

# *Literacy for Empowerment and Social Change*

Carman St. John Hunter

While it may be true that the electronic age has devalued literacy, what seems more serious is the way in which certain groups have been so devalued that they are inhibited in their acquisition of literacy skills. Many poor and minority students are prevented from developing their cognitive and manipulative skills beyond a minimal level. Perhaps what needs changing is not the level of skills in literacy or functional competence but the level of hope and expectation among bypassed people in our society. Action research might be designed to focus on competencies presently existing and valued and, at the same time, on the changes that occur when groups develop new hope for themselves and a more dynamic vision of the options available to them.

“Is there a different literacy for different groups of people?”

“Has literacy been devalued in our society?”

These and other questions on the brochure that introduced this conference have already been reflected in our discussions. I believe that one need not spend very much time producing evidence that literacy is devalued in our society just because it has become less necessary. One need not read to keep up with what is going on even in distant parts of the world. And we are losing the habit of writing letters to keep in contact with family and friends. It is not even necessary to be literate to initiate actions that change the course of history. Instant electronic communication is a powerful reality that for many has taken the place of reading and writing.

In this group I need not rehearse statistics to prove that most of the programs set up to improve literacy levels in this country have been failures.

I have been asked to be part of this conference not because of any expertise in teaching—although I was a high school teacher for a small number of years—but because of a study which David Harman (formerly of the Harvard Graduate School of Education) and I did on the extent of adult illiteracy in this country. In the course of doing that study, several things became very clear to us. We understood as we had not before that approximately 65 million adults in this country have serious literacy-related difficulties. That is the number of persons 16 years of age or older who are without a high school diploma and not presently enrolled in school. We realize that

many who have not graduated from high school get along very well and that many who *do* have high school diplomas do *not* do well. However, allowing for these differences, it is still safe to say that about 65 million adults have more serious problems with reading and writing than most of us in this room imagine.

David and I were not content with the grade-level standard sometimes used to define or measure literacy. Nor did we find the type of testing for functional competence introduced through the adult performance level studies very helpful. It was our contention that while broad statistical definitions may be interesting to educational agencies, school systems, and policy groups, those with literacy-related problems have their own inner measures: Can I do what I want and need to do in order to accomplish my own goals? Can I fulfill the demands that are made on me by the society, by my community, family, job? Am I able to fulfill my personal aspirations? Once we ask questions like these, we begin to understand that literacy is something more than a set of technical competencies. Literacy is closely related to self-reliance and a sense of personal power over conditions that affect one's life.

We realized, too, that among the population group most affected with literacy problems, there are vast differences. Some return as adults to programs leading toward the GED or toward new job skills and do very well. Yet the majority of persons for whom these programs are intended never enter or, if they do, drop out without ever receiving the intended credentials. Those of you who have looked at our study know that we developed four categories among the 65 million as a very rough way of distinguishing among the different responses to offered programs.

There is one group of people who take advantage of the existing programs, complete them, and achieve the desired credentials. They are trying to catch up with peers who have higher levels of schooling. They are highly motivated and are able to overcome the immense difficulties of returning to the classroom, meeting requirements, and passing examinations.

The second group are those who are everyone's "favorite illiterates," the people "just like us." They may suffer from dyslexia or from psychological or emotional handicaps that made learning in school difficult. Once they overcome the shame of not having learned "when they were supposed to," they are capable of moving with help, often in one-on-one situations provided by Literacy Volunteers of America or Laubach Literacy. Their stories sound much like religious conversions. These two groups of people are well served

by existing types of programs if they can just be reached and given the positive encouragement that they require in order to succeed.

Our major concern in the study focused on people who have serious literacy problems but who do not find literacy to be their major priority. While they have very low levels of technical literacy on any kind of scale, this is not what they see as central to their problems. Literacy programs per se are never the route they choose toward desirable changes in their lives.

Who are these persons and what happened to them as they went through the schools? Carolyn Persell in her study, *Education and Inequality* (1977), has examined relevant research on who does not learn in our schools. Her findings matched what we discovered about adults in our Groups 3 and 4. She demonstrates that class and racial biases of the society as a whole are reflected in the schools, seriously affecting educational access and achievement among the poor and the minorities. Grading practices, tracking, differing school environments, the scope of curriculum options, teacher expectations and styles all influence educational outcomes. Many poor and minority students are prevented from developing their cognitive and manipulative skills beyond a very minimal level. In addition, they are socialized for low opportunity, low-paying jobs, and they are systematically — although perhaps unconsciously on the part of teachers — taught to see themselves as unable to pursue any occupation or activity that requires educational qualifications. These adults do not and will not return for whatever kind of program is offered unless they see some pay-off, some immediate results. The results they look for are related to being able to achieve a new level of participation in society — increased earning power, increased access to the products and privileges that advertising tells them represent the norm in America. Advancing one or more grade levels will not change their marginal situations in society.

