Developing The Literate Mind

J.A. Langer

Speech
IRA
Cosponsored Reading Hall of Fame Session
Tuesday, May 4, 2004

My talk today is called DEVELOPING THE LITERATE MIND. I chose this title because all my research, ever since I began, has focused on The Literate Mind – what it is, how it develops, and what we can do to help it grow at school.

I'm going to talk to you about it today. I'll take you on a road trip of some of the things I've learned – and end my talk with how I'm using it all to change schools in ways that make a difference.

My notion of the literate mind involves the kinds of thinking needed not only to do well in school, but outside as well.

It's the kind of mind children need to get on in life and adults need to keep up with life.

It involves the ability to use language and thought to gain knowledge, share it and reason with it. We do this when we read, write and use the symbols and signs that permeate our society.

There are four theoretical concepts I've been developing over the past 25 plus years that have given me a way to think about the literate mind.

Each of these concepts has been a focus of my research, and over time each has been absorbed into the theoretical foundations upon which my later work is based.

First is the concept of LITERATE THINKING.
I see being literate as the ability to think like a literate person – to engage in the kinds of thinking and reasoning people generally use when they read and write even in situations where reading and writing are not involved.

For example, if you listen to people leaving a movie, often you hear them talking about what they liked or didn't, and about things that surprised them and why – some give examples, and others disagree and give counter-examples. They analyze and defend. They engage in literate thinking. But they're not reading or writing.

I think this broader conception will take us much farther both in schools and in society than simply focusing on acts of reading and writing.

Literate thinking invites students to use their particular knowledge -- what they know and have experienced -- as a starting place for learning.

From this perspective, students begin new learnings by manipulating their knowledge of content and their knowledge of language in ways that help them think and rethink new skills and understandings.

From this perspective, the thinking and awareness come first, embedded in thought-provoking ideas and activities.

For example, one of my studies of bilingual students found that when students are encouraged to become analytic about the language and structure of their own oral stories from home, they more easily make the transition to written text. They learn to write and edit their own stories with greater ease, and also to use their knowledge of language and structure to read, analyze and critique the texts of others, including those in their textbooks.

This is a very different notion of literacy than thinking of it as the acquisition of a general set of reading and writing skills. It values a different set of performances as being smart and learning well, and leads to different ways of teaching and using literacy in the classroom.

For instruction, Literate Thinking suggests that we help students become analytic about the language and ideas they already know, and help them find ways to relate what they know to the new content and skills they are learning.

Next is what I call A SOCIOCOGNITIVE VIEW OF LITERACY.

By a sociocognitive view I mean that literacy learning is an essentially social enterprise. Why and how people <u>use</u> literacy grows from the social environments in which they are regularly a part – at home, in the community, in places of worship, at play with friends and in classes at school.

The mind learns to think and reason, and to discuss in ways that are particular to those various purposes and situations.

When children interact with others, they learn not only the uses of literacy, but also what is valued – what is considered successful. And that notion guides the strategies they use as they learn to do as they see done. The social informs the cognitive.

For example, today children grow up in a technology society. From early on, they know how to manipulate and control video-recorders, digital cameras and home entertainments systems in ways I'll never match. They're part of their environment, but not mine. I'll

need a lot of experiences and instruction before I become as technologically literate as they are.

The sociocognitive view helps us understand the kinds of literate knowledge students come to school with and also the range of purposeful literacy experiences they need to learn at school.

For us, it means that if we want students to gain higher literacy, then the social contexts of education – the values and end goals of the larger system, as well as what happens in the classroom--, need to represent the kinds of literacy uses we want students to master and the kinds of performances we consider marks of success.

Next, my notion of ENVISIONMENT-BUILDING

In the past, we've treated the growth of comprehension as a building-block process, where new ideas are attached to old ones – leading to some built-up understanding of the text.

But my research shows it doesn't work that way. Understandings grow and change and spiral and become transmuted when we read and write and think.

I use the term envisionment to refer to the world of understanding we have at one point in time, when we're reading, writing, or thinking.

