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# Literature and Literacy: Rethinking English as a School Subject

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As a high-school English teacher, I spent a lot of time worrying about essays like this one, which Andy, then a junior, wrote about Ernest Hemingway's short story, "Fathers and Sons" (*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, 1927, New York, Scribner's):

A man named Nick Adams drove thru the rural area wich he grew up in. It brought back memories of shooting quail with his father. Nicks father was a large man with great vision, who was a very adept hunter and fisherman. Nick daydreams to the times when he was a youngman growing up with his father and sister Dorothy. He spent lots of time hunting in the hemlock woods behind the Indian Camp. Nick played with Nick and Trudy who were Objibawy Indians during the sumer.

I believe this story is about youth, someday you have to grow up and be responsible, get a job and work. When your young you should not worry but just play and have fun because you can't be twelve forever.

Nick has a son know, who is just under twelve, and his son asks him when he will be able to have a gun. Nick tells him when he is twelve, if he is worthy of it. He then realizes that he will only allow his son three shells per day, this was a bad rule, or so he thought back then. Nick relized his fathers wisdom in retrospect and knows he is a grown up responsible man.

But when Nick was yonger, he thought it was a dumb rule he didn't realize that his father did for his own good so he would improve his shooting. Nick looked back upon his father in a different light than he had ever seen him before. He just then knew that his father was looking out for him.

## The Literary Essay and Beyond

Like many English teachers, I have often been frustrated in my attempts to help students like Andy write effective essays of literary analysis. And I've posed a lot of questions as I have tried to figure out how an essay such as this one comes to be.

What was the nature of the assignment?  
How much time had Andy been given?  
Was this a first draft?  
Had Andy ever written such an essay before?  
Was this the first Hemingway story Andy had read?  
Are the many spelling errors typical of Andy's writing?

And so on. Such questions address a variety of important issues that can help explain some of the problems that mar this essay; they are the kinds of questions that often should be asked about any student's writing. But it strikes me that during the countless hours I have spent thinking and talking

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about Andy's essay and the many others like it that my students have written, I never asked—and we as English teachers rarely ask—what must be the most important question: Of what use was such an essay to Andy? I'm now inclined to answer, "Very little." It no longer worries me much that so many high-school students don't seem able to write effective essays of literary analysis. What worries me is that we ask them so often to do so. What worries me is that so much of what we ask students to do in English classes is of little use to them.

As we reflect on the last one-hundred years—and anticipate the next one-hundred years—of English as a school subject, I have been thinking a lot about Andy's essay and about what we do in our

English classes. I used to be convinced that having students write about literary texts would help them learn to use written language in ways that would serve them well in a complex and changing world. I no longer am. More and more I am coming to see English as we typically teach it in our schools as irrelevant to the challenges our students now face.

Poet Adrienne Rich said at a 1992 Literary Awards banquet at Purdue University that "we must write as if our lives depended upon it. That is not often taught in schools" ("Instead of a Lecture,"

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April 23, West Lafayette, IN). I'd add that we must read the same way and that that is also not often taught in our schools. We teach texts, but we don't teach the power, the vital importance, that written language could have in our lives.

This is a common complaint, but it carries weight in these days of almost inconceivable change. I'm thinking here not only about Andy and his writing, but about the hundreds of children I have watched learning to read and write in schools and about the millions I have never seen, whose faces are obscured by endless statistical reports about the apparent "decline" of our nation's schools. Many of them will simply not be ready to face the profound social, demographic, economic, and technological changes that challenge us in the 1990s. According to a recent Government Accounting Office report, for example, one of every three 16- to 24-year-olds "will not have the skills needed for even entry-level, semiskilled, high-wage occupations" (report #GAO/OCG-93-18TR, December 1992).

Our problems begin with the assumptions about literacy that guide our standard approaches to teaching the language arts. For one thing, we still tend to teach reading and writing as if they are exclusively individual, cognitive skills. We often seem unable to see that reading and writing are more than sets of portable skills, that they are inherently social activities. What's more, we have trouble understanding that reading and writing as they are practiced in our schools represent one kind of literate practice, or as the British scholar David Barton puts it, they represent one "domain"

of literacy. The big question here is this: Does literacy as we teach it in our schools serve the needs of our students as they read and write outside of school? If not, what kinds of literacy instruction will best serve those students in the next century? How can we help them learn to use language in ways that will enable them to construct useful and fulfilling lives? With those questions in mind, consider the following vignettes.

