

Introduction: Further Conversations: Jay Robinson, His Students, and the Study of Literacy

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Talking about Literacy

Democracy begins in conversation.

—John Dewey

One September morning just over a decade ago, the two of us, along with some of the authors in this volume, tentatively climbed the stairs of the School of Education Building at the University of Michigan, peering at room numbers as we searched for the classroom that would hold our introductory seminar for the doctoral program in English and Education. As we entered and found seats, we stared at the other students, all of whom, we would soon discover, were coming from situations much like our own: experienced teachers who had paused in that other life to pursue graduate studies, some interested in rhetoric and composition, some in English education, some in both; some committed to teaching at the college level, some planning to return to secondary or elementary schools. As we sat there, nervously wondering just what we had done to our lives by uprooting our spouses and significant others, leaving our secure jobs, and moving to an unknown city, wondering if we were up to the challenges of a competitive doctoral program, our professor, Jay Robinson, entered.

“Good morning,” he said, a slow smile spreading on his face. “Let’s start off by writing for a few minutes. Can you write about this: What do you think we mean by the word *literacy*?”

Silence. A few smiles and sighs of relief. This wouldn’t be so hard, we thought. We were, after all, experienced teachers of reading and writing; we knew what literacy was about. We had been in classrooms for

years and felt we could pretty easily distinguish between those kids who were literate and those who were not. And so, as we wrote our responses, freewrites focused on literacy as reading and writing and doing those skills well enough to survive, we recall feeling just a little smug. If this was the kind of question our professors would pose, how hard could graduate school be?

We began that day by talking about our own definitions, taken from our lives as teachers. And as the semester progressed, Jay opened that discussion to voices beyond the walls of our School of Education classroom, asking us to immerse ourselves and our experiences in the words of various theorists and teachers whose names we couldn't always pronounce and whose discussions of literacy stretched both our disciplinary narrowness and our individual understandings: Maxine Greene, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Paulo Freire, James Boyd White, John Dewey, and Shirley Brice Heath; and over the next few years, Lev Vygotsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, Richard Rorty, and Michel Foucault, to name but a few. But on that first day, after talking about our own definitions, Jay shared with us a take on literacy that struck chords immediately and has continued to resonate over the years. It began with a quote from James Boyd White, a professor of law, English, and classics at the University of Michigan:

I start with the idea that literacy is not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances but the ability to participate fully in a set of social and intellectual practices. It is not passive but active, not imitative but creative, for it includes participation in the activities it makes possible. (72)

This quote was startling to some of us, a stretch for our more limited definitions, and—most of all—a promise of what was to come in our new education. Our subsequent discussions of how that quote might apply to real classrooms with real students, informed by our sharing of experiences and readings of other authors, increasingly complicated any simple definition of literacy, especially for those of us who initially had felt so confident in our understandings. The emerging talk in which we engaged challenged us to reconsider what we thought we had known well—the realities of kids in classrooms. And as many of us who were not already Michigan public school teachers found ourselves invited by Jay to work with teachers in the schools over the next few years, to participate in classrooms filled with students whose experiences with literacy were much different from our own, we began to uncover even more questions: If a literate person was someone who could read and write well enough to survive, what about those who couldn't read or write well, but who were surviving (at least in economic terms) just fine?

And what about those who could read and write, but found those abilities meaningless in their struggle to survive? What did it really *mean* to read or write well? What if, for example, you could read and interpret your tax form but not Shakespeare? Or Shakespeare but not Toni Morrison? What did it mean if you could read those authors but *chose* not to? Did we mean by literacy E. D. Hirsch's notion of "cultural literacy," a version of literacy that insists on a shared cultural heritage? Or did we mean James Gee's idea of an "essay-text literacy," a form-based literacy created by and for schools? Or the ability to sign one's name? The ability to score 50 percent on the reading section of a state-administered proficiency test? Or the ability to listen to a political debate on the voucher system for public schools and write a letter to the editor to express our beliefs?

As that semester progressed and gave way to other courses, other conversations, other shared experiences in classrooms, the original question—what is this thing named literacy—remained central. We began to reconsider literacy at least in part in terms of our own continuing practices as teachers, recognizing it as a term that gets defined within particular historical moments, depending on various social circumstances. Literacy, we slowly realized, is not an unproblematic—"you're literate or you're not"—concept; literacy, as Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon remind us, "is and must always be ideologically situated . . . qualified by the context of assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and related conceptual material that accompanies its use by particular groups of people in particular sociohistorical circumstances" (15). "Literate," then, might be better understood as a representation of something, a naming of an individual or a group of individuals that reflects as much about the namer's beliefs and values as it does about the person being named. For many of us, this realization of *our* complicity in defining literacy, in the resultant naming of people as literate or illiterate, and in the very real consequences of that naming, became the impetus for thinking about what Knoblauch and Brannon call "the explosively simple question, 'Why do it this way?'" (11).

