How we envision literacy makes a difference. If we see it as meaning making and not meaning making plus inquiry, we fail to envision all that literacy might be. If we see literacy as language and not language plus other sign systems, we also fail to envision all that literacy might be. This lack of vision is obvious in our schools. We have barely scratched the surface of what there is to know about the complexity of literacy and learning.

Currently talk about school restructuring abounds. Unfortunately, however, much of this talk deals only with surface changes to the nature of classrooms. Instead of one grade level, schools are moving to multiage classrooms. Instead of moving children to a new teacher each year, schools are experimenting with multiyear classrooms. While reforms of this sort are long overdue, they in themselves do not constitute real change in education.

If interaction patterns in classrooms don’t change, then nothing is really different. One can have multiage and multiyear classrooms and nevertheless have dreadful instruction. To change education requires a shift in the nature of teacher-student, student-student, and student-content area interaction. None of this is simple.

For example, we have been exploring the notion of transmediation, that is, taking what you know in one sign system and recasting it in another (Sühö, 1992), by using an instructional strategy called Sketch to Stretch developed several years ago (Harste, Short & Burke, 1988). This strategy asks readers to draw a sketch “symbolizing what this story means to you.” Sketches are shared through another strategy called Save the Last Word for the Artist (Harste, Short & Burke, 1988, 1995) in which the artist holds up his or her picture, everyone in the group guesses what the artist has tried to portray and, as a way to end, the artist gets the last word. When used together, these two strategies are extremely generative. My students and I are always amazed at the new insights we get into old stories as a result of participating in Sketch to Stretch and Save the Last Word for the Artist.

Several teacher-researchers have used Sketch to Stretch as the basis of their educational inquiries. Marjorie Siegel (1984) explored “reading as signification” by using these strategies with a fourth-grade class of students. Interestingly, because she pulled children...
from the classroom to do Sketch to Stretch with them, they came to perceive it as “fun,” but not part of “real reading.” That was the stuff that went on under the direction of the classroom teacher. Phyllis Whitin (1996) used Sketch to Stretch as the basic organizational device for her seventh-grade reading program. Each evening students would draw a sketch of what the story meant to them and then use this sketch to begin a new round of classroom conversations. Over the course of the year, Phyllis varied the strategy’s format by asking students to identify pieces of existing art they thought personified stories they had read and, on still other occasions, she asked students to represent the stories they had read “mathematically” by using pie graphs and the like. The tale of her work is told in a book entitled *Sketching Stories, Stretching Minds* (1996) and documents the significant growth students made in her class relative to reading.

I’ve also seen Sketch to Stretch used much less effectively. Many teachers (even those who experience the strategy firsthand under my guidance!) will go back to their classrooms and modify the directions, asking students to draw “a favorite part of the story” rather than “symbolize what the story means to you.” This simple change alters the strategy completely. It calls for representation rather than metaphorical thinking. This is like asking a literal question instead of a question that encourages critical thinking. As defined earlier, to take what you know in one sign system (language) and recast it in another (art) is a process called transmediation. While talk mediates experience, taking what you talked about and drawing a sketch “transmediates” it. Sketch to Stretch was designed to encourage transmediation. The meaning readers make becomes a metaphor that also needs to be read. Readers read the sketch as a metaphorical statement about a bigger process, typically some truth about how they see the world working. Sketch to Stretch supports the process of projection. Literacy is not only comprehending but also using what was understood to understand the unfamiliar. Other participants, of course, complicate as well as enliven the discussion. Their projections differ, often creating new tensions as well as new possibilities.

Recognizing the subtle difference between sketching a favorite part of the story and sketching what the story means depends on understanding theoretically what happens in each case. When a child draws a scene from the story, who can argue with his or her representation? Even if such pictures are shared to create conversation, the conversation is focused inward (on the picture and the scene it represents) rather than outward (on the metaphorical meaning of the sketch). The conversation will be a retelling of the story rather than an expansion of its meaning to other aspects of life.
Transmediation is one concept that has significantly changed our thinking. Transmediation is an instance of metaphor, yet more. To create a metaphor, the language user searches for an equivalent to the experience, often one that is more familiar and that puts an experience in a new light. Transmediation pushes beyond metaphor by taking what is known in one sign system and recasting it in another. Because each sign system is unique and best suited to a particular perspective of the world, there are often no direct equivalencies. It is difficult to express horror in mathematical symbols, and “love” is expressed quite differently in art than in language. Moving from sign system to sign system is like turning an artifact so that we suddenly see a new facet that was previously hidden from our view.