There is a contradiction between our ideology and our practice. The ideology behind ABE and other poverty programs was that they would “assure full participation in all of society by all of the groups in the society.” Within our schools and in the programs that have been set up for adults that is not what happens. What is wrong?

Some see the answer in competency-based education. I am convinced that these educators are on the wrong track. What is needed is not the ability to write checks, fill out forms, or read bus schedules. What is missing is the ability to be agents, or as Paulo Freire calls it, to be subjects of our own destiny and to influence what is happening around us. It is not merely the poor who suffer from this incapacity, but it is they who suffer most.

I would summarize my observations about the four groups by noting that Groups 1 and 2 are socially and economically placed to take advantage of the increased opportunities that credentials and new skills open for them. Groups 3 and 4 are unable to change their social or economic status merely through schooling. They are more acutely aware of their inability to be agents of their own destiny than most of us, including those in Groups 1 and 2. Any real solution to the problem of low literacy levels must come to grips with the universal need for human competence, that is, the ability to influence what happens to us, to understand the forces that act on us, and to reach decisions and take action as free agents.

Warren Zeigler (1977) has done some very interesting thinking about these matters. He uses the term civic literacy to describe the capacity to influence what happens to us in a positive way, the ability to feel good about what we do, and to see that our actions produce results. He describes what exists today as a client society. For every need that exists there is an expert out there. We are clients in the areas of health and education where we have become dependent on faceless systems that control us. We are clients in the political arena where closely structured party systems take the place of citizens joining together to speak for themselves.

All of this may seem far removed from the questions we are addressing today — i.e. learning to read for understanding, to write clearly, to express ourselves in speech. Yet I am convinced that those skills are more closely related to a sense of personal identity and to the conviction that we can do something about what is happening to us than they are to teaching techniques.

I do not want to suggest that teaching objectives, skills, and methodologies are unimportant. I do, however, want to emphasize that unless these are understood in the context of such concerns as “reading for what,” “writing to express what meaning,” and “speaking about what reality”, then they may indeed be of little importance. As educators we are called to join our educational goals with the quest for basic human competence among those we teach.

Another person who has drawn ideas from Paulo Freire as well as from his own experience to reach some conclusions relevant to this discussion is Jack Mezirow of Teachers College, Columbia University. His reflections on the results of consciousness raising in the women’s movement and on programs of nonformal education in the Third World have led him to coin a term for education that builds not only on the obvious needs of learners but, also, on the causes of those needs, i.e., the incongruities and contra-

dictions in their psychological, social, or economic situation. He calls this approach “perspective transformation.” People become aware of the assumptions that shape their actions and of the inhibiting nature of some of these assumptions. Situations of stress often lead to new understanding of the ways in which old perspectives limit their ability to act in response to reality. Mezirow suggests that true education should be a means of leading people to move toward meaning perspectives that are more inclusive and enhance their sense of agency or control and, thus, provide a clearer meaning and direction in life.

If we return for a moment to the difficulties experienced by children who are poor and/or belong to racial minorities as these were described by Carolyn Persell, we can realize that their problems were exacerbated because they were perceived as unable to learn. People who are treated as deficient come to believe that about themselves. They accept dependency and client status throughout their adult lives. The programs that are set up for them as adults are also based on the expectation that they are unable to become agents of their own destinies. And so the cycle continues. That is what produces a two-tiered system and creates “different literacies for different groups” in our society. That is the way that we create a permanent underclass. The question to us as educators and citizens is whether we want this to continue.

It is not only the meaning perspective of the learner that must be progressively changing. Our own meaning perspective as educators must also be transformed. If we see certain people as unable to contribute their own meaning to society or as having nothing worthwhile to express, then they will, indeed, remain illiterate in the most comprehensive sense of the term. If, however, there can be a change in the predominant view that the children of the poor cannot learn and that adults who failed or were failed by the system are incapable of learning, then there may also be a change in the learning that takes place.