How we might do it a different way is in large part what we have learned from Jay Robinson since that day, reflective of what decades of students, undergraduate and graduate, have learned from him as well: important lessons about imagining new ways into conceiving literacy, new ways of recreating ourselves as teachers and learners. How we might do it a different way is what drives the professional and personal lives of many of Jay's former students—and is what drives the essays these former students have written for this book. More than merely a collection of writings composed to honor the work of our mentor, this volume

serves as a series of concrete enactments of how we might do it a different way, written by authors whose methodological assumptions and practices vary, whose contexts and circumstances vary, whose composing styles and genres of expression vary—but whose underlying concepts of what literacy might mean reflect striking similarities—and which may, in fact, offer some insights as to what a democratic vision of literacy looks like in practice.

A Life in Literacy

To study literacy and its uses is to commit oneself to the study of contexts and relations.

—Robinson, *Conversations on the Written Word*

Doing his graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley, preparing to be a medievalist, Jay first wrote about the importance of contexts in the understanding of texts in his dissertation on Chaucer, entitled *The Context of The Prioress's Tale*. But as his own contexts changed, Jay's studies began to change also. Teaching from 1961 to 1965 at Northwestern University, Jay began to make a transition from medieval studies to linguistics, both areas of interest that would have an impact on his later work in literacy studies. Coming to the University of Michigan in 1965, Jay solidified his transition to language scholar considerably, writing a number of articles about lexicography and phonetic interpretation and editing several volumes with a growing group of collaborators: *English Linguistics: An Introductory Reader* (with Harold Hungerford and James Sledd), *Varieties of Present-Day English* (with Richard Bailey), and the *Real World English* series (with Bernie Van't Hul).

While maintaining his presence in the world of medieval language studies as Executive Director of the Middle English Dictionary, and after chairing the English Department from 1974 to 1981, Jay came to co-direct the Ph.D. Program in English and Education in 1982, first with Steve Dunning and later with Anne Ruggles Gere. In 1984, Jay became the founder and Director of the Center for Educational Improvement through Collaboration, where many literacy scholars began to know him for his groundbreaking work in school-university collaborations and specifically for his redefinitions of literacy and the role of English departments in supporting that redefinition. During that time, Jay and Associate Director Patricia Lambert Stock worked extensively in public schools around the state of Michigan and developed a cadre of professors and graduate students from across the university to join them in collaboration with K-12 teachers and students, to think together about

issues of vital importance: assessment and its connection to curriculum development, student voices and their connection to schooling, narrative depictions of classrooms and teacher research, the political and ethical responsibilities of all those involved in literacy work.

The process of exploring the nature of literacy and rethinking the role of English departments within that process began to intensify for Jay through his collaborative work with public school teachers in Ann Arbor and Saginaw: “My thoughts in my own study, at Northwestern and Michigan, and my words in my own classroom, were shaped by the words of teachers,” he explains (1990, 4). At the same time, Jay began to write extensively about this work from his own perspective as university professor and visitor in these classrooms. As we in his classes began to read these essays, some written for journals in the field and some written as “conversation papers” for us, his doctoral students, we—like others around the country—found ourselves challenged to examine carefully our own commitments; such pieces as “Literacy in the Department of English” and “The Politics of Literacy” (co-authored with Patti Stock) forced us to confront some unpleasant realities of how institutional definitions of literacy impact the lived worlds of students and teachers. These essays and other of his writings on literacy were collected in the 1990 volume *Conversations on the Written Word: Essays on Language and Literacy*, a book which serves to exemplify the metaphor of conversation in its very structure; in addition to the pieces written by Jay, the book includes both essays co-authored with Patti Stock and essays composed by two of his students, Carol Winkelmann and Cathy Fleischer. Maxine Greene wrote the foreword for the book, introducing it in this way:

[The authors] allow us to experience the necessity of conversation because they engage in it themselves. Moreover, they make us feel intensely the existential importance—as well as the political importance—of liberating persons to find and use their own voices . . . It is not simply a question of right or equity. It is a question of the culture’s articulate life, as it is of the health of our public space. (x)

Jay’s own Introduction to *Conversations on the Written Word* lays out in broad outline some of the guiding principles for the collaborative ventures he and many others embarked upon for those years, principles that we contend have been central as well in the work that continues in this book. Jay explains:

