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Literacy at the Lake

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Edited by
Brian C. Lewis
Century College

Editor's Introduction: Thoughts on Literacy

Welcome to another edition of the *Minnesota English Journal*; this edition marks my second as editor. I am proud that, for this edition, I am also the cover photographer: my photo of Gull Lake in Brainerd, taken at the last MCTE conference, was chosen by our editorial staff as the cover photo for this issue. So we're fortunate to have a photo of the very lake at which we had our 2011 conference on our cover. (Many thanks to my dear graphic artist friend, Rodney Nowosielski, who did the cover graphics for the second year in a row.)

But enough of lakes—on to literacy. As I began to collect submissions for this issue focusing on “literacy,” I begin to review in my mind some of its key components. What is literacy, and what does it mean for us today? For me, when I think of “literacy,” there are two definitions that stand out in particular.

One of them comes from J. Elspeth Stuckey. In her 1992 text *The Violence of Literacy*, Stuckey spends a great deal of time critiquing the specific “subjectivities” of America’s class structure. As the title of her text indicates, literacy is, first and foremost, an act of “violence.” Even though popular myths about literacy suggest that it has the power to transform America for the better, and most texts about literacy describe being “literate” in glowing terms, Stuckey asserts that “The truth is that literacy and English instruction can hurt you, more clearly and forcefully and permanently than it can help you, and that schools, like other social institutions, are designed to replicate, or at least not to disturb, social division and class privilege” (123). While Stuckey’s book is twenty years old, I believe it still reveals a lot of truths about the way we speak of literacy in our culture. The news media speaks of “literacy rates” when commenting on the intellectualism of certain areas in the country, and, of course, the term “computer literacy” has begun to pervade twenty-first century discourse. Stuckey reminds us that when we measure these “literacies,” we need to remember the biases in how they are measured: we must consider how literacy divides, not just how it unites.

In contrast to Stuckey’s, James Gee’s approach to literacy is better classified as a socio-cultural approach than a Marxist approach. His studies tend to focus on discourse analysis: Gee asserts that to engage in an act of reading or writing, one must engage in a discourse. Gee defines “discourse” as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (“Literacy” 537). He urges us to “Think of a discourse as an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (“Literacy” 537). The more adept one is at taking on this role, the more “literate” one is considered to be.

I concur with Gee’s view that we must perceive literacy as one’s ability to read and write within one’s particular culture or community, but I also feel that we need to validate Stuckey’s more radical view that literacy, particularly academic literacies, may often manifest a “violent” side. As most sociocultural theorists indicate (Horsman, Giroux, Gee, Freire), those individuals whose literacy skills vary from people in positions of power, such as racial and class minorities, are often perceived as lacking literacy skills rather than possessing different ones. Thus literacy is more than just an ability to read and

write; it can be, as Stuckey suggests, embedded with a political system which varies from one culture to another, and often reinforces cultural division.

The selections included in this issue of *MEJ* embody both of these literacy concepts. The first section, “Personal Narratives: Prose and Poetry,” shows how literacy is used in the process of identity construction. The selections in this first part of the journal remind me of Gee’s notion of the “identity kit” that enables individuals to formulate a discourse recognized by others. Amanda Sass-Henke’s piece, for example, talks about what it means to be both a parent and an English teacher, and she explains how one can integrate the two identities. The second section, “The Teaching of Writing: Theories, Practices and New Technologies,” includes articles that reveal or emphasize the socio-political dimensions of literacy, just as Stuckey does in her work. Rachel L. T. Hatten’s piece, in particular, analyzes the political dimensions of the video game “Grand Theft Auto” and points out how this video text does indeed have “violence” in its messages. The third section, “Literary Dimensions: From the Pedagogical to the Poetic,” integrates both theories. Karen Murdock’s piece on recovering the classical elements in the Sherlock Holmes stories, for example, identifies essential elements for fully comprehending Sherlockian discourse, enabling readers to become more fully integrated into the “club” of Sherlock Holmes readers, as Gee would argue. Carol Mohrbacher’s piece, by contrast, is more political and reminds me more of Stuckey’s theory of literacy: it discusses Meridel LeSueur’s political inclinations and how they are revealed through the metaphors in her work.

In addition to its many articles, this issue of *MEJ* contains many selections of poetry. We received so many fine poetry selections for this issue that we decided that we had to print most of them. Furthermore, we decided to include the poetry at the end of each of the three major sections, just to create some contrast throughout the journal: each section begins with several prose articles and ends with some poetry. So we keep going back and forth between poetry and prose. This constant shifting back and forth is consistent with the habitually shifting definition of “literacy”; we are constantly reminding our audience here that literacy can take many different forms.

Please enjoy the new *MEJ*. For comments or questions on this issue, e-mail me, Brian C. Lewis, at brian.lewis@century.edu. Or, instead of an e-mail, please consider writing a “Letter to the Editor” for us to publish in our 2013 issue. It’d be great to hear from you! And thanks for reading.

Brian C. Lewis
MEJ Editor
February 26, 2012

Works Cited

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