We have learned that transmediation is most powerful in a social setting. Sketches need the interpretation of others to fulfill their promise. The process is designed to disrupt the existing text, to open it up anew. The person who drew the sketch often gains new insights from hearing what others have to say.

Majorie Siegel (1995) argues that transmediation represents the core of literacy. Learners take what they know and symbolize it. To be meaningful, they draw on their knowledge of sign systems, for these systems represent social agreements about signs and meaning. In sharing, the learners come to understand that all meaning is negotiated and that the meaning attributed to signs depends on the context and social interaction. These literacy processes are what Sketch to Stretch is all about.

This discussion of transmediation reflects just one example of the kind of conversations I would like to start. I strongly believe that a holistic, inquiry-based curriculum, at the foundation of which rests multiple ways of knowing, has the potential to revolutionize schools. Therefore, I think we must envision and create curriculum that places inquiry and sign systems—art, music, dance, drama, and movement—at the center of the learning process, rather than in the peripheral position of curricular frills, mere respites one ventures into by way of taking a break from the hard work of learning language and mathematics. What we are learning is exciting, because it does disrupt the existing text. We have experienced how such a curriculum makes new perspectives possible, helps us to see the strengths of previously marginalized learners, changes us personally, and enhances the humane and critical aspects of literacy and learning.

What I wish to do in this chapter is set forth some points of departure. I would like to move beyond cute activities and seriously explore sign systems as central to the learning process, for sign systems create tension, offer new perspectives, and set in motion the twin processes of reflection and reflexivity.
The goal of a good language arts program is to expand communication potential.

Often we hear children at about the third-grade level say they can’t sing. By fourth grade many children say they can’t draw, and dancing with their classmates is something they’ve long ago rejected. This concerns me, and I hope it concerns you, too. Young children love to move, to sing, to draw. What has happened, then?

It seems obvious that in our teaching of art, music, and movement, we’ve convinced children they are not capable. As children progress through school, they become more and more dependent on language as their primary means of communication. Unfortunately, most language arts curricula inadvertently contribute to this problem—perhaps because the importance of these other sign systems is not recognized or because they are trivialized in the translation to classroom practice. Teachers often think art is easy, whereas language is tough. Pictures are concrete; language, abstract. Art is optional; language, mandatory. “Write a story, and then, if time remains, you might like to illustrate it.”

Carolyn Burke (1991) drew the sketch in Figure 1 to illustrate two important points. First, every sign system contributes something unique to the making and sharing of meaning. When we limit ourselves to language, we cut ourselves off from other ways of knowing. As Elliot Eisner would say, our point of experience is so narrow that we don’t even recognize what we don’t know. A good language arts program should open up, rather than close down, our communicative options. A language arts program that emphasizes language at the expense of art and other sign systems fails to serve anyone well. Children whose strength is not language are denied access. Children whose strength is language are not given opportunities to extend their knowing and thereby develop new ways to communicate with themselves and others.

Second, Figure 1 suggests that every instance of making and sharing meaning is a multimodal event involving many sign systems in addition to language. As an example, watch two people in conversation. They use posture, gesture, facial expressions, intonation, laughter, and even silence, to get their message across. Picture storybooks may be viewed as language, but in reality, the pictures carry as much of the message as do the words on the page. McDonald’s uses its name, as well as its golden arches, to produce readers. Just ask parents of a three-year-old. They often drive miles out of their way to avoid driving by a fast-food restaurant. Even college textbooks use illustrations and sketches to present their ideas and make them comprehensible. Speakers use overhead projectors, drama, and concrete examples to drive points home.
In his 1996 book, *Changing Our Minds*, Miles Myers argues that, as a society, we are doing exactly what the title of his book suggests—changing our minds about literacy. Given technological changes in our society and advances in the field of research, reader response and authorship no longer constitute what it means to be literate. Citizens of the twenty-first century will need to know how to read, as well as how to create, multivocal and multimodal texts. By multivocal, Myers means texts that respect and reflect multiple voices. By multimodal, he means texts that use images—as well as sounds, music, movement, and language—to communicate their messages. People creating homepages for the Internet are already involved in this kind of work.