In our work . . . we are trying to understand how literacy develops, when it does, in the adolescent years of schooling. We are trying to understand how members of a school class come to constitute themselves (if they do) into a social community of a particular kind: something Stanley Fish might call an interpretive community. And we

are trying to understand how social and sociointellectual interactions among members of the forming community both effect and affect individual development of those competencies and the enactment of them that we comprehend with the term “literacy.” We are trying to understand and describe not so much the peculiar culture of *the* classroom as the particular cultures of particular classrooms as these are shaped by personal and institutional histories and as they take shape in anticipation of future, perhaps possible worlds. (7)

Important to observe here is Jay’s attention to social and interpretive issues in learning, with particular focus on the ways communities are most productively formed in school settings. For Jay, community—with its focus on human beings with lived lives who converse together, learn from each other, and create understanding together—is essential before anything like literacy can be realized. Integrally tied to this is his resistance to totalizing descriptions of teaching and learning. As he says elsewhere, “I think we need to put aside efficient languages for ‘inefficient’ ones—well-ordered languages that serve like newly cleaned-up desks in neatly ordered studies” (1990, 320–21). The often too “well-ordered” languages of various comprehensive “Grand Narratives” of schooling he resists as limiting and closed, ignoring the differences between and among us. Talking about *the* classroom ignores what’s most important: individual kids and teachers who bring to specific classrooms a plethora of experiences too often left unexplored by both those who run schools and those who do research into them.

Since the publication of that book, Jay has remained an important voice in our field. He was one of the founders and is now on the Editorial Board of *On Common Ground*, a journal devoted to the work of university-school collaborations which brings together the voices of university scholars and classroom teacher-researchers to discuss and problematize their work. He also was one of the co-directors—with Patti Stock, Janet Swenson, and David Schaafsma—of the Write for Your Life Project, a national university-school project focusing on literacy, health, and social change.

Constitutive Literacy

So what is this literacy of which Jay speaks in his writing and through his work? What are its dimensions and parameters? What are the conditions under which it might best flourish? To fully understand Jay’s uses of the term literacy, one must begin with his notion of a constitutive rhetoric: a rhetoric in which meaning is necessarily *constituted* in the context of one’s interactions with others. Because reading, writing, speak-

ing, and listening are purposeful human actions which take place in specific and local circumstances, they “are made meaningful by the contexts in which they occur” (1990, 95). Whenever we use language, we are constituting meaning; in order to do that, we are always constituting other things as well: our own character, the character of others, the intentions we bring to the interaction, the community that surrounds us, the cultural mores which help define that community. Because we are “rhetorical animals” Jay tells us, “we have no other choice” (1990, 111). And because language interactions rely upon multiple parties, meaning becomes constituted within the contexts of the interactions of those who participate. Rhetoric is then a social construction, constituted through the institutional, historical, and individual constructions which occur when human beings share a language. Jay explains,

We use language to make meanings, of course, but we make meaning in language only when our intent in doing so is perceived by those whom we address, or is at least perceptible to them. To know my meanings, my reader or my listener must know what to do with them; and to know what to do with my meanings, my reader or my listener must know me—or at least that particular construction of me that functions and counts in the community I am trying to constitute with my audience through my saying of what I am saying. (1990, 102)

Such a constitutive rhetoric requires an active role on the part of its participants. It is not enough merely to recognize that language use is a social construction; Jay reminds us that understanding can be created most fully only if language users are wide awake both to the voices of others and to their own part in that construction. When we are aware of our own ability to choose how we constitute ourselves and how we constitute others, the nature of the conversations in which we participate becomes a kind of negotiation with others; in these circumstances, both our language and our understandings of one another change and grow.

The creation of meaning, then, relies upon multiple parties, the intentions of those parties, the selves that are created through and in the conversation, the community constraints upon such conversation, the cultural beliefs which determine the parameters of the conversation. Such a rhetoric is, in Jay’s terms “an art that helps us sustain human freedom” (1990, 111). Because we have choices about how we constitute ourselves, because we have some impact on the communities and cultures we constitute, Jay tells us, our role in a constitutive rhetoric relies on our artfulness as language users and teachers as we purposefully and vitally come to “understand what freedom is and how it is constituted through the ways we use language to talk with one another and to write for one another” (1990, 111).

