Another Kind of Story

Using the Techniques of Imaginative Education to Develop Literacy in the Elementary School Classroom

R.J. McKellar

Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University

8888 University Drive, Burnaby, B.C., Canada V5A 1S6

rjmckellar@shaw.ca

ABSTRACT

Recent developments in academic theories of literacy are contrasted with the ideas and practices of teachers and school districts within a five-year research project in British Columbia. An alternative conception of literacy is outlined, involving the development of "Romantic understanding" through imaginative engagement with the world of text. This approach is illustrated through a case study of teaching Canadian history in an "average," culturally diverse grade 6 class in an elementary school in B.C.'s Fraser Valley. Some of the challenges and potential benefits of this approach are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

If we consider our current notions of literacy and how it ought to be taught in schools, we are struck almost immediately by what appears to be something of a paradox. Academically, there have been successive shifts from behaviorist, to cognitive, to sociocultural approaches to research and to teaching (Gaffney and Anderson, 2000), accompanied by corresponding shifts in our conception of the learner and the nature of literacy. We no longer see literacy as a set of distinct skills taught in a autonomous course called "language arts," but rather as a multifaceted developmental process engaging the learner at several levels, and deeply embedded in sociocultural practices that extend across genres and disciplines. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words (*1983), for example, made it clear that not all students begin their education with the same kind of language background, and that their domestic sociocultural context has an enormous influence on their ability to comply with the cultural expectations which form a hidden part of the school curriculum.

Yet many if not most school-based literacy programs continue to approach literacy through a series of texts of increasing difficulty, with students progressing through different levels based on some measure of their competence, as if there was a well-defined set of cultural attitudes and skill levels to be acquired in sequence. This method of organizing reading programs finds favour with most teachers, because it offers them a manageable method of dealing with the intricate problem of teaching reading in the context of their busy schedules and crowded classrooms. And although the process approach to writing has had a great deal of success in helping teachers to realize that good writing is not simply a talent that people are born with, but a set of interlocking skills that can be approached in a systematic way, writing still often remains a kind of afterthought that is rarely integrated across the curriculum.

Although these methodologies have had some success, being relatively structured, consistent, and easy to apply, they clearly have significant limitations. Many children leave school lacking either love of or confidence in reading and writing; as sociocultural models would predict, these low levels of functional literacy tend to be concentrated in certain social and cultural groups. This paper explores one alternative apporach that may address some of the weakness in the prevailing lockstep, cognitivst model of literacy development. Drawing on the work of Kieran Egan on imagination, and the sociocultural insights of Vygotsky and others, this "imaginative" approach to teaching literacy nonetheless presents some significant challenges as well as opportunities.

The problem is that introducing new conceptions of literacy and literacy instruction has always been fraught with controversy. As Venevsky (1987) says, " No other component of the curriculum has been subjected throughout its history to such intense controversy over both its basic methods and its content." In this paper, I shall be examining some of the barriers faced by teachers as they attempt to implement a new approach to the teaching of literacy from an imaginative perspective. In particular, I shall be looking at the experiences of teachers in two school districts in British Columbia, particularly as those experiences are contextualized within the districts' literacy practices, as well as the curricular demands imposed by the province. I am also interested in the way in which these external constraints impede the implementation of imaginative education in the classroom.

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON LITERACY

The research reported on in this paper took place in the context of the LUCID research project, described in an accompanying paper (Fettes, 2005). As part of this project, which involves collaboration between university researchers, grade school teachers, and First Nations educators in three B.C. school districts, we have been particularly concerned with the

development of literacy in Grades 4-8. Early in the project, in July 2004, we therefore surveyed project teachers (who at that point numbered 27) on their ideas and attitudes towards literacy. We were interested in the question of where teachers were starting from in their journey towards making their classrooms more imaginatively engaging for students.

