)

Parents know that their children's life chances hang very much on being literate and articulate. They also know that their children must master "the dominant discourses to have access to economic power" (Delpit, 1995, p. 162).

Learning and Earning

Literacy is pivotal to acquiring the type of education that is the path to economic and political power. A recent study in (reputedly class-bound) England found that the ability to read well is the single best indicator of future economic success—regardless of family background (British Broadcasting Corporation News, 2002).

And earnings, as Richard Kahlenberg tells us, "increase lockstep with education" (Kahlenberg, 2004). U.S. census data reveal that those with less than a high school degree earn about \$19,000 per year; high school graduates earn an average of \$27,000 a year. Those with bachelor's degrees earn \$51,000 a year—almost twice that of those with a high school degree. We know, as well, how a college degree confers a level of respect, access, and opportunity beyond earning power. Education, he writes, is "the ticket of entry to the middle class," the key to upward mobility.

One of the saddest features of life in the United States, with its unmatched prosperity, is that 40 percent of those born into the bottom economic fifth stay there as adults (Kahlenberg, 2004). If we want to end this cycle of inequity and intergenerational poverty, education is the surest route. The gateway to a good education is literacy.

But what does it mean to be truly, authentically literate?