The essential components of a constitutive rhetoric set the stage for a complex notion of literacy, a literacy for which the constructions of self, other, intent, community, and culture are essential. In Jay's understanding, these various constructions create contexts, contexts which rely upon a language user's present circumstances, of course, but that also reach both into her past—what Jay calls a sociohistorical process—as well as into her future. As he explains,

[Literacy is], in essence, sociocultural development, not merely cognitive development, a notion that seems to imply an isolated learner and not one who lives and learns as a social being in conversations with others. Learning, we are trying to say—and especially language learning—is a particular kind of sociohistorical process. Becoming literate, we think, crucially involves a glimpse of some future—a sight, however blurred, of what Nelson Goodman or Jerome Bruner might call a possible world; but it also involves, as crucially, some sense that one may find habitable space in that future as a self who can speak and act meaningfully. (1990, 7)

The kind of literacy of which Jay speaks here is social, cultural, and historical in nature. Because it is in part determined by such dynamic factors, it is also a literacy which envisions possible futures, the creation of selves speaking and acting meaningfully. What is crucial to the fostering of such a conception is the development of a “habitable space,” a common place, a safe place, where conversation can begin and where meanings might be negotiated to create communities in which literacy might flourish. In an essay co-authored with Patti Stock, Jay cautions us to remember that participation in the kinds of social and intellectual practices called for by James Boyd White cannot happen without opportunity—and opportunity depends upon these common spaces for all students. Such an emphasis necessarily demands a rethinking of terms like “marginal,” terms that push students to the edges of those common spaces with no hope of coming to center.

Jay asks us to think about these habitable spaces in at least three ways: first, as teachers in classrooms, in order to create more openings for kids to read, write, speak, and listen; second, as university professors, in order to rethink our connections to the literacy habits of the adults and prospective teachers we instruct; and third, as collaborators involved in university-school partnerships, in order to negotiate new ways of understanding issues of concern to all parties. In our striving to create habitable spaces for these others, we must first consider the purposes of our own roles, our own constructions: “What is the usefulness of our thoughts and theories?” Jay asks us. “What is the reach toward students in classrooms, toward students whose differences from one another and from us test the comprehensiveness and humanity of any thoughts we think,

any theories we manage to construct?” (1990, 5). His beliefs encourage us to begin our journey into understanding literacy by critically examining our own practices—For what reasons do we teach? What changes are we trying to effect? And for whom do we speak and write? Whom do we represent in our literate renderings of the students and classrooms we encounter?—and to do so with an awareness of our own roles in constituting the literacy that will arise from those encounters.

In a more recent article exploring the dimensions of habitable space as we work with others, Jay cautions us to recognize our own positionality:

In collaborative projects, participants always meet in a *borderland*, a space that has recently been named by scholars who are interested in examining new structures of interaction that emerge when members of separate cultures find themselves, for whatever reason, living together and working together. Trying to find one's way in a borderland, old maps help some, but new maps must be drawn. Walking on unfamiliar ground, people have to find new ways to talk together if they are not to get hopelessly lost. . . . (1996, 15)

In this reminder, we see that if we strive toward full collaboration, no one participant can occupy the center; all begin at the edges. As we work with each other to determine new ways to talk and act together, though, we might begin to meet on more common ground.

Vital to any notion of habitable space, of course, is the theme of human agency, another recurring image in Jay's writing. When teachers metaphorically (and at times not so metaphorically) reimagine the spaces of their classrooms in order to create opportunity, they necessarily open a world to student voices, inviting students to be heard through their reading, writing, and speaking, and “to become critical about their presences” in the worlds they see depicted (312). In the essay from which these words are taken, the now classic “Politics of Literacy,” Jay and Patti Stock analyze the writing of one student they name Charles Baldwin, a real student whose texts have become emblematic for many of us, in part because they are defined by an absence of self. Charles Baldwin's words, taken from a series of essays he composed for a teacher-designed assessment, depict a chilling world of violence in which he and his friends emerge as pawns, acted upon by outside forces, a world described matter-of-factly by Charles as he weaves stories of gangs and guns and explosive anger. Jay and Patti argue here that we can't talk about literacy for a student like Charles without speaking as well about his apparent lack of agency. “Given a world in which he lives as marginal,” they ask, “can he become literate?” They claim not, or at least not until he sees a glimpse of his own connection to, his own reason for, participation in another kind of world. In language reminiscent of White's

call for literacy's definition to be "not passive but active, not imitative but creative, for it includes participation in the activities it makes possible" (1990, 72), Jay and Patti explain what they mean:

In the world we inhabit with our students, one is not made literate or taught to become so; one chooses to become literate in circumstances where choice is made available. . . . No one becomes literate who does not see some opening, however small, toward active participation in a literate world that is part of the reality in which he or she lives. No one becomes literate who does not glimpse, and then come to feel, some possibility, no matter how tightly constrained, to shape the meanings that inevitably control one's life. (1990, 313)