#### **Four Literacy Vignettes**

*Vignette #1.* Tim, the twenty-one-year-old son of a friend of mine, works at a discount chain. A year or so ago he dropped out of college, unhappy in school and undecided about what kind of career he'd like to have. So he reads the want ads in the newspaper; he reviews materials from the employment office; he writes letters of application for a few jobs he has seen advertised; he tries to put together a resumé. In short, as he tries to find fulfilling work, he reads and writes in very specialized and purposeful ways. He's never really had to do this before; job hunting for him represents complex uses of language with which he has had virtually no experience and, truth be told, little skill. Last I heard, he was still looking for work.

*Vignette #2.* Recently, my sister's husband, whom I'll call John and who had been "running around on her," as they say, told her that he wanted a divorce. My brother, who had been witness to some of John's more flagrant transgressions, was beside himself with rage, especially after trying to console our ten-year-old niece. So my brother sat down and wrote a long and angry letter to John, then delivered the letter himself. This is the same brother who, while in college, dreaded English courses and once asked me to write a required essay on

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Nathaniel Hawthorne for him. He had virtually no idea how to write such an essay. But he was able to write that letter to John, a letter that has become a focal point of the ongoing family conflict surrounding the divorce.

*Vignette #3.* Chris, a high-school senior, was about to vote in his first election, the 1992 U.S. presiden-

tional election. Chris had not done well in school, and he had no plans to attend college, but he thought he might be able to find work at one of the automobile plants near his home in Indiana. He was worried about the economy, and he had been trying to make sense of all of the campaign talk about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). President Bush had been pushing for the agreement; candidate Bill Clinton seemed to support it with some reservations. In one short newspaper article about the issue, Chris read the following passage from a statement by President Bush:

In order to avoid dislocations to industries and workers producing goods that are import-sensitive, a NAFTA will provide a gradual schedule for the elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers on such products. (Cleveland Free Net, April 29, 1992.)

To Chris, this statement sounded like some of the textbook prose he was required to wade through in school. He wasn't sure what terms like "import-sensitive" and "non-tariff barriers" meant. In school, he tended to look up such terms in the dictionary or wait until the teacher explained them in class. He never really thought about the fact that such terms might have meanings that go beyond the dictionary definitions—that these terms have to be placed in a complex political and economic context in order to be properly understood. In fact, he had rarely been asked to read anything that mattered to him as much as this passage about NAFTA now did. Eventually, he decided that what George Bush said about NAFTA made sense and he voted to re-elect Bush in part on that basis. A few months after the election, Chris began to anticipate graduation by applying for jobs at auto plants.

*Vignette #4.* Recently I received three documents in the mail:

1. A memo from our water company informing us of its sale to the city water utility
2. A letter from our bank indicating that they had sold our mortgage to a mortgage company in California
3. A flyer from a neighborhood organization providing information about a new development in our subdivision and expressing concern about the possible ramifications of that new development

The information contained in these documents and how I respond to that information may profoundly affect my life and that of my family. I read and reread them carefully, uncertain about some

passages. I talk to a neighbor about the letter from the water company. I discuss the letter from the bank with my wife and with a financial adviser. I read through some rather complicated materials on remortgaging and on our rights as homeowners. I slowly come to understand that some aspects of the situation with our new mortgage company can compromise our financial security. This realization comes after reading a lot of dense prose, discussing the issues with knowledgeable professionals, and painstakingly rereading old mortgage documents. I have advanced degrees in English and rhetoric and yet I find the stuff very difficult to understand. And I begin to realize that my degrees provide me with very little training to deal with this kind of text, with which the average homeowner must deal all the time.

### **The Social Contexts of Literacy**

Obviously, part of what I hope to illustrate with these vignettes is the variety and complexity of the reading and writing that we routinely do in our daily lives. More important, I want to highlight the vital importance of reading and writing. Tim is looking for a job so that he can survive financially; my brother is trying to deal with a situation of wrenching importance to our family; I am trying to negotiate, largely through print, the complexity of owning a home. These difficult reading and writing activities are qualitatively different from analyzing a short story for an English class; they absolutely matter in our lives.

