LYNETTE REINI-GRANDELL

On Literacy

What is literacy? When I think of literacy, my mind immediately goes to the categories of Bloom's taxonomy: stages ranging from basic, literal comprehension to higher types of thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. One can't get to the higher stages without first mastering the lower levels. But what happens when we focus only on the basic, early stages? It's not that difficult to test for knowledge and comprehension. But the next levels—application and analysis—are where critical thinking actually begins, and when we reach synthesis and evaluation, we can really make use of literacy, moving from the relatively abstract world of reading and thinking into real world applications, and back again. This is the activity we embark upon when we take to heart E.M. Forster's words, "Only connect. . ."

As a teacher and as a citizen, I think about literacy a lot. We seem to be living currently in a society that values literacy at the level of comprehension, and little more, yet our society also requires increasingly sophisticated levels of literacy, not just regarding books, but also with other media, such as film, television, popular music, and the internet. It's good that we are beginning to have tests to see whether eighth graders can successfully comprehend texts on the level of a newspaper article, but it is dangerous to stop here.

The literacy requirements of the graduation standards and the Profile of Learning have set the bar dangerously low, codifying formally a general slide that has been taking place in our culture for some time. Why should we read things that present us with more than information to be comprehended at the literal level? Why should we read literature that offers us complicated ideas, situations, and images to interpret? It's about common culture—though I wouldn't be as prescriptive about it as E.D. Hirsch is in his (in)famous book, *Cultural Literacy*. We read to learn through others' experiences, and to interpret our own place in the world, having seen others' experiences and ideas. We read these things to synthesize, bringing community and society together.

As teachers of reading, writing, and literature, we need to exert a stronger influence than the current arbiters of our culture—business and entertainment—and not stop at the level of comprehension when we teach literacy. Yes, comprehension must be present before proceeding to application and analysis, but it is not the place to stop. Further, college is too late to begin learning analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. As people mature, these activities should become habitual, not something only trotted out for special occasions and special degrees.

As I was putting together notes for a discussion on literacy at the spring MCTE conference, the movie "The Matrix" came out. I went to see it, and was impressed. To me, it was a thought-provoking story about the need to question appearances and one's perceptions of reality. I also like that it followed Joseph Campbell's description of the monomyth of the hero—separation, initiation, and return—with particular subdivisions of the hero's journey,

such as the refusal of the call to adventure, supernatural aid, and the belly of the whale being recast in ingenious, futuristic ways. I recommended the movie to several classes of my college students. One person had already seen it, but as we started comparing notes, it was apparent that his experience was very different from mine. It turned out that he really hadn't understood the plot or theme of the movie, but the special effects had been breathtaking enough to keep him entertained for the requisite two hours.

A few days after this perplexing conversation I came across a newspaper article that gave some background for the dilemma. According to John Gaeta, special effects director of the film, "The Matrix" has to be seen three times to be properly appreciated: once, for the emotional impact of the style and special effects; the second time, to understand the plot; and the third time, to ponder the deeper implications of the film. Ah, I thought wryly, my students could save the price of two extra tickets if they only knew how to analyze and interpret the film in front of them.

My thoughts about the interpretation (and misinterpretation) of movies and other cultural texts became more urgent when I considered the spectre of Littleton, Colorado, where two high school students killed 13 people as well as themselves, wounding many others. Immediately following the tragedy, fingers of blame were pointed at violent movies, such as "The Matrix," that made shooting look stylish, and where wearing a black trenchcoat had a certain tough, romantic cachet. I thought briefly about the 2-1/2 black trenchcoats hanging in my own closet and wondered what my role was in this culture of images.

Could literacy on the higher levels of analysis and synthesis have made a difference? It's the kind of issue that logicians and statisticians would never dare to touch because of the uncontrollable number of variables, but as teachers we can't afford to ignore possibilities. We've all seen egregious cases of misreading. My favorite example is a college student who was writing a research paper on gun control and quoted from the Second Amendment to support her point. She typed, "Congress shall make no law," and that was the end of the statement. She was completely oblivious to the meaning of the words she was quoting.

Students can develop funny ideas about things when their understanding of something is incomplete; in fact, it seems to be part of the learning process. For example, often times they can recognize the topic correctly but think the author is arguing the opposite of what he or she is actually saying. It's our job as educators to recognize when the student's understanding—or literacy—is incomplete, and take steps to remedy that incompleteness. And literacy is incomplete when it stops at knowledge and comprehension, ignoring higher level thinking skills. At those higher levels are the skills that are necessary for our culture to function, to solve its problems and to develop a sense of empathy. The ramifications of incomplete understanding go far beyond the classroom, and, because of this, we put all of ourselves in danger when we are content to leave one person behind.

As members of MCTE, we are in a unique position to communicate and share notes with colleagues working all along the learning spectrum of student literacy. Let's use that affiliation to make a concrete difference in our communities, and in society, showing to the rest of the world that literacy does have effects, and remembering that incomplete literacy also has its consequences.

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