The responses we received should of course not be taken as representative of teachers as a whole. In fact, one could argue that the project teachers, being largely self-selected, already represent a group divergent from most mainstream teachers. Certainly they have shown themselves to be a group of dedicated, professional individuals with a desire to improve their teaching not only for First Nations children, but for all those in their classes. Their answers to our questions, however, help us to understand how teachers' perceptions of literacy and their role in the classroom are related to the institutional framework of curriculum guides, district mandates and narrowly-conceived assessment practices.

The first question which we asked was, "**At the age levels that you normally teach, what does a 'fluently literate' child look like? What attitudes, actions, or abilities tell you that the child has 'gotten it'—that literacy is no longer a problem but a resource for him/her?**" The responses show that the teachers have fairly sophisticated notions of literacy. They were able to see beyond a merely skills-based approach to decoding information, and to appreciate the fact that literacy involves more complex attitudes towards learning as well. It was important for these teachers that students could not only understand but also interpret what they read. Students were required to be able to explain their ideas to others, in both oral and written form. The capacity of students to take their ideas and apply them to new situations, and to develop their own ideas, was important for some teachers, as was the ability to think metacognitively about the processes in which they engaged. Students were thought to need to be able to retrieve information, and to connect ideas to previous knowledge. Beyond the skills level, teachers recognized the importance of students becoming emotionally

engaged with what they read, including understanding humour and desiring to communicate their ideas. The desire to read for its own sake also showed up in several responses, including the notion that reading ought to be engaged in for pleasure.

Interestingly, the notion of competence in writing was only marginally addressed. Most teachers seemed to focus on the idea that literacy was a question of the ability to read and understand, while the idea that students should have a range of skills in terms of composing their own texts was not mentioned often. Of course it is in the process of composition that imagination may be thought of as having the greatest scope of production and engagement.

Aside from this lack of focus on writing, there is clearly very little to complain about in this list. If we were able to graduate students who demonstrated these abilities at a proficient level, most of us would be well pleased. There are at least two points to make here, however. The first is that this list shows the influence of the impact of cognitive approaches to education, which have dominated the field of teaching over the past 20 years. Talk of metacognition, of connecting ideas to previous knowledge, of understanding and interpreting, show the growth in our understanding of literacy from the simplistic behaviorist models which held sway during the 50's and 60's. Students are no longer expected to read set texts and respond to fill-in-the-blank questions, in tests for literal interpretation and rote memorization. The second point is that there is a clear appreciation of the importance of emotional engagement with text. The idea that students would actually enjoy reading, and desire to convey their understanding to others, is clearly evident in the teachers' responses.

Less evident, however, is a sense that the students ought to engage their reading in an imaginative manner, transforming and creating meaning for themselves in the process. A few teachers did mention the notion that students ought to develop their own conclusions, but this insight seemed to be restricted to situations involving logical deduction rather than creative

engagement. What seems missing from this list is a fully-developed sense that reading and writing are part of a web of activities that lead to a deeper engagement of students in a sociocultural context of meaning. Further, even though these teachers are self-selected for a project in imaginative education, the role of the imagination in literacy is never addressed directly as an issue.

The next question that we asked of teachers was, "**Briefly describe the 'literacy profile' of a typical class that you teach — the range of reading and writing that children do, the role of oral and written language in their lives**". Responses to this question were diverse, and reflect teachers' struggles with an environment in which students have a wide variety of needs, interests, and abilities. Here the idea of a single scale of literacy abilities seemed to be most prevalent, as a way of grasping and working with this diversity. For instance, according to one grade 5/6 teacher, "Within our district readers the students would range from emergent to grade 10+ ability." This class thus typically includes students who are can barely read at all, at one extreme, to students who are reading texts that most of their peers cannot understand and enjoy until they are several years older. The role of social and cultural factors becomes invisible, however, in such descriptions of literacy as a progression through the "district readers".