Some illustrations come to mind that demonstrate what can happen when the perspectives of both teachers and learners are open. In Puerto Rico a group of young educators began working with people in an area of San Juan that had been written off by both the radical left and the social service providers. The young people knew enough to find friends in the community whose endorsement and physical presence could bring about their acceptance by residents tired of outside interventions. The young educators began with a series of meetings asking what people wanted to learn. They were astonished—and somewhat taken aback—when the people said they

wanted to qualify for the GED and they wanted their new friends to act like teachers in the traditional definition of the role. For a year the teachers did just that and a group of adults were drilled in academic subjects. Five or six of them passed the GED examination. Once that happened, it was as though all the participants believed that they *could* do it if they wanted to. Interest in academic subjects alone became less intense. Each year some people qualified for the GED but they did so through learning activities that were wide-ranging in subject-matter and also closely related to practical concerns for improving the quality of life in the neighborhood.

In Philadelphia a group has developed an approach that combines the teaching of basic skills and preparation for the GED exam with reading content that presents the problems, conflicts, and potential in students' everyday lives. The students are adult women, many of them with grown families. They live in a depressed zone where industry has moved away leaving burnt out factories and thousands of unemployed. The curriculum consists of units focused on the women's real concerns for such areas as parenting, education, and unemployment. Newspaper articles, open-ended stories, tapes, and pictures are used. A brainstorm method helps the learners to concentrate on the ideas presented as well as to practice recalling what they have heard or read. They move through a series of steps that begin with isolating the key words; they then group the words to show the key ideas; then they relate the key ideas to each other in order to understand the *main idea* expressed. The method allows the learners to bring their own ideas and experiences to bear on the subject. Discussion questions are not seen as a way to find answers but as a means to point up the real problems and conflicts embodied in the material. Finally, discovery questions direct the learners' attention outside the classroom to the larger social context of what has been presented. Learners are encouraged to discover community resources for addressing the problems as they affect themselves and their neighborhood. Although the material used is quite different from the subject matter required for the GED examination, the majority of those who take the exam succeed.

In these situations and in others with which I am familiar, both here and in the Third World, the competencies being nurtured are those that enable the learner to see old problems in a new way. Writing and oral fluency are related to thinking and reasoning. Teachers and learners are confident in each others' ability to change.

The transmission of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that result in immediately measurable behavioral changes is too narrow a goal for education.

Instead we may need to ask ourselves seriously whether we want to develop *objects* or *agents* through our educational processes. If it is the latter, then we may be called to redefine our priorities and to explore some very new terrain. The ideas and tentative thinking of those I have quoted here represent a few of the signposts for our journey.

## References

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## DISCUSSION

*David Olson*

One of the points that Carman St. John Hunter stressed is that we may be able to understand literacy and society better if we compare indigenous literacy programs with more school-related literacy activities. This has to do with the notion of what you called "agency" — helping people release their own experience via indigenous literacy programs. Let them participate, you suggest, as opposed to being mere recipients. In the context of the school, agency would be achieved through the balance between the activities of reading and writing. If we identify literacy with reading, as we're very often tempted to do, and deny children opportunities for serious writing, we're turning children into consumers, into being mere recipients of a tradition. Reading is certainly an important function, but it should be coupled with the opportunities for expression as well. That is where writing comes in. I don't know why writing has been so undervalued in school except that written products are time consuming for teachers to mark. I think it might be more serious than that. It may go back to something that Richard Venezky said earlier, namely that one of the functions of literacy in our society has been simply to equip people to fit into the existing social order. Authorities could use written directives to influence the masses rather than the masses using literacy to influence authority. For purposes of social control it is more important for people to read than to write. One direction in which we could move, then, is away from the notion of identifying literacy with reading, and think of literacy as having to do with the expressive powers of writing as well as the interpretive problems of reading. I was impressed that this conference was called the literacy conference rather than just the reading conference — language competence can no longer be identified with reading competence.

*Carman St. John Hunter*

Just a quick comment: it is interesting that the experience of people working with groups, such as the ones I was describing, is that people are far more willing to say that they need help with writing or with spelling, than they will say they need help with reading. I don't know why, but it is a phenomenon that I've heard over and over again.

*Richard Venezky*

I had the sense that the methods you've discussed seem to be working best in situations where the traditional forms had already produced failure; that is, with groups that had been through school and failed. Do you think these techniques would work before failure? Is there any application of these techniques to urban schooling today, particularly in the elementary school? And what are the problems, especially of complying with or changing the expectations of the existing system?

*Carman St. John Hunter*

I think I really don't know the answer to that. I do know some teachers who, in limited ways, have tried some things like this in urban schools and they say it works. But that is looking at something little and not the whole system. I do know that Jack Mezirow, for instance, says that we only change our perspective when we're confronted with a dilemma, with a contradiction. Therefore, it doesn't mean you have to have failed in order to find a methodology which helps you to see your own power in an area, whether that area is reading or something else. You don't have to be a failure; you may indeed just confront something that you can't do, and if you really get a new picture of yourself as being able to do it, then you will be able to do it better.