To become literate, then, individuals must see themselves, even for a moment, as actors in/creators of their worlds. Basic to the development of this kind of literacy is

the empowerment of individuals to speak freely in such voices as they have about matters that concern them, matters of importance, so that conversation may be nourished. The most debilitating suggestion in our dominant metaphors for literacy is this one: that a language must be learned, a voice acquired, before conversation can begin. . . . (1990, 284)

This metaphor of conversation and the exercise of voice, human voices replete with agency, are central for both students and teachers to achieve understanding, to effect change. Neither is possible, though, unless the kind of language used by teachers and scholars radically changes to what Jay calls "a common language." Jay makes it clear that the creation of a common language is essential for the building of literate communities, necessary if we have any hope of creating a just society. As he says, "To find a common language—to found a common language—is to make it possible for writers to write and for readers to read and for all to learn together in community in order to achieve some larger common end, to act together in community to build a better world" (1990, 284). Jay cautions us about the difficulty of such an act, of the danger of coercive actions intended on the surface to create a common discourse but which instead recreate authoritarian positions: "To achieve community through a common language, we cannot impose our language on those others; to find a common language those others' languages will have to change, of course, but so will our own" (1990, 266).

For Jay, this metaphor of conversation, with its emphasis on common language, is a necessary component of what he and Patti define as critical pedagogy, an essential approach to the kind of literacy he imagines:

A critical pedagogy opens out only in a classroom where authorship can flourish, only in a space where students may learn that

words have some potential for changing worlds. A critical pedagogy needs a classroom in which starts might be made toward a multivoiced literacy in which all might speak, no matter what language, to reach toward responsive understanding of deeper meanings of language and of the word as they shape worlds we must inhabit. (1990, 285)

This notion of a critical pedagogy, arising as it does from a critical literacy, rejects the kind of coercive approaches and dualistic assumptions common to many of the current discussions of critical pedagogy and speaks for understandings more complex, more shaded, without closure. We are cognizant as we read some others' renditions of critical pedagogy, that our work with Jay has immersed us in a very different definition from the "confrontational pedagogy" Fishman and McCarthy, for example, critique. They speak of the created dichotomy between those teachers who see critical pedagogy in monolithic ways, unsatisfied with their classes unless powerful emotions erupt and who see other less confrontational teachers as being "non-progressive" (1990, 343–44). Similarly, Knoblauch and Brannon argue convincingly that critical pedagogies cannot, must not, become another form of "political correctness" in which a certain way of thinking is what becomes valued. Like Elizabeth Ellsworth, we realize that those approaches, well-intentioned as they are, just don't "feel empowering" for us or our students. For those of us steeped in a different understanding of critical pedagogy, one which always is based in conversation,

The literate communities we build . . . must substitute an authority gained through experience or through learning shared in conversation for an authoritarianism that can only be gained through the exercise of coercive power and be sustained through having the powerful speak and the powerless listen quietly (Robinson 1990, xx).

Authority and power issues are central to a conception of literacy focusing on multiple voices and perspectives. And what those of us who are the authors of the essays which follow have learned from Jay Robinson is that working with others to achieve literacy is inevitably tied to the political and ethical considerations of what it means to be literate, of what it means to be a teacher and researcher of literacy, of what it means to live in a society based on conversation rather than coercion—in our minds, to connect literacy to the kind of democracy envisioned by Dewey and others. For us, such a society begins in the microcosm of the classroom, but in a classroom that has invoked some radical changes in order to meet the challenge of creating a community that is so in more than name only. Creating such a literate classroom involves more than the seemingly inevitable writing and perfecting of a new canon, a new

curriculum. Jay tells us, “If classrooms are communities, curricula become much less important than pedagogies: the ways students and teachers communicate among themselves—the sets of relations they establish among themselves—are the crucial issues in language development” (1990, xx).