Another theme which emerged was the difficulty of applying the B.C. Performance Standards, which are meant to act as guidelines for teachers. One teacher commented: "I do not mean to say that I think that the Performance Standards are great. I don't think a strict adherence to them benefits anyone." Teachers understand that they are meant to use the guidelines to judge the progress of students, but applying the Standards in real classroom situations is clearly problematic. The diversity of the student population makes applying one standard a frustrating and often counterproductive exercise. For some teachers of First Nations students, one of the major points of difficulty was the low value attributed to written

assignments in that community. Conversely, the teachers themselves seemed to attach low priority to the development of oral language. The connection between orality and literacy was addressed only in the context of reading aloud, and here the main criteria seemed to be behavioral, with literate students being willing to sit quietly while other students read, or being able to read without hesitating or stumbling over words themselves.

One of the most poignant comments about students' developing literacy came from a teacher who wrote, "I'm continually surprised at how their young lives are influenced by the experiences of their families. Those who do spend time on the land, at the beach, in the villages, or in the family gathering activities come with those stories. They can also come with the stories from TV, videos and DVD's. I sometimes realize if I don't watch or know those stories I can't distinguish what's coming from kids' imaginations or heavily paid TV show writers." Clearly the barriers to creating an imaginative classroom are not merely the ones created by curriculum demands or district guidelines, but are also part of the culture in which our students live.

Perhaps what emerges most clearly from teachers' answers to these questions, however, is that there is almost no talk of how language is being used by students in any place except school, where its role is confined, for the most part, to lessons in Language Arts. A few teachers indicated that they tried to teach both reading and writing across the curriculum, but for most it remains an activity that is tied to individual lessons emphasizing particular, discrete skills. Scarcely mentioned is the notion of using oral language skills as a beginning point for reading and writing. Literacy is almost always conceived of as an activity that is limited to a narrow range of the curriculum, rather than something that draws together different strands of knowledge from every discipline. The integration of specific skills of decoding and meaning-making into a broader conception of what it means to be a fully literate person is never explored.

I later compared this teacher data with the conception of literacy held by the district literacy team in Chilliwack, where I am doing my primary research. The literacy team consists of two teachers and an administrator who have been seconded from the schools on a part-time basis to deal with literacy district-wide. In the 2004-2005 school year, I interviewed them about the district's overall approach to teacher training, how it deals with students not meeting the performance standards, and their take on different theoretical approaches to literacy. The district team's responses in many ways reflected the same basic thinking about literacy that was evident in the LUCID teachers' responses.

In defining literacy, for example, the district team was very clearly influenced by the cognitivist approach, emphasizing the development of skill sets in such areas as accessing information, making connections, communicating ideas and information, and solving problems. The impact of the critical thinking movement was apparent here as well, in terms of the integration of thinking skills in the definition of literacy itself. The Performance Standards established by the province were cited as the benchmark against which student progress is measured. The district has in place a "literacy framework" document which sets out the steps to be taken to remediate the "at risk" students who fail to achieve at a level consistent with the literacy standards.

Literacy was seen to be primarily the responsibility of the Language Arts teachers, although there was a recognition that literacy should be emphasized across the curriculum; over the past few years, according to the team, there had been a move to implement reading strategies in content areas. The importance of oral language development was recognized, but its application seemed to be restricted to phonemic awareness and to vocabulary development. The development of literacy using the skills of oral language was not specifically addressed. There was no overall theoretical framework guiding literacy practices, but rather an amalgam of approaches drawing from several perspectives.

DEVELOPING THE LITERATE IMAGINATION

The notions of literacy development and literacy teaching that prevail at the levels of the individual teacher and the school district levels are not easily reconciled with the imaginative conception of literacy which is central to the LUCID project. In the developmental scheme outlined by Kieran Egan (1997), the acquisition of the "cognitive tools" of literacy allows a distinctive and emotionally rich kind of understanding to unfold, that builds on and transforms previous kinds of understanding derived from embodied experience ("Somatic" understanding) and from embeddness in an oral language community ("Mythic" understanding). According to Egan, this development of "Romantic" understanding tends to be most powerful from ages 8-15, a range which includes all of the students presently involved in LUCID classrooms.