*Jay Featherstone*

I have three quick points. One is that a kind of generic theme coming out of a lot of the work that we're talking about is the whole question of passivity, treating people as passive. An underlying point is that people are makers of their own meanings and actors on their own behalf in programs that work. If there's a transfer, that might be part of the transfer. In an expert society, I talk, you listen. My mother may be the only person in America who talks back to the CBS evening news.

The second point is that the implications for school are very important. Being aware of the social and class dimensions of the issues we're talking about is absolutely crucial. That kind of insight is useful if it gives us perspective and leads us to rethink our practice, and it's the kind of insight that is profoundly demoralizing if you then think that schools can do nothing. One of the many sad features of the way the sixties wound down was that people read the research and the political conclusions of the period to indicate that you can't change society, that you can't do anything in schools. It is a fact that lots of poor people and black people are, in fact, learning in schools.

Since it is such a demoralized time in education, I think it is particularly important for us not to lose heart in that same way.

And the last point: in the end, literacy and competence are not technical issues. Whether or not we realize it in our work, they usually involve some moral and political dimension. If we don't see that, we're missing out on something that we're doing.

### *Audience Participant*

Does it really make a difference what kind of content material teachers use to teach reading? In terms of your special literacy programs, can the students actualize control of themselves? It seems that what you need to do is give people who are not reading a context in which to feel that they want to read. They therefore will then learn how to read. Over the years . . . kids have learned how to read despite the way that reading is taught in school. I was wondering how these observations are relevant to schools in the broad area of literacy.

### *Richard Venezky*

There are two issues that have to be looked at, even though I'm not sure they're independent. One is motivation. Let's take a typical inner city school that has very few resources, and has teachers who at best are neutral towards the learning abilities of the student. With these limitations plus political appointment of principals and the political appointment of superintendents, such situations tend to exhibit little motivation for struggling to reach high achievement. Therefore, no matter what you do at the classroom level, no matter what kind of materials you have, you're going to have problems in schooling. If we're interested in schooling opportunities and schooling outcomes, then perhaps a concern for fiction or non-fiction skills or for kinds of materials used in teaching reading will lead nowhere until fundamental changes are made in the organization and management of the school.

The second issue concerns the difficulty in predicting the outcomes of different approaches to education. In the sixties we thought we were doing a lot of good for the disadvantaged with Title I (and I'm sure a lot of good things have come out of Title I). But the attitude of Title I is that schools don't have to change. Schools can go on pretending that all children come out of the same middle class, white, Protestant background. Title I will provide funds to give shots to kids to make them look that way. Furthermore, Title I was based on the assumption that if you gave those shots early enough, the

students who received them could manage in the schools without further assistance. In hindsight, this attitude has been proven to be fundamentally wrong. But it shows, nevertheless, how difficult it is to predict what will cause schooling to improve.

There are facilitative contexts such as Carman Hunter has talked about, but if we contextualize schooling as an independent entity that outside agents impose on people, then schooling has little chance of working. It may work with certain people, but it hasn't worked on the majority who seem to need help in achieving. I'm not sure I'm answering your question as much as telling you why I don't think I can answer it. I'm all for what Carman is saying, but I'm not sure that it is enough to make the changes suggested. There are things on the broader level that have to be done that relate to the goals of schools and the resources they have, to the attitude of people, and the way that society manages its schools. I'm not convinced that society really cares yet.

#### *Audience Participant*

How can you get schools to assess reading comprehension that's based on literary basal readers as compared to reading comprehension required for history, science, and math books? Part of the problem might be the duality of looking at reading that way. What are some practical things that schools may need to start thinking in order to move away from that duality of context versus comprehension?

#### *Richard Venezky*

One way might be to fragment even further, to develop literacy instruction within each of these areas that requires literacy. Once this is done we will obviously see some overlap of instruction that will need to be eliminated somehow. But for some reason it has been taboo to waste time in a math program teaching kids how to read the math book. There are some signs of a change but in general, reading is what you do in the reading course. There are parallels to this problem in the delivery of university computing services. For many years the computing center has been the source of all knowledge on computing outside of the computer sciences department. This was practicable when only a small percentage of the faculty and students needed computing. But now practically everybody needs computing and consequently everyone is going to have to learn to do some of their own processing; one center is no longer capable of delivering the total service. But the older men-

tality still exists: if you need computing, you go to the computing center. If you need reading, you go to the reading teacher. In a sense all teachers have to become a reading teacher.