Further Conversations: Honoring Jay’s Work

When we learned that Jay would be retiring from the University of Michigan in 1996, we approached him with the possibility of putting together some sort of Festschrift in order to honor his work, intending initially to invite contributions from some well-known scholars who clearly respect his work and refer to him in their own: Shirley Brice Heath, Maxine Greene, Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, among others. But as we began thinking and talking about Jay and his influences, we realized that one of the most important embodiments of his work lies in its continuation among those he has taught. And thus our goal in this book has been twofold: first, to collect a series of essays that might have some impact on the field of literacy education, something that would be useful to us in our own teaching and research, but which would speak to English educators and teachers of literacy everywhere; and second, to show the widespread influence one man has had—on his own students, on their students, and on the people with whom/on whom they research. Over the summer of 1995 we met several times with Jay (who was encouraging, but characteristically resistant to essays *about* him and his work) to discuss some broad themes about which essays could be written, and to discuss which of his former and current students might speak to those themes because of the research and teaching they are undertaking. These themes were intended as merely a starting point for what we hoped would be rich conversation among authors, what we dreamed might be a sort of continuation of the many seminars these authors had taken over the years with Jay. And so, we asked the authors to start thinking, and we met at several conferences over the following year to talk about ideas, to share drafts, and to come together (at a retirement gathering for Jay in May 1996) for an intensive day of talk about the issues raised by the drafts of these essays. The original themes we proposed to the authors were these:

1. Critical Literacy

What are we promoting when we talk about “critical literacy”?

- What does critical literacy mean in practice?
- What are the contexts for a critical literacy?
- What are the politics of a critical literacy?

2. Representation

How do we talk to/with people about our understandings of critical literacy, i.e., What are our roles and responsibilities as scholars and researchers?

- What genres do we use? What languages do we use?
- How do we provide access for others?
- How do we encourage others to participate?

3. Social and Educational Change

What changes can we make in our worlds with our understandings of critical literacy? What kinds of reforms can we/should we promote and encourage?

- In what ways can we contribute to educational reform movements?
- In what ways might we feel those reforms may be limiting?
- Are there contradictions between the goals of a critical literacy and some notions of education reform?

Although we asked the authors to have these questions serve only as a very loose structure, you will see, we hope, the nuances and implicit considerations of them in the work of each. And you will see other themes as well, many of them reflective of Jay's work and of the multiple understandings we have gleaned through our conversations with him over the years. As Jay has told us, "We read our pasts to shape them into our futures" (1990, 2). As editors of this volume, we are not surprised then to see the ways Jay's voice and commitments are echoed in his students' essays; at the same time, we are struck by their own strong voices, by the work they are doing in diverse and sometimes unusual settings, and by the expansive contributions they are making to our understanding of what literacy and pedagogy might mean for the democratic society Jay has helped us to imagine.

Underlying all these essays is their central commitment to the creation of that kind of society, first introduced to us through the words of Dewey and made concrete for us through Jay's words and work. Jay's dream of a just and democratic world relies in part on the elements basic to his notion of literacy: the creation of habitable spaces for all citizens which in turn allows for the development of human agency; the establishment of participatory communities in which students can move their private understandings into public settings, connecting their pasts with their presents, anticipating their futures. In a newly written essay included in this volume, Jay speaks specifically of two components necessary to this democratic vision: a civic and a civil literacy. For Jay, the notion of a civic literacy is similar to the teachings of a number of pro-

gressive educators: an engaged and engaging literacy which involves students (and others) in practicing the acts of citizenship and languages of critique which help them to recognize and enact changes in their immediate and future lives. It's what Maxine Greene calls "wide-awakeness," what Hannah Arendt calls "enlarged thinking"—ways of viewing and acting upon the world which result from the kinds of critical pedagogies mentioned earlier. A civic literacy would have students

extend beyond a language of critique to languages of construction and of possibility, to ways of thinking and speaking that are adequate to the complexities of collective living and problem solving, to modes of listening and of responding that are sensitive to the multiple voices and minds of those who have stakes in civic issues and those who are affected by the solutions that are proposed for difficult problems. ("Literacy and Lived Lives")

But Jay talks as well in that essay of a second kind of literacy necessary for a truly democratic society to work: a civil literacy, a literacy that he says

has to do with the character of the relations we seek to establish with our words and in our engagements with other members of our literate communities. . . . Its essence is a willingness to listen—especially to others whose voices often go unattended; its exercise is the courtesy and the courage to listen responsively. . . .

A civil literacy relies on politeness, of course, but is never merely that. Linked to a civic literacy, it asks us to be sensitive to the voices that develop when we ask students to bring their experiences and pasts into the school environment, but it asks us also to be seriously responsive, to engage students in true conversations in order to help those voices grow stronger.

For Jay, for us, and for the authors of these essays, the literacy we envision is at once civic and civil in nature—intended to help individuals read, write, speak, and listen thoughtfully, courteously, and yet critically about their own lives and the lives of their communities in order to help effect the kind of change that is essential to achieve these democratic ideals. And like a true democracy, the authors included here speak to these issues not in a singular voice, but ever cognizant of their own circumstances and commitments.