Like when you're listening to me. Your envisionment right now represents your understanding at one point in time. You might be thinking, this isn't the work I thought Judith did. What is she talking about? But, if you continue to listen to my talk, your envisionment of my work and also of what I mean by the Literate Mind will change and grow. You'll find your old points of connections, and discover new ones. Wait and see.

Each envisionment includes what you do and do not understand, as well as your momentary hunches about how the whole will unfold, and your reactions to it.

Envisionments are text worlds in your mind, and they differ from person to person. They're a function of your experiences, what you know relative to the topic and situation, and what you're after. And they're always subject to change, as new ideas, information, or experiences come to mind.

The implications of this notion for assessments as well as teaching are vast.

For example, in one study I learned that bilingual students who read texts in English were unable to answer multiple choice questions about them, even though they could discuss what the texts were about when asked to share their envisionments. It was the wording of

the multiple choice questions and the kinds of answers they were after that prevented the students from showing what they understood.

For instruction, the notion of envisionment-building suggests that we need to think of comprehension as something that's developing and changing -- we need to ask questions and engage in discussions that provide opportunities for students to get out what they do and do not understand, so we can guide them in ways to go beyond.

These three concepts: literate thinking, sociocognitive view of literacy, and envisionment-building underlie all the research I do. And one newer body of research has begun to be absorbed into my larger theoretical conception of the literate mind.

That's the notion of LITERARY and INFORMATIONAL UNDERSTANDING.

My studies show that the meanings we're after and the ways we make sense differ substantially when we're reading, writing or discussing in order to gain or share information (say, to read a textbook or to write about it) versus when we want to get into a novel or movie.

I call the kind of thinking we do in an information-getting or content reading experience "MAINTAINING A POINT OF REFERENCE," and the kind of thinking we do in a literary experience "EXPLORING HORIZONS OF POSSIBILITY."

When reading for information, we're asking questions and refining our understandings in order to narrow in on, sharpen, and extend our understandings of something we're after.

In content reading, there's new information we are exposed to -- and we need to analyze, interpret and evaluate the ideas at hand to gain a fuller understanding of that particular topic. Good reading and thinking enriches our understanding of the point of reference – the topic the information is about.

On the other hand, when reading for a literary experience we're asking questions and seeking meanings that go beyond what we can imagine. There is no topic to build upon, but a realm of possibilities we explore, from a variety of perspectives. This act of exploring possibilities changes not only our understanding at the moment, but also our predictions about how the piece might end.

With each different possibility we explore along the way, there is another possible interpretation of how the piece might end. Exploring horizons of possibilities is the literary quest that keeps us riveted as story readers and story writers.

What does this mean for instruction? Both are useful ways of thinking that we use at school, work, and in our everyday lives. So do students. But we don't usually take these different kinds of reasoning into account in our teaching. We don't usually focus on the

different kinds of knowledge students should be after in literary or content reading –nor do we necessarily teach the differing strategies they need to use to get there.

I've written a lot about each of these four areas, so you can read more if you are interested.

But now I want to tell you about some recent research I've been doing to improve student learning. That's where I pull all the parts I've been talking about together.

I recently completed a five-year study that I call my Beating the Odds project. I began the work based in the ideas I've just described, very concerned about helping schools get through this high stakes testing era, and of course wanting to help students gain the higher literacy I think counts.

The study took place in 88 diverse middle and high school classes in 4 states. All schools were trying to help their students do well and had good reputations for trying. But only some of the schools were consistently doing better than other schools like them; the other schools produced more typical outcomes.

As I talk, you'll see photos of some of these schools-in-action.

Here are my research questions:

1. How did the school environments differ in the two settings?
2. How did the teachers' professional lives differ in the two settings?
3. How did the parent and community involvement differ in the two settings?
4. How did the instruction differ in the two settings?

The differences are remarkable, and run counter to some everyday assumptions, and counter to what many schools are doing.

Professional Environment:

1. In schools that beat the odds, teachers live highly collaborative and professionally involved lives. They keep up with their students' needs, stay current in their fields, and they keep an ear to the public.

