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The Secondary Desk: What Does it Mean to be a Literate Reader/Writer/Critic?

Peter R. Thacker

University of Portland, thacker@up.edu

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THE SECONDARY DESK

**Peter Thacker, University of Portland,
Chair**



Secondary Desk: What Does It Mean to Be a Literate Reader/Writer/Critic?

As I have mentioned in a recent column, a new vision of literacy across the disciplines has emerged among literacy experts: students apprenticing to become literate in each discipline: to think and do for instance, like an historian, physicist, mathematician, and reader/author. We need to guide our students by modeling how professionals in our discipline think and work. We ask them to inquire, discuss, read, and write with the sensibilities of an expert in each field. We are, then, creating Renaissance men and women, able to think flexibly across, as well as in, disciplines bringing a multiplicity of lenses to problems needing solutions.

What does that mean for we who teach reading, writing and the language arts? How do we expert interpreters of literature, drama and film, we fine users of the language, we habitual writers think and do? What are our dispositions towards our subject matter? What skills have we honed? What content is worthy? How do we choose what is worthy of exploration?

Each year, I teach students becoming English teachers, and our methods class is often a hoot. My students love to write, think about what makes a good essay, wonder about the meaning of a phrase, debate the subtle symbolism, posit internal motivations for character actions.... When I used to talk books with my English teacher colleagues, the delight was ever-present. We know ourselves as passionate consumers and creators of poetry, prose and critique.

So how do we, particularly those of us who teach middle and high schoolers, apprentice our students to become like us? How do those of us teaching novice teachers prepare our students to enter into English teaching?

I now begin by asking students to imagine the content, skills, and dispositions necessary to be a writer, reader, and critic of literature. I won't spend much time with the content necessary to learn to become an expert in literature. Though we have had battles about including unheard voices, from women and under-appreciated American sub-cultures, not to mention those from non-Western world cultures, these literatures are well-represented in many classrooms now. Though students are certainly constrained in their writing by categorizing essays into narrative, persuasive, expository, etc., we do include a wide variety of modes of expression. I fear that we put form over function when demanding a thesis statement and three details or a five paragraph and only five paragraph essay, as if this is how real people write. Still, at the core, the content in English classrooms is appropriate.

What are the skills necessary to read the world like a writer or critic? What skills do we teach? What others should we add? I certainly see students reading and writing in secondary classrooms. I see them learning to connect personal experience to, analyze, even, compare and contrast literature. They learn the language of our discipline, whether it be for plot development or types of conflict. They learn figurative language, symbolism, themes, even motifs. Yet the reading skill most necessary to impassioned, life-long reading is often neglected: how to decide on a personally compelling book. We build an understanding of, and reading list from, multiple genres, but don't often encourage individual discernment. We build discussions, but don't often allow student inquiry to initiate and continue those conversations. Student agency is neglected.

Our teaching of writing may be even more distant from the process of experts. First, we often lose the obvious connections between what we learn as readers and what we do as writers. Yes, we often use internal monologues, asking students to write in the style of an author or using the voice of a character. But do we often have kids noting stylistic decisions and practicing using them in their own writing? I know I could build more of this connection into my courses.

(continued on next page)



The Secondary Desk: Secondary Desk: What Does It Mean to Be a Literate Reader/Writer/ Critic? *(continued from page 11)*

What I do emphasize, and wonder why we don't do this more, is having students write every day. It is well-known that writers write hours every day. They write junk; they write epiphanies; they write poems; they write down their daily worries; they write and write and write, often carrying pocketbook diaries to hold on to phrases they love. We need to remind students of their voice and encourage writing for a myriad of purposes, some of them personal, some of them for sharing.

Writers also choose the works they want to expand and which to leave for rummagers in attics a hundred years hence. Writers also are ferocious editors, often revising pieces over and over and over. Yes, we English teachers encourage multiple drafts, but unless students see the efficacy of this practice, they do this for a grade, not for creating a piece they appreciate more. When students write for publication, they work to make their pieces strong; they share them with others who make suggestions; they see themselves as having something to say to the larger world.

Finally, students need to care that their final copies can be read without difficulty. Mechanics count in the real world. While we often use out-of-context grammar worksheets to teach rules, the most useful method I've found of finding errors is to have students read their work aloud while you listen. They hear the awkward sentences. They hear the misplaced punctuation. They find themselves self-correcting errors after learning the rules and seeing several of the same errors in a paper.

As writers we self-correct, we revise and revise, we show our almost finished products to trusted friends for feedback. Can we model what we do for students? I often write papers on the prompts I give students, asking them to feed back to me suggestions, after which I write my final draft. When I do this, students take peer revision sessions much more seriously. They listen to their audience.

Those who read and write for a living have a sense of agency. They know why they read; they know why they write; they read and write with enthusiasm; they read and write through pain; they read and write until the light burns out, and think the rest of the night about what a character might have done to avoid a situation. They know their efforts are worthwhile; that their ideas matter. This more than anything we want to teach our 200 students a day in high school: A sense of coming to terms with the big questions in life. Read and write and find what matters. We teach students that our individual and collective lives have meaning. For this to have meaning, the inquiry must be students' own. We are just the catalyst.

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