Sociolinguists like Shirley Brice Heath (1983, *Ways With Words*, Cambridge UP), Denny Taylor (1983, *Family Literacy*, Heinemann), and Brian Street (1984, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge UP) have been showing for years that literacy pervades daily existence in ways that we barely notice; moreover, they have shown us that this "vital" literacy is always situated in particular social contexts. For example, Tim's review of the want ads and his attempts to write an effective letter of application and resumé occur in a specific situation with specific constraints. If he is to be successful, he must be able to negotiate those constraints. He must be able to read those ads in certain, critical ways, and he must write his letters of application and his resumé in certain ways as well. Those ways are determined not so much by standard rules of grammar, but by the situation he is in right now, at a time of economic uncertainty nationally and a

time of profound transition for him personally; in addition, they are determined by social and cultural practices governing employment in our society. In other words, he's not just reading and writing; he's reading and writing in a particular way for a particular purpose in a particular set of circumstances. He is reading and writing *meaningful* prose.

Adrienne Rich is right: Lives do depend upon reading and writing. And she's right to assert that we don't teach this in schools. Think again of Tim as he tries to find meaningful work. What sort of literacy skills does he need to negotiate his situation effectively? I've already mentioned some of them:

An understanding of the way language works in specific contexts

A knowledge of how information and ideas are constructed in specific situations and manipulated for specific purposes

A knowledge of the rules and conventions governing the form and style and purpose of letters of application and resumes and how they function in the search for a job

A sense of how the audience for his texts might shape those texts

The ability to apply all this knowledge and to use written language effectively in this kind of situation

These skills go far beyond a rote knowledge of the rules of school grammar or the form of a business letter or even fluency in writing, nor are they the kinds of skills Tim might pick up in a job-hunting seminar. They are critical, rhetorical skills involving complicated uses of written language.

Does Tim learn these skills in language-arts classes in school? To some extent perhaps. He may have learned—probably implicitly—that certain kinds of language are appropriate for, say, an essay

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on Hemingway, that such an essay should contain specific elements and be written in an academic prose style. But has he learned why that's the case? Has he learned that the essay on Hemingway is a specialized form of writing with its own conven-



tions and purposes, which may differ radically from those of, say, a business letter or resumé? I don't think so. By and large students like Tim are taught—implicitly and explicitly—that writing and reading are isolated, decontextualized skills governed by sets of *universal* rules: expository essays have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion; sentences must never begin with a conjunction; use simple, direct, declarative statements; and so on. Moreover, students practice only very limited kinds of reading and writing: reading largely to "learn" information which is later reproduced on a test and writing largely to have their knowledge assessed. They rarely, if ever, use reading and writing in meaningful ways, as Tim and Chris and my brother and I had to do in the vignettes I described earlier—as we all have to do every day. They have little opportunity to develop what many educators and theorists call "critical literacy." Whatever else he may have learned in writing an essay on Hemingway, Tim likely did not learn the skills he needs to assess a particular rhetorical situation, such as writing a job-application letter or a letter to a mortgage company, and to use written language effectively in that situation. I'm afraid my former student, Andy, didn't learn those skills, either—at

least not overtly. For like many English teachers I know, I taught writing as a general skill, with little explicit reference to how that skill is tied to specific contexts.

### **Reconceptualizing English**

I don't mean to suggest here that we should throw Hemingway out and turn our language-arts classes into resumé-writing seminars or "life-skills" workshops. But I do believe that our traditional focus on—you might call it an obsession with—"great" literature and our concomitant narrow conception of literacy do not adequately serve the needs of our students today, especially given the way that literature tends to be used in English classes. The mother of Duke University basketball star Grant Hill was asked in a recent interview about her son's preparation for his future. Grant is the son of the famous football star Calvin Hill; his mother is a high-powered Washington consultant. Here's what she said: "As much as Calvin and I value education, we know that you can make it in this world without Chaucer" (*Sports Illustrated* Feb. 1, 1993, 62). I'd add that you *cannot* make it without the ability to use language effectively. You *cannot* make it today if you don't know how to read and write as if your life depended upon it.

