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Textbook Review of *Literacies*

Students are most likely to speak when they believe they will be heard, and they speak better when they have something worthwhile to say. The premise behind *Literacies* is that the same holds true for writing. Subtitled “Reading, Writing, Interpretation,” *Literacies* is essentially a reader with an edge—an agenda of exalting the status of student writers’ voices by encouraging them to read, think, and write critically and contextually. It is a textbook rich in resources yet simultaneously designed for flexibility, making it appropriate for a significant range of college classrooms.

*Literacies* posits student writers as learners and contributors, teachers as facilitators and guides. Key to *Literacies* pedagogical approach is its editors’ notion of reading and writing as “conversational processes” (xiii). The editors are explicit about this understanding of language and interpretation and structure their reader around it. The purpose of the text is to involve students in the meaningful interpretation of text analysis and knowledge formation. The editors see students as people with something to say, to contribute, and reminiscent of George Hillocks, they believe in engaging students in the process of inquiry. (xiv, xvii-xix)

For the editors of *Literacies*, a mastery of interpretation is of paramount importance. They urge students to contend with, build upon, and “shape their own meanings” from texts. They argue that, “readers who inquire and establish connections between what they know and what they read create an opportunity for a new understanding of themselves and others” (xix). The primacy given to interpretation makes active reading and critical thinking necessary precursors—or at least adjuncts—to successful writing.

*Literacies* is a reader designed for college freshmen or sophomores. Along with a collection of forty-nine thematically organized readings, the textbook contains reading questions, “invitations to write,” assignment sequences, a brief guide to MLA and APA citation styles, and short biographies of the authors represented.

As evidenced by the heavy emphasis placed on interpretation as well as knowledge formation and ideological refinement, *Literacies* is grounded in an epistemic approach to composition. Both reading and writing are seen as purveyors of knowledge and understanding. The editors continually exhort students to use writing for learning, urging them to believe that they “can make knowledge, not just recall it” (xxvii). Although the editors are firm believers in the social construction of texts, their approach is not intended to reveal an untenable, repressive political-educational system that marginalizes students (*Guide to Teaching* xv). They are interested instead in giving credence to students’ individual learning experiences and participation in reading and writing “conversations.” Still, an emphasis on questioning texts and the ways in which the language of others influences us as readers and writers places this text on the border between epistemic and social-epistemic philosophies.

The readings included in *Literacies* are varied in discipline, style, and agenda, but they share certain importance characteristics. All of the readings are open to multiple interpretations, deal with social or academic issues, and relate to knowledge or experience in some way. The readings are conducive to discussion by students and can be used to reconsider one another’s positions. They expose students to a diversity of writing styles and to issues that persist across academic disciplines and social life in general. Although the language of the readings themselves is not insurmountably difficult, the complexity of the material makes close reading, careful rereading, and teacher support crucial. (*Guide to Teaching* xxvii-xxix)

Although the book packs in forty-nine readings, comparatively few could be effectively used in any one semester. By asking students to write in response to questions before and after reading as well as to write several longer papers, teachers using *Literacies* can promote thorough analysis and interaction with a limited number of texts rather than a more peripheral handling of many readings. This is the approach advocated by the textbook's editors. In a class focused on composition, placing an emphasis on the development and revision of focused student texts, which respond to a few carefully selected readings, should prove more fruitful than attempting to even approximate the scope of readings represented in *Literacies*.

The text includes a number of assignment sequences based on small groups of readings involving similar themes. Examples include: "The Social Contexts of Literacy," "Objects and Subjects in the Academy," and "Family in Context." Each of these sequences includes four or five texts and three essay prompts. The prompts ask students to use combinations of readings to develop explanations, forge connections, or consider issues in complex ways. The essays are more sophisticated than simple "compare-and-contrast" essays. They ask students to apply the ideas of one author to another, to envision the reaction of one writer to another, or to use several texts to examine an abstract idea.

The editors explain the purpose of the essays to their students, arguing that "sequenced assignments help you participate in the self-reflexive literacy practices actively encouraged by the essays and questions in *Literacies*" (761). The notion that students can and will write "like" the authors represented in the textbook is important for the editors' epistemological and pedagogical approach. They want students to interact with texts, to challenge them, and to see themselves as writers—if not of similar caliber at least of analogous validity. The assignment sequences are also designed to direct students focus to the writing process rather than on the

creation of error-free prose. They impart to students that “when you write essays in a sequence, you recognize that writing is not so much about producing correct answers as it is about taking part in a process of understanding, a process open to change as you encounter new information or new experiences” (761-762). If this is not enough to win students’ favor, they also point out the practical benefits of using the assignment sequences, arguing that “extended work with a set of ideas resembles the work you will be doing in your academic major and in your career, so the interpretative challenges you face in the sequences have a special realistic value” (xxvi).

All of this indicates that learning with *Literacies*—at least in the editors’ ideal case—would involve reading and reacting to texts through class discussion, peer group work, and writing. Students would combine their own experience and knowledge with interpretation of the readings. Multiple steps and activities would be combined with a focus on the process of writing. Although students would typically be writing “essays,” they would not be the much criticized “five-paragraph theme” essays. In fact, many of the papers would involve using techniques of inquiry and research. Teachers less interested in using the questions, prompts, and sequences provided in the textbook could certainly have students branch into other genres of writing as well. For example, after reading Scott Russell Sanders’ “The Men We Carry in Our Minds” or Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman,” students might write a memoir of their own. The readings are rich and adaptable enough for teachers to create diverse assignments with specific purposes in mind.

In whatever form, assignments based on *Literacies* are likely to improve students’ reading and critical thinking skills as well as their writing. By using all parts of the textbook, students can gain an appreciation for the authority of their own texts and voices. Although mechanical skills are not a focus of the text, the “Invitations to Write” do encourage students to

consider the kinds of errors they make and to attempt to correct them for themselves. The editors claim not to be impressed by heuristics, so tight methods and processes might be something missed by using this textbook. However, the “Invitations to Write” are meant to serve as tools, and could possibly be seen as the sort of heuristic devices the editors profess to avoid. In addition, new teachers or those looking for a ready-made course might be somewhat overwhelmed by the project involved in designing a course with *Literacies*. Although alive with possibilities, teachers must carefully consider which texts to use when planning a semester-long course. The *Guide to Teaching with Literacies* provides assistance and a sample teaching cycle; nonetheless, creativity and flexibility are needed to make this text work successfully.

*Literacies* is a complex reader that offers students many opportunities for inquiry, engagement, and development. The textbook draws from the stores of process theory and social constructivism, combining them in a way that gives authority to the voices of students. Although much depends on the creativity, demeanor, and specific curriculum developed by the individual teacher using *Literacies*, the book provides ample advice and opportunity for students to grow as readers, writers, and thinkers.