All of the essays, of course, focus on problematizing any easy definition of literacy, a return to that question of our first day with Jay, a concern that obviously continues to haunt all of these authors. There is no easy agreement, though, among these authors as to the parameters or confines of literacy—or even any agreed-upon definition of the term. But we do recognize certain recurring themes reflective of the connec-

tion between literacy and democracy. The first is that there are passionate human concerns addressed in these writings—from Carol Winkelmann’s work in a women’s shelter to Roberta Herter’s Detroit night school class to Laura Roop’s poetry writing with students and teachers to help them make sense of their lives—concerns which focus on real people in real circumstances. We see such concerns at times raise questions for the authors about their preformed definitions of literacy and about the political stances toward particular methods of literacy instruction that often arise from those definitions. But what we notice even more is the level of compassion expressed here—about the people and contexts in which these authors have worked, indicative of the strength of commitment these authors bring to their circumstances.

We are struck as well by the ways in which these passions are tempered with a kind of humility, an openness to other perspectives, that is not always characteristic of academic essays. As Jay taught us, through his words and actions, these essays are respectful: of students, of teachers, of theory, of new understandings, enactments of what Jay calls “literacy as listening.” There is what we will call a useful tentativeness in most of these essays, reflective of the tensions these authors sometimes feel both within their own understandings and also in the new kinds of understanding that have emerged for them through their work with others. Reminiscent of Gadamer’s call for a fusion of horizons, only as these authors have immersed themselves in the horizons of others, critically looking together with those others to become enough a part of another’s world, have they begun to achieve some kind of understanding.

Such awareness leads these authors toward what we might call a pedagogy of ethics—a stance toward their work which seems to us present explicitly or implicitly in every essay. The writers here are people who constantly question not only *what* they do in these dual roles of teacher and researcher, not only *why* they do it, but also *how* they do it: the ethics and politics of the choices we teachers make every day in curriculum and method; the ways we represent others in the research process; the roles and responsibilities we take on when, as researchers, we talk about ourselves and others. As Todd DeStigter tells us in his essay in this volume, “[T]he question asked by, say, an ethnographer desiring to be useful becomes not so much ‘What can I do to/for others?’ but ‘What is the nature of my relationship with this person? How can/should we *be together?*’” In the authors’ efforts to determine how to be together with the teachers and students with whom they have worked, they have placed a strong emphasis on the voices of students and teachers. We admire how these voices are never taken for granted nor treated in any kind of simplistic fashion. And in terms of Jay’s own call for “inefficient” in-

stead of “well-ordered” languages to describe various classrooms, most of these authors engage in the “messy” language of narrative, choosing to tell complex stories of their own and others’ practices, replete with occasional contradictions, constant questioning, and self-awareness about their roles as the shapers of the texts you read.

Most of these authors, then, seem to demand for themselves a critical self-reflection, but not in the way popularly dismissed these days as “navel-gazing.” Instead, the authors see self-reflection as inevitably tied to Freire’s notion of *praxis*: “the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it” (66). Freire tells us there can be no action without reflection; as these authors write about the worlds in which they work, they conscientiously and carefully research their own presence in those worlds, recognizing—and studying—the inevitable effect of their presence, both for themselves and others. As Tom Philion explains in the introduction to his piece, “I hope to teach myself through my writing: that is, by describing and reflecting. . . . I hope to obtain a better understanding of who I have been and who I may yet be as a literacy educator.” Consistent, critical reflection upon what we do keeps us honest, we believe. Recognizing our own commitments and desires; questioning our own positions of power and authority; understanding our own multiple purposes and audiences all serve to strengthen our work. Recognizing our sometimes implicit roles as change agents demands our sincere efforts to be cognizant of what change might mean for ourselves and for those with whom we are working—and forces us to be much more careful about our actions in those settings and our representations of those settings in other worlds.

Democracy and Literacy: Jay’s Students’ Essays

As Jay’s questions have become our own, they have been reshaped and reconfigured within our specific contexts. All of the authors here have taken their own driving questions about literacy and followed them into a variety of settings and contexts. Essays run the gamut in style and methodology: from the carefully footnoted and documented anthropological approach typical of ethnolinguistics to the turn-by-turn discussion of conversation practiced by discourse analysts to the intertwined personal stories of teachers and students common to teacher researchers. And much like the conversation in a typical “Jay seminar”—which attracted linguists, rhetoricians, teacher-researchers, and even one memorable term, a musicologist—the variety of the work represented here shows the wonderful hybrid of approaches we have increasingly come

to see as “normal” for composition studies and which grace all of our learning in vital ways.