English/language arts teachers are once again under the gun. Now we are being asked to prepare children for a literate future we ourselves have only just begun to grasp. Yet this does not mean that what we have done in the past is wrong, only that it fails to measure up today. In order to prepare children who can read and create such texts, we need to conceptualize literacy and literacy education very
differently. I believe that seeing sign systems as central to learning is a first step in that process.

Taking what we know in one sign system and recasting it in terms of another is both natural and basic to literacy.

At six years of age, Alison had a telephone conversation with her friend Jennifer (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). They decided to meet after church on Sunday and play ballerina. Alison would get her leotard, slippers, and hair ribbons from her dresser, and Jennifer would bring her leotard, slippers, and hair ribbons with her in a bag. When Alison got off the phone, she went to her room and recorded her conversation. To do so, she used math, art, and language, as shown in Figure 2.

Alison forced us to rethink literacy. She showed us that literacy is much broader than language. When literacy is defined as the processes by which we, as humans, mediate the world for the purpose of learning, then this language story demonstrates that Alison is engaged in the stuff of “real” literacy. To mediate the world is to create sign systems—mathematics, art, music, dance, language—that stand between the world as it is and the world as we perceive it. These sign systems act as lenses that permit us to better understand ourselves and our world.

Alison’s final product is an elegant summarization of a complex literacy event. How many of us wish we could take paper and pencil and so easily portray an experience? No one taught Alison to do this. In the course of living in a multimodal world, she figured out how sign systems work in the service of her needs, wants, and desires.
Teachers often view transmediation—the use and movement among sign systems that Alison has done so readily here—as an instructional strategy rather than as part and parcel of every act of literacy inside and outside school. All cultures have devised multiple ways to mean. Further, the ability to make sense by moving between and among sign systems begins early and develops to sophisticated levels (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984).

Lessons such as this one are important for all of us to make firsthand. They teach us to trust children and the learning process. What goes wrong in many schools stems from a failure to understand literacy in all its complexity and thereby prevents our trusting learners and the learning process. Further, failing to understand literacy as a multimodal event results in restrictions and reduces options for the learner. By being able to move to alternate sign systems, children can “wiggle” the system to have it make more personal sense to them (Ericksen, 1985). By underestimating learners and the learning process, we often restrict learners by simplifying tasks—thereby decreasing opportunities to keep conversation dialogical and learning generative.

Just as reading involves the flexible use of all cue systems, so also literacy entails the flexible use of all sign systems in the creation of a successful text given a specific context.

In 1967, Kenneth Goodman did a very simple thing that revolutionized the teaching of reading. Instead of building a model of the reading process based on adult logic, he handed readers a book, asked them to read, and then tape-recorded their readings. Based on his observations and analysis of their reading, he devised a psycholinguistic model of the reading process (Goodman, 1967).

Goodman defined a miscue as the difference between an expected and an observed response during reading. Figure 3 shows a miscue. In this case the reader, John, has read a section of the story as “John opened the door. There were amazing . . . magnifying . . . magazines and boxes of clothes.”

The little c in the circle means that the reader corrected the miscue. What is significant about this miscue is that given the letters in magazine—M, A, G, A, Z, I, N, E—the reader came up with two words, within the period of about two seconds—amazing and magnifying—with many of the same letters. This feat, repeated again and again as people read, gives us pause. The mind is a truly marvelous thing. Although we have difficulty explaining the rapidity of the miscues, we know that letter-sound or graphophonemic information was involved in the production of the miscue.
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Notice that the reader adds -ing to the ending of each miscue. The helping verb were sets up the expectation that an -ing word will follow. Here’s proof that the reader is using syntax, the structure of language, to make predictions while reading. Proficient readers unconsciously ask themselves, “Does what I read sound like language to me?” If it doesn’t, they self-correct based on their intuitive sense of the grammatical rules that govern word order and the flow of language.