What does all this mean for English teachers? In the first place, it means that we need to reassess what we do in our classrooms. We need to evaluate the activities and knowledges we build into our curricula against criteria that grow out of the question, "What kinds of reading and writing skills will

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best serve our students' needs today and in the future?" To some extent, we have begun to do so. We have examples of innovative English language-arts programs that are designed not simply to teach basic reading and writing skills that can be employed in the workplace but to help students develop a deeper, critical sense of the complex, rhetorical nature of language and to use written language effectively in various situations. But by and large, despite developments in whole language and the writing process and cultural studies, in many schools some version of an outdated, "tradi-

tional" secondary English curriculum, with its focus on "great" literature and generic "skills," remains intact. To make that curriculum meaningful and useful to our students will require a reconceptualizing of what constitutes English as a school subject. Such a reconceptualizing should involve at least two key changes:

*First, language, not literature, should become the focus of the curriculum.* The primary purpose of English at the secondary level should be, first, to give students meaningful experiences in using written and oral language in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes, and second, to help them come to understand the social, rhetorical, situated nature of all language use. John Willinsky suggests that our programs should promote literacy "as a social process with language that can from the very beginning extend the students' range of meaning and connection" (1990, *The New Literacy*, New York: Routledge, 8). Accordingly, students should be asked to read and write texts in various forms for specific purposes: for example, proposals to school boards for a new sports facility; letters to the editor about an issue of local importance; reports about important topics, such as school prayer, that might be used in making difficult decisions in the school community; oral histories of the local community for the purpose of understanding a particular issue or event. In doing such assignments, students should be encouraged to learn to assess the social, political, and economic factors governing the specific rhetorical situations they are in; they should learn how reading and writing shape and are shaped by such situations. And they should learn using the new and evolving technologies, especially computer and electronic communications technologies, that are now reshaping the way we use language.

*Second, literary texts should be taught not simply as "great art" but as cultural artifacts that grow out of complex historical, social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances.* If we must teach literature, we should teach it in ways that help students understand language and language use. Hemingway's short stories might convey "universal" themes that are worth exploring; indeed, one reason that we continue to read certain literary works is to grapple with the complex and important ideas embodied in those texts. But to approach literary texts only in

this manner, and to ask students to write only the kind of essay I asked Andy to write, is to teach a very limited form of reading and writing and to perpetuate problematic assumptions about what literature is and how it should be used. Instead, we should use literature as an opportunity to teach students about language and language use—and about the complicated connections among different forms of language, including literary language, and the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts out of which it grows. *Literature, then, should be removed from the center of the secondary English curriculum and become part of the study of language that should be at the center of that curriculum.*

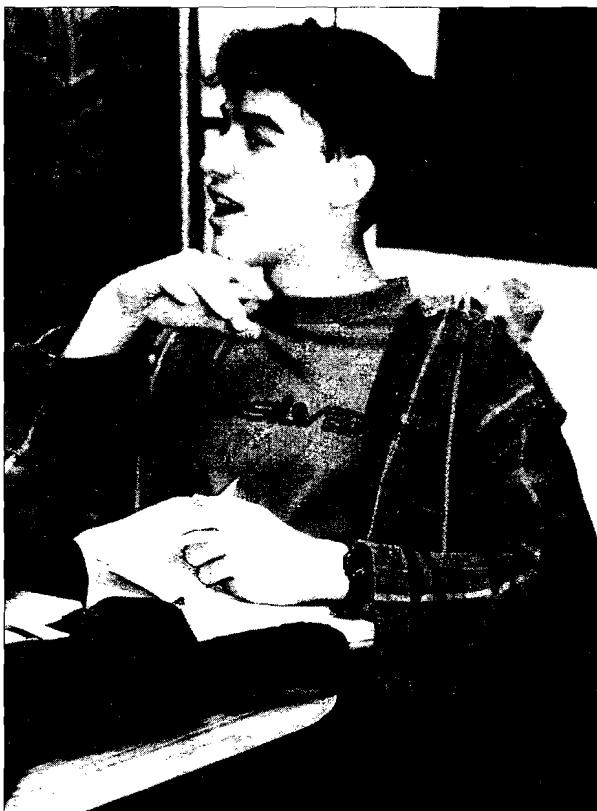
#### A Final Vignette

These changes would result in secondary language-arts classes that might look very different from those we are familiar with. Imagine, for example, a junior-level English course focused on a broad theme, such as "The Individual in Society," and structured around individual and collaborative projects that give purpose to a variety of reading and writing activities. As a student in such a course, Andy still reads Hemingway's story, "Fathers and Sons," but he does so in ways that go beyond literary analysis. For instance, one of the course units examines the role of teens in contemporary American society. Accordingly, Andy participates in class

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discussions that explore what Hemingway's story might reveal about the complexities of parent-child relationships. He also writes a brief narrative, shared with his classmates in peer response groups, about an important aspect of his own relationship with a parent (or guardian or relative). In addition, Andy and his classmates, working individually and in collaborative groups, define projects that involve a variety of reading and writing activities on related teen issues, such as gangs, teen fashions, school reform, drugs, music.