A crucial difference between Egan's scheme and the Piagetian developmental model, which has exerted enormous influence over teaching and curriculum for the past 80 years, is that Egan advocates helping students progress from the Somatic to the Mythic to the Romantic levels of understanding (and beyond, to the Philosophic and Ironic) without leaving behind the earlier levels. According to Egan, this movement from level to level recapitulates the development of Western culture historically, and each transformation of understanding entails losses as well as gains. In contrast, Piaget saw each stage of development as an immature precursor of subsequent ones, and he was much more interested in aspects of development that could be studied without reference to a particular cultural context. Egan's scheme is more closely aligned with that of Vygotsky, who also saw our higher thought processes as crucially dependent on "mediational tools" made available by our culture, primarily through language. He is also more radical than Vygotsky, when he argues that we ought to model our educational system on the notion of bringing students through the different stages through which literate, print-based cultures have themselves moved.

One of the implications of this model is that each level needs to be fully developed, in order for students to be able to take full advantage of the next level as they grow and develop (Egan, 1997). An educational program that does not take this kind of embedded process into account runs the risk of failing to develop students to their full potential. As Egan points out, there tends to be much dissatisfaction, among both professionals and the general public, with the type of literacy achieved in schools. Even students who do test out at a high level often show a fairly superficial grasp of their abilities and understandings, as was noted two centuries ago by the author of *Emile:*

> The apparent ease with which children learn is their ruin. You fail to see that this very facility proves that they're not learning. Their shining, polished brain reflects, as in a mirror, the things you show them, but nothing sinks in. (Rousseau, 1911, p. 71)

Furthermore, and perhaps at a deeper level, many students display a frustration with education in general. They tend to be bored with what is on offer, and their experience of the educational system leaves them with a negative view of intellectual pursuits. If this is the consequence of our current model of literacy, then even when that model achieves its objectives, in terms of some basic abilities of comprehension and composition, we are left with a feeling that there must be something more that can be accomplished.

If we look then at students in grades four to six, we see that they are moving from the Mythic to the Romantic level. On the Mythic level, students are willing to accommodate the fantastic with complete credulity. They believe in flying dragons and witches without any problem. As Egan points out (1997), this belief in magic persists in many people, even into adulthood. Consider how many people continue to pay attention to horoscopes and fortune telling, for example. Yet underneath the apparent naivety of this way of thinking is a wealth of powerful tools for making emotional and intellectual sense of the world. Egan suggests

that, in order to prepare the way for text-based literacy, teachers need to help children further develop these skills of oral language further: the use of abstract binary opposites, metaphor, story telling, and imagery, to name a few. This will strengthen and extend children's powers of abstract thinking and their command of language and thereby set the scene for the Romantic stage, when a new interest in reality as it actually is begins to emerge.

The Romantic level of understanding is characterized by deeper narrative engagement with the topic, an interest in vivid and exotic detail, and a focus on the heroic qualities demonstrated by the main characters. In the Romantic framework, we explore human strengths and weaknesses, the wonders of the world, and the extremes of reality. At this age students are naturally intrigued by the limits of the world — it is not unusual to see them reading the Guinness Book of World Records, and being deeply interested in exploring the world around them in search of things wonderful and strange. Romantic understanding has to do with developing a personal connection to the world, with humanizing knowledge. At the same time, the Mythic level, if properly developed, remains as a mode of understanding that undergirds the Romantic level and lends it additional energy and depth.

According to this way of thinking, part of the problem with the way in which we tend to teach much of the curriculum in today's schools is that we move rapidly from a narrative to an expository form of presentation, thinking that students ought to be able to deal with more abstract forms of understanding. But while it is true that they are developing their powers of abstraction, it is also the case that their imaginations are much more powerfully engaged by narrative. Like most people, students are more likely to enjoy and remember a good story than a dry presentation of facts. Similarly, the Guinness Book of World Records remains so popular because it places facts about the world in a context of dramatic limits and extremes, which are much more interesting than the rather prosaic details of most children's

lives. It humanizes the limits of the world by presenting them in human form, in terms of what real people are able to do.