Another thing to notice is that the reader corrects his miscue. Obviously, were magnifying and doesn’t make sense. The reader goes back, resamples from the text and aligns what is being said with what is on the page. Proficient readers also continually ask themselves, “Does what I read make sense to me?” In this case, the linguistic system that triggered the rereading is called semantics, or meaning.

All three systems of language—graphophonemic, syntax, and semantics—work together when we read. The discovery that the subsystems of language work together in reading led to a revolution in reading instruction. Therefore, teachers today give children with whom they work entire texts to read rather than lists of words. When word lists are used, readers cannot rely on their knowledge of syntax and semantics to predict or self-correct. They are forced to depend on the graphophonemic system alone to acquire the information they need. Deprived of all the language cues typically available in the real world, students find that reading in school often becomes harder than it is in real life.

As a result of Kenneth Goodman’s work, we now understand that readers make use of three cuing systems as they read. The difference between proficient readers and less proficient readers lies in the flexibility displayed in the use of the three systems. Less proficient readers use all three systems on occasion but tend to overuse one system at the expense of the others.

Figure 3.
John: Miscue Sample

Jim opened the attic door. There were magazines and boxes of clothes.

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Now, I would like to do for literacy what Kenneth Goodman did for reading. I would like to argue that literacy necessitates the flexible use of sign systems to create a successful text given a specific context.

My absolute favorite example of a very effective, as well as multimodal, text is from Emily, age five. She writes, “Once I get into books, I can’t get out.” As shown in Figure 4, her drawing of herself in the book does more than replicate what she means, as without it, her text would not have nearly the impact it now does.

This text illustrates the point. It consists of language as well as figures and artifacts. To be literate, one must take what one knows and create, in light of the audience and the context in which one is working, a successful text. For example, were I talking to my mother about whole language, I would create a text very different from what I would create were I talking with teachers and even very different still were I talking to researchers. Each of these texts requires the orchestration of sign systems in very different ways. To be literate, I need to flexibly use a variety of sign systems.

Once children have researched topics of interest, they should be invited to make multiple presentations to different audiences,
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audiences that require the presentations to be orchestrated in different ways. Persons who can communicate knowledge in only one way are not as literate as futurists such as Miles Myers (1996) suggest they will have to be.

I cannot talk about sign systems except in relationship to education as inquiry.

Figure 5 shows how we are now envisioning curriculum. The core of curriculum is personal and social knowing. Curriculum begins in voice. Learners have the right, as well as the responsibility, to name and theorize their world. They also have the right and responsibility to interrogate their own naming, as well as the naming of others, but to say this is not to deny that curriculum begins with voice. It is the first step, yet must not stop there.

Subject areas now have a stranglehold on curriculum. Even “integrated curriculum” begins with the assumption that the subject areas are rightfully the center of the curriculum, and the only real problem is that we need to better integrate them. Instead of emphasizing the facts and skills of subject areas, we can focus on knowledge systems as perspectives that inquirers might take in exploring a topic of interest. Knowledge systems resemble syntax in language. Just as syntax provides an explanation of how language is structured, so, too, knowledge systems represent various perspectives or ways of structuring knowledge about the world. Each knowledge system has its own focusing questions. Historians are interested in how the past might inform the present and future. Ecologists are interested in how what we do affects the balance of nature. By rotating our questions through the knowledge systems, we gain new insights. In Figure 5, knowledge systems become research perspectives used by inquirers, rather than dead bodies of knowledge to be memorized and forgotten.

Language, art, music, drama, mathematics, and movement are sign systems. They represent ways humans have learned to mediate the world in an attempt to make and share meaning. Although the history of each of these sign systems is a discipline in itself, in their tool form they are the vehicles by which we code and encode our world. We can, for example, use any and all of these tools in talking about any subject we wish to talk about. They represent, in the truest sense, communication potential.

The wedge in Figure 5 represents inquiry. It cuts across all the other systems, thereby suggesting that an alternative way to organize curriculum is around the inquiry questions of learners. Knowledge systems and sign systems become perspectives and tools that inquirers flexibly use in collaboration with others to explore, share,
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and make meaning. Figure 5 suggests that the smallest unit of curriculum is the focused inquiry.