Andy's group eventually decides to focus its project on a recently passed city ordinance establishing a curfew for residents under eighteen years



old. They read the text of the ordinance, and they write letters to their mayor and to city-council members requesting information and opinions about the curfew. They follow public debates in the local press, and they hold in-class debates to explore the issue. They seek information and ideas in libraries and on computer networks. They develop and conduct a poll to gauge local opinion. And they regularly discuss not only the issues they are exploring but also the discourse surrounding these issues: the language and form of the city ordinance, of letters to the editor in the local newspaper, and of polling reports in the press; the differences in reading and writing such documents; and so on.

In consultation with their teacher, Andy and his classmates decide that their project will culminate in a report to their school board about the effects of the curfew on students. That report will include recommendations for addressing some of the problems, such as vandalism, that gave rise to the curfew. Working collaboratively, Andy's group decides to include in their report part of Andy's personal narrative about difficulties he had with his parents regarding his late hours in a part-time job.

Through class discussion, peer editing, and conferences with his teacher, Andy revises his narrative while other group members work on other parts of the report. Together they discuss what information to include in the report, decide how to organize it, puzzle over the most appropriate and effective language, hone their style, correct errors—all for the purpose of constructing a document that they hope will convincingly convey their ideas to school board members. In the process, they are not only practicing sophisticated reading and writing skills but also learning how to assess and respond to a complex rhetorical situation; and they are learning about the situated, interested nature of all written discourse.

This vignette offers a glimpse of the kind of course that might grow out of the recommendations I have made above, the kind of course that a

few innovative educators are beginning to implement here and there in our schools. It suggests exciting possibilities as well as difficult problems. And it represents a fundamental shift in the way we think about and practice the language arts in our schools; as literacy scholar Harvey Graff puts it, "What is needed is a broader view of reading and writing that integrates and emphasizes . . . many human abilities in a context of a changing world that requires their development and use" (1987, *Legacies of Literacy*, Indiana UP, 397). But such fundamental change is necessary and inevitable, I believe, if we are to make English as a school subject meaningful and useful to our students as the turn of the century approaches.

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## EJ FIFTY YEARS AGO

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### **Lost Horizons: Language, Culture, and Creative Americanism**

In the spring of 1937 ten thousand children and one hundred and fifty teachers and administrators representing twenty-eight secondary schools in ten cities and towns on the Pacific Coast began a three-year experiment in the language arts. . . .

[The Stanford Language Arts Investigation] aimed to observe the results of *centering work in English and foreign languages upon the personal and social welfare of young people*, conceived within the democratic framework of a creative Americanism.

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The Stanford study is now open for inspection. In the approximately thirteen hundred pages of the three volumes . . . any open-minded teacher of English or foreign language will find a picture of living, meaningful, and valuable teaching and learning. Here are illustrated many experiences we have long professed as aims of language (native and foreign) courses. Young people in the classes described are using language to read about and discuss both personal and social problems, are breaking down speech inhibitions acquired from racial, religious, and economic prejudices, and are finding pleasure and satisfaction in literature. Here are striking gains over the average English and foreign-language class. Motivation is intrinsic rather than artificial. Youngsters, for example, read and talk about the culture of Mexico because they are trying to discover how they, Mexican and non-Mexican Americans, can work happily together. This is a far cry from making a toy castle as motivation for reading *Ivanhoe* or preparing a speech on last summer's trip in order to learn how to use an outline or eliminate first-person pronouns or stand erect on the balls of the feet while speaking from notes.

Symposium. March 1944. "The Stanford Language Arts Investigation" including Holland D. Roberts, "Plan and Procedure," *EJ* 33.3: 119–21, and Lou LaBrant, "Open for Inspection," *EJ* 33.3: 123–25.