   And their administration supports them in their efforts. Further, administrators and teachers alike use this high stakes era as an opportunity to do what they always want to do – to improve student learning. And when it is attained, they up the ante.

2. In comparison, the more typical schools try hard, but are more hierarchical, deciding what programs the students need and what professional development the teachers need.

   The teachers are recipients and enactors of someone else's decisions. Also, the professionals in these less successful schools consider the high stakes tests to be a hurdle – something to be gotten over for the moment.

Response to High Stakes Testing

They also respond to high stakes testing differently.

1. The schools that Beat the Odds get to know the tests their students are taking, focusing on the literacy demands students need to do well not only on the tests, but in their coursework in general as well as in life. And they make sure these are integrated into the everyday class life. They're after higher literacy, not merely right answers.

   There are many activities – lots of practice using literacy for a variety of targeted purposes (like reading and writing political articles that are meant to persuade, or comparing family stories written in two very different eras, or doing a computer search for your own genealogy).

   And the skills and knowledge the students need to do these are taught before, during and after – wherever and whenever helpful – until the students can do them on their own.

   And there's a lot of minds on experience using literacy - seeing movies, writing summaries and critiques and reading books – analyzing and comparing them, and discussing the big ideas – all where teaching and learning take place.

   Reading, writing and discussion activities like these are what the Beating the Odds Schools consider to be test preparation. They brush up on the test format a couple of weeks before the test – but not much more.

2. In comparison, the more typical schools work very hard at another kind of test prep. Because the spotlight is on the scores, they think that more and more practice on test-like content and formats will get their students through.

   In many typical schools, much of the usual curriculum has been set aside for pseudo test work – practicing completion of test replicas. Substantive and enriched experiences are hard to find.

   They mean well, but get more limited results – both on the tests over time and in helping their students develop higher literacy. And when the tests change, they're in trouble.

These are just tastes of the many findings from my Beating the Odds studies that have been useful in thinking about the changes that need to be made at district, school, and classroom levels in order to help students gain literate minds as well as test performance. You can find a lot more in my new book **Getting to Excellent** published by Teachers College Press.

And this leads into the present study, The Partnership for Literacy. It's an instructional development/professional development study.

The Partnership is designed to help middle grade teachers become active and inquiring professionals who learn how to read their students, the knowledge in the field, and the larger literacy demands, and to work together to make changes in their curriculum and instruction to improve students' literacy learning and performance.

The 70 participating teachers are in high need and low need schools. Some of the schools are on special "watch" lists. The teachers are involved because they want to improve student learning, and our role is to help them gain the kinds of conceptual and pedagogical tools they need to make that change.

There are four areas that we focus on, each of which has been informed by our previous work:

1. Substantive Dialogue
2. Envisionment Building
3. Curricular Coherence
4. Challenging Subject Matter

All in the service of developing the literate minds necessary for success in school and life.

What's special about this study is providing and then valuing the professional knowledge of teachers, giving them agency to do their work and offering them the kinds of opportunities for continuing professional growth and recognition that a sociocognitive perspective demands for teacher as well as student learners.

Partnership students learn content and strategies, language, literacy skills and knowledge -- with texts, about texts and without texts – in engaging literacy activities throughout the year.

Partnership teachers learn new knowledge about effective teaching and learning, knowledge about the content, knowledge about reflection on the match between their

teaching and their students learning, and knowledge about professional inquiry that they need to improve their students' performance.

Our work with teachers parallels their work with students—collaborative workshop and discussion activities help develop their 'literate minds' about teaching and learning. They engage in interesting tasks where their envisionments can be challenged and grow. They learn new concepts and techniques for applying their new learnings. They pause and reflect on what they are learning. And, like the students with whom they work, the outcomes predictably surpass anything that anyone expected.

In closing, I hope you've been able to see in these last two studies, echoes of the theory I described at the beginning of my talk, and ways in which it can enrich our teaching of the literate mind -- ways that can be of critical help to schools in this era.

We know a lot, and the time is right. Things can change. As a field, let's work together to make it happen.