Another educational problem noted by Egan is that we often begin with what children presumably already know about the world, and move from there to explore what they don't know. Now at first this seems like a reasonable process, for it would make some sense to build from the known to the unknown. But a different way of managing the process might be to begin with what is strange, unusual and exotic, to begin, as it were, at the fringes of the topic, and to clarify the overall picture as we go along, rather than filling it in piece by piece, like a jigsaw puzzle. Egan argues that both ways of looking at the learning process are in fact valuable, but that the notion of a large picture which comes more and more into view as it develops seems to offer the most in terms of creating meaning.

In fact, it is the question of meaning-making that ought to be uppermost in our minds here. When the curriculum is presented in a decontextualized manner, or as something that is finished and prepackaged, it loses its connection to students' lives, and thus is unable to stir within them a sense of engagement or response. Positivism often defines meaning as the logical connection between statements and a set of conditions prevailing in the outside world, and rejects notions of meaning which depend upon personal response or subjective interpretation. Imaginative approaches to education, in contrast, ultimately attempt to connect students to knowledge in a new way. It is not just that students are learning in a different way, but that they are engaging the subject matter in a deeper, fuller manner. What is central to the program of imaginative education is the issue of understanding, as opposed to simply remembering information.

Of course understanding also takes place in a cultural context, and for some of our students, Aboriginal students in particular, this presents an added difficulty. For these students, the curriculum is often seen as something alien, something that draws on

connections outside of their own cultural world. The problem is even more complex than that, for it isn't as simple as having Aboriginal students on one side of a cultural divide, and all of the other students on the other. Instead, students (both Aboriginal and non-) tend to be differentially situated along several cultural dimensions simultaneously, and to have a wide array of learning difficulties and abilities as well.

IMAGINATION IN A GRADE 6 CLASSROOM

In the grade 6 classroom where I have been working for the past four months, the students are a rich mixture of First Nations and others from diverse backgrounds. There are 22 students in total, of whom eight are First Nations. Of those eight, two have been diagnosed as learning disabled. As a group, the class is considered very average by the teacher, with students ranging in ability from below grade level to well above. Their scores on a number of standardized tests are typical, with some students operating on a grade two level, and two operating two years above grade average. A number of students have come and gone during the year, so that of the 25 who began the year, 21 remain, with one new student. The area is somewhat socio-economically depressed, and is located approximately 16 kilometres outside Chilliwack, a small city in the Fraser Valley, 100 kilometres from Vancouver. The students are well-mannered, cooperative and engaged with most activities. To my eyes, however, they tend to appear naive, and sorely lacking in background knowledge about the world.

For the past four months I have been working closely with the classroom teacher, as part of the LUCID project, in an attempt to use the techniques of imaginative education as a means of engaging both First Nations and other students in learning. We are teaching the history of Canada — or should I say re-teaching it. The students were taught this material in grades four and five; but when we began the unit, we asked them to tell us everything that they remembered about Canadian history. The answer, disappointingly, but not surprisingly,

was that they had retained almost nothing. They recognized none of the names of the explorers, and could not even begin to discuss the role of the First Nations people in Canadian history. And so we began the unit with an almost blank slate.