*Carman St. John Hunter*

I support everything you have said. There is one very interesting fact that is, for me, a clue to what in the world we thought we were doing in the sixties. We were doing something for some people who were going to be brought into what was already okay, our mainstream. Only once in a while could you read an article by someone like Charles Willie who said, "If you bring people in, the people who are already there are going to benefit maybe even more than the people who come in." Why? Because the diversification of that school society is going to help them learn a little more about the diversification of their society as a whole. What we did, however, was to bring people in but then never own what they brought with them. We sort of said, "Put that all away." If we can ever learn to open some of those different experiences up to each other before we end the whole experiment, we might become a little more culturally diverse.

*Audience Participant*

At the risk of insulting a lot of people here, I think one of the things we also have to look at is who become teachers and why they become teachers. I remember when I was in graduate school, somebody citing a study which included a "compassion" measure. There are a lot of theories that people who go into the helping professions — teaching and social work — have a vested interest in keeping people dependent and not becoming competent, because it feeds into whatever their ego needs are. To be in power, teacher knows best . . . .

I don't see very many courses for teachers on how to motivate children, how to make them confident. Colleges teach a lot of other things about how to teach, but not motivation or why it's important. How to work with families in helping the community, helping the family, helping the child is rarely taught. I think we have to look at the whole child and the family and the community; that's all part of this picture.

### *Jay Featherstone*

Yes, I think knowing those things are good, but I think it's a mistake to start off by thinking that the teachers as a group are any less compassionate than the rest of the human race — or more.

Are you concerned that maybe you're asking teachers to be miracle workers? I mean, we're really expecting a tremendous amount from teachers. We're entrusting the development of the child's psyche, inculcation of values, the ability to master various skills and materials. Then, on top of that, we're asking that the teacher be able to go out and work with the family, deal with special motivational needs and, of course by law, the teacher has to deal with handicaps in one form or another, language development, non-English speakers and so on. How much can we expect for \$12,000 a year and very little job security? I realize it is not the purpose here just to discuss the situation of the teacher in America today. But somewhere along the line I think we have to face the reality that if we're talking about children acquiring things from a service institution, then we have to ask, "Have we provided the resources to that institution to deliver those services?" Previously a lawyer was talking about a court situation contesting competency guidelines. Well, it may very well be that one can demonstrate that the resources aren't there under normal ordinary situations to deliver the goods.

### *Carman St. John Hunter*

One of the implications of what Warren Ziegler was talking about is that we begin to consider some of the ways in which teachers have been forced to take on all the roles of all the institutions — the family, the community, the everybody. Those groups need to get back the ability to be agents of what they're supposed to be agents of.

### *Audience Participant*

I want to make a comment that stems from the last three or four comments. I think that many of us don't understand — the society at large does not understand — the function of institutions. Exactly what are the functions of a school or any kind of educational institution? Many people come to the institution who may have value in education, for example, but they don't necessarily understand the process of getting this system to meet all their needs. Then, a lot of problems occur. I work at Roxbury Community College in the Boston area and I've had a student who has continued to come to the class and act out. He is a 24-year-old man who is very interested in going

through this institution, but no one ever explained to him that he should see the dean of students, or a counselor, or some other person who can provide adequate information to help him have his needs met. So many times the responsibility is all on the teachers, the instructors, or the administration and we fail to realize that there are areas of responsibilities to which we cannot adjust ourselves. A lot of people don't learn to read or write because they don't know what an end to this road is or what they have to do in order to become proficient.

I think teaching is a kind of a personal thing with everyone. I got into teaching because I had a friend, a 32-year-old man, who could neither read nor write. He felt that because I graduated from college I should know how to teach him to read and write. I didn't teach him. (But I did get into education and later into graduate school.) I could not teach him, and I began to wonder why did I spend all that time at the University of California.

*Audience Participant*

I also agree that all other segments of society should start to take back their responsibilities, but I take objection with the feeling that teachers do not need to be trained. Where do we get this wonderful new perception? Where do we get this new view of the world and what learning is? How do we learn to have children take on being a change agent? How do we take what we've learned from this history of where we've been? This conflict in dualism exists — math teachers still see reading as something for the reading teacher. How do we take this entire problem and translate it if it isn't with the upcoming teachers?

*Audience Participant*

Many of the benefits that Carman Hunter mentioned as occurring in these non-formal programs can also occur in a formal program, in a school system. I've had experience in setting up different programs and found that some people discovered a self-confidence they hadn't realized before. I mention this because I think that you should not discount your formal school structures as being a means for many people to get what they need — a raising of their own self image.