It is important to understand that the meanings that get made, shared, and explored are determined in part by the context of situations in which education is embedded. Education in our society means education for a democracy. When some sign systems or ways of knowing are valued over others, inquiry is affected.

We are not suggesting that inquiry is innocent. Because of the nature of our society and the ways of knowing it’s values, inquiry is also tied up in issues of access, equity, and justice. Not only are we challenged to understand the systems of meaning that operate in our society but we are challenged as well to interrogate the structures that keep those systems of meaning in place. Inquiry is, of course, the way to do this and hence why the sketch turns on itself by inviting learners to interrogate their old and new naming of the world.

Curriculum as inquiry is not something that happens from two o’clock to three o’clock in the afternoon in school. It is not a clever device for integrating the curriculum through themes. Nor is it a skill we can teach by doing a unit on the “scientific method” in science. Curriculum as inquiry is a philosophy, a way to view education holistically. Inquiry is education; education, inquiry.

To explore these ideas further, Jean Anne Clyde and I organized a graduate course between our two universities, the University
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of Kentucky and Indiana University. One of the course requirements was to create a series of curricular engagements that invited students to think in some sign system besides language. During one sharing time, Vicki Bumann and Darlene Horton shared an “inventor project” they had worked on in Vicki’s classroom. While inventing is neither a sign system nor a particularly hot “social issue,” they rationalized that inventing would support visual and mathematical thinking, as well as privilege some groups more than others. They began their inventing project by bringing in a guest inventor. His advice was that inventors identify recurring problems by thinking about their lives and checking with friends and family members for ideas. He suggested they assume other people had the same problems they did, focus on a problem that interested them, and then brainstorm with others about how they might solve it.

To support and help organize the children, Vicki and Darlene had prepared an Inventors Notebook in which the children could record information they collected and sketch possible inventions. Victor, a Chapter 1 student who participated in this experience, did everything the inventor suggested. He created a list of problems. He checked his list against what his teachers and parents thought were problems. He investigated to identify an inquiry topic.

Victor chose a very real, personal problem. He repeatedly lost his pencil, a situation that was driving him and his teachers “nuts” —to use his own take on the issue. Resolved to hold on to his pencil, Victor brainstormed ideas with members of his family and found a practical solution. Using two pieces of velcro, he wrapped one around the top of his pencil and stuck the other piece to his desk. At the time Vicki and Darlene were sharing the story, Victor had not lost his pencil in over a week!

Further, the teachers reported that several other children in the class decided they wanted Victor’s invention. He sold his invention to others for twenty-five cents. Predictably, because of his success, other children began to see him as a marketing expert and consulted him about which inventions were worth making.

Victor had not been a very popular child in the class and was not a proficient user of written language. He had been perceived as an outsider. Yet within a week, he had begun to gain a new identity for himself.

I like this story. It moves the study of sign systems beyond cute and intuitive to focus on how sign systems affect what curriculum in a democratic society might be.

Point of Departure #5

Sign systems can be used to enhance all the underlying processes of literacy.
As we have explored curriculum as inquiry, one of the major questions to have emerged concerns the role of sign systems within inquiry. In our early work, we fell into the trap of studying sign systems separately from inquiry in much the same way in which schools had previously asked students to read and write without having a purpose that made sense to the students. When isolated and explored on their own, the functionality of the systems is lost.

Within the context of inquiry, however, sign systems serve an important role in expanding, understanding, and more fully appreciating ideas. In this context they are not just frills, but tools for gaining new perspectives on the world.

Figure 6 represents a sketch of the inquiry process based on what we currently know about the role that language plays in learning. It is a working sketch which assumes that other sign systems play a similar role. This assumption is significant for two reasons. First, the use of sign systems is most often relegated to the presentation phase of learning—“You might want to include some charts, graphs, or photographs in your report”—rather than used to help learners gain a new perspective or see the world differently. Figure 6 is meant to suggest that art can be used to acquire voice,
observe the world more carefully, gain new perspectives, disrupt the typical way this topic has been thought about, identify qualities previously overlooked, make better presentations, reflect more thoughtfully, and contribute to a more well-rounded understanding and set of actions. Art, in this case, is being used metaphorically. Music, drama, mathematics, and movement can play similar functions.