An interesting issue has been the difficulty of situating this kind of teaching methodology within the context of a typical classroom setting. One of the problems that I have encountered is simply that of trying to do a unit as extensive as the history of Canada within the confines of the time allocated for curriculum by the province. In theory, I should have no more than a few hours a week to do the entire unit, but this is proving to be very difficult, as the unit continues to grow like an amoeba to swallow up time, resources, and interest. We have somewhat circumvented this problem by tying the unit to other curricular areas whenever possible. The classroom teacher, who takes a very imaginative and professional approach to everything that happens in her class, does art projects to go along with the unit. So far the students have begun to construct a timeline beginning 12,000 years ago with the arrival of the First Nations people, made mobiles representing the different "tribes" that we have established for group work, drawn a huge map of Canada upon which we have placed the locations of all of the original First Nations peoples, and begun a quilt which will show in symbolic form the meaning of each era that we examine. I have also taught the students some mathematics in helping them figure out how to scale their timeline, and some science in teaching them to use a quadrant and compass to find directions and to navigate. Along the way we have investigated the cause of scurvy and its treatment, how epidemics caused the depopulation of the original First Nations people, and how First Nations cosmology compares to that of modern science. We have discussed how magnets work, and why it is difficult to travel to other planets given the nature of cosmic rays. Overall, this part of the curriculum has been driven by students' need to know the background of various aspects of Canadian history, and when it is thus motivated, it seems

that students' natural curiosity invariably comes to the fore. Rather than scheduling science and mathematics content in a decontextualized unit called "science", the material is tied naturally to some issue that has arisen as we have explored together.

We also integrate language arts by having the students take notes from various readings, and they write a diary in which they imaginatively take the part of a character in the past, and describe life through his or her eyes. Facts and details concerning the character's life and times are woven into the narrative, so that they become more meaningful by being associated with someone with whom the student can identify. The First Nations students are able to choose the character of an Indigenous person, and many of them are discovering for the first time the important role played by the First Nations people in Canada's history.

All of these methods of integrating curriculum have led to what appears to be a more rich, more engaging experience for the students, in spite of the limitations of working within the constraints of time and curriculum demands. If we were to ask how an imaginative classroom "looks" in comparison to one which adds little to provincial curriculum guidelines, district mandates, and standard conceptions of literacy, the first thing that we might notice is a different level of engagement by the students. One of the First Nations students, who also happens to be one of those labeled "learning disabled", was writing in his diary the other day. He had chosen to take the role of a fur trader, and was writing a letter home to his mother, describing his adventures. In it he had written a vivid description of the first winter spent in New France as one of Champlain's men, and the hardship that he had endured. His narrative blended in facts about that first year in the New World, with striking similes reflecting his emotional and critical engagement with the subject. He looked up at me when I passed by his desk, and said in a low voice "Mr. McKellar, this is fun." I looked down at his work, and although it was replete with spelling and grammatical errors, he had somehow managed to capture the look and feel of the life of a fur trader. He had poured his understanding, and

more importantly, his feelings, into his work. For this young man at least, imaginative education has opened a door which was previously closed to him. It remains to be seen whether the LUCID approach can open similar doors for all students; but this experience established for me that it is a real possibility.

As I told the class at the end of that lesson, they had had an experience with the history of Canada that would stay with them for the rest of their lives. In the end, if imaginative education does nothing more than make these kinds of experiences possible for students, it will have proven its value. It should also prompt further rethinking of the concept of literacy, as I argued earlier. The discovery of real joy and satisfaction in the use of written language is not something one typically finds in cognitivist or even sociocultural frameworks. Egan's description of the literate imagination captures something real and important, that deserves closer study by theorists and practitioners alike.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Egan, Kieran, (1997), *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fettes, Mark. (2005). "Imaginative Engagement in Culturally Diverse Classrooms: Changing Teacher Thinking and Practice within a Community-University Research Alliance." Paper presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Society for Studies in Education, London, Ontario, May 28, 2005.

Gaffney, J. and Anderson, R., (2000), "Trends in Reading Research in the United States: Changing Intellectual Currents Over Three Decades," in Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson & Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*, Volume 3 (pp. 53-76), London: Erlbaum.

Heath, S.B., (1983), *Ways with Words* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rousseau, J., (1911), *Emile.* London: Dent. First published 1762.

Venevsky, R.L., (1987), "Reading Research in the United States", in *Review of Research in Education,* 13, 129- 167.