The second assumption being made in this sketch is that sign systems operate “like language.” This is a fairly dangerous assumption. Other sign systems do things that language does not do, or else they would cease to exist. We are language educators, so we know more about language than we do other systems. We have to be careful, then, that we do not let what we know mask what is possible. We have a lot to learn about the role of sign systems in learning. To think we already know what it is we need to know is to arrest the learning process. Despite this, the best hypothesis we can posit is that other sign systems are at least as powerful as language.

I recently saw a Reggio Emilia tape in which a group of four- and five-year-olds create “An Amusement Park for the Birds” (Forman & Gandini, 1994). In this videotape, and in The Hundred Languages of Children (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993), preschoolers are constantly invited to use art to observe their world more closely. Given the details and lifelike portraits these five-year-olds produce by drawing, we need to interrogate the assumptions upon which we currently base educational decisions. Clearly, something is happening in programs that support multiple ways of knowing, such as Reggio Emilia, that has not been happening in our verbocentric curricula of the past.

Three aspects of the sketch in Figure 6 bear particular notice. First, the cycle calls attention to the underlying processes of inquiry. If this cycle is our framework for thinking about education, then curriculum should focus on and support the underlying processes of inquiry. Activities that are planned should do more than keep children busy. They need to lead somewhere. While they might highlight a particular process (help children build from the known, find their own inquiry questions, gain new perspectives, and so forth), they also need to fit a larger purpose.

Second, the cycle focuses on learning, or inquiry, which represents the larger purpose. Education, first and foremost, is about learning, about outgrowing ourselves through inquiry. Inquiry is not a technique, but rather, the very focus of education. In the past, we have taught problem solving as part of a unit in mathematics, and inquiry, as part of a unit in science or history, and then we were finished. As a curricular frame, Figure 6 puts inquiry at the center of what education is all about.
Third, Figure 6 is also meant as a sketch of professional education. Teaching itself is a matter of inquiry. Children serve as our curricular informants and collaborators, but there is no getting teaching right. As professionals we, too, are always learning and growing.

The whole of education is one cloth. Theory and practice go hand in hand. How we think about education affects what we do in the name of education. Figure 6 is a theoretical hypothesis. That we, and the teachers with whom we work, have a difficult time always living the theory, or even knowing how the theory might look in practice, is not a problem so much as an invitation. Theory, in a sense, is similar to imagination. We have to envision the future before we can ever hope to create it.

Literacy always involves an intuitive leap of faith, and it is in this leap that sign systems play a significant role.

I would like to return to the beginning. How we envision literacy makes a difference. If we see it as meaning-making and not meaning making plus inquiry, we see only part of what literacy can be. I argue that literacy always involves more. We take the personal and social meanings we have created through literacy, the familiar, to metaphorically explain the unfamiliar.

Therefore, more is needed than just reading and discussing the meaning of a book. The next step is to take the insights the book holds and rethink the world. This leap is inquiry. We have a new hypothesis, a new point of departure.

The leap from the familiar to the unfamiliar has been the subject of many conversations in language (see Bakhtin’s thinking in Holoquist, 1990). Often, this leap is referred to as the generativeness of language and literacy. We should perhaps think of it as why the process of literacy is always literacy plus more. Krashen (1985) might say, “literacy plus one.” It is always possible to generate a new perspective, to see the familiar in a new light that changes the possibilities we understand. All of a sudden we make new connections. We see more and think differently. We have insights we lacked before inquiring about our questions.

Sign systems, with their potential for providing multiple ways of knowing, need to occupy the center position of curriculum. We need sign systems to experience the full generative power of literacy, to put an edge on everybody’s learning. The authors of this book believe the study of sign systems holds significant promise for education. In this chapter, we have set the stage to move beyond what has been done in the past—a trivializing of the arts. We need not have another exercise in that. Therefore, now is the time, and
here is an invitation, to take sign systems seriously. We are fortunate in having theories that allow us to see glimmers of their potential. Take the opportunity with us, to use this theory as a lens, as we tell stories of how this theory looks in the classroom and how it allows us to better know learners challenged by our school systems.