For the first essay in the collection, a piece entitled “Literacy and Lived Lives: Reflections of the Responsibilities of Teachers,” we asked Jay Robinson to continue his conversation with us one more time by writing of his vision for the future of literacy education. For those of you less familiar with Jay’s previous work, this piece will serve as a brief introduction, as he reflects on some of the contexts in which he has participated over the past decades. He speaks specifically in this writing to the responsibilities we teachers must take on when we engage with students whose real-life circumstances are often challenging (for them and for us). Admonishing us to be reflective as we attend to the lives of these students, Jay reminds us of the importance of listening, of caring, of practicing civil literacy if we have any hopes of helping young people negotiate the worlds in which they (and we) live.

The next two essays, Todd DeStigter’s “Good Deeds: An Ethnographer’s Reflections on Usefulness” and Tom Phillion’s “Three Codifications of Critical Literacy” follow Jay’s admonition, as each author studies in some depth his approach to and motivation for his own teaching and research—each one problematizing what he means when he talks about such issues in critical ways. Todd’s essay, based on three years of ethnographic research among Latino students at a predominantly Anglo rural high school, explores the delicate epistemological and ethical issues that arise when privileged researchers—and Todd includes himself—presume to represent the experiences of “the other” in their own terms, which are inevitably subject to particular cultural, perhaps even colonial, biases. Specifically, he discusses the ways in which his evolving relationships with individual students who served as his “subjects” led to his reformulating his understandings of how he might be “useful” to these students on *their* terms rather than his own.

Tom’s piece traces his own development as a critical pedagogue over a number of years, first as a graduate student and course assistant at the University of Michigan, later as a collaborative teacher in an urban elementary school, and finally in his present position as an English education professor at an urban university. Throughout the piece, Tom uses Freirian codifications as ways to represent his experiences; within his analysis of each codification, he rejects any simple explanations for the term *critical literacy*, instead situating his developing definitions within the local circumstances of his own teaching.

The next three essays continue this theme of reflection, situating that reflection in part in their authors’ social and political commitments. Researching and writing from the varied methodological perspectives

which characterize this book, these authors attempt to understand what others, given habitable spaces and opportunities, can tell us about their own literacy. In her essay, "Not a Luxury: Poetry and a Pedagogy of Possibility," poet and educator Laura Roop, parallels her uses of poetry writing and reading in her personal life, in professional development opportunities with practicing teachers, and in coaching invitations to students in classrooms. Laura argues that poetry is not a luxury but an essential component of being wide awake, as she urges educators to heed the words of poet Audre Lorde: "(Poetry) forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action." In this piece, Laura analyzes what role poetry might take in lives: in her own, in the lives of her students, in the lives of two exemplary educators, Sharon Galley and Laura Schiller, with whom she has collaborated.

In "Unsheltered Lives: Battered Women Talk about School," linguist, composition professor, and community activist Carol Winkelmann also explores the power of writing to effect personal and social change. In her essay, Carol examines the memories of schooling which the women she has encountered in her ethnographic research at a local shelter shared when given the opportunity to talk and write. For shelter women, according to Carol, "school" concerns relationship, not location. They recall institutional relationships as marked by power struggles and class/race/gender inequities; they believe violence begins in the schools. Carol's conclusion is that girls survive school because they transform and transcend its institutional meanings, in part, by seeking out dialogic mentor relationships with sister-kin in families, communities, and sometimes school.

In "Imagining Neighborhoods: Social Worlds of Urban Adolescents," English educator Colleen Fairbanks looks at work she did with the Saginaw Public Schools while working with Jay for the Center for Educational Improvement through Collaboration. Colleen calls for an interactive theory of learning that might better serve a culturally diverse society, one that, as Anne Haas Dyson suggests, talks "less of 'empowering' and more of recognizing the power that exists in a . . . child." Fairbanks looks at how a group of ethnically homogeneous students talk and write about various moral dilemmas to their white teachers; she then analyzes how the students use both the languages of school and community to formulate their own evolving concepts of self.

Colleen looks at these issues from the perspective of a university professor committed to working sensitively with public school teachers and

students. In “Conflicting Interests: Critical Theory Inside Out,” Roberta Herter examines issues of collaboration and political commitment from her perspective as a high school English teacher engaging in such a collaborative project, a night school collaboration between a University of Michigan English professor’s Theater and Social Change students and her own Detroit Henry Ford High School students. The collaborative work ostensibly provides habitable space and opportunity for both sets of students involved, but questions arose for Roberta about the success of the project: questions about the portability of Freire, the self-perpetuating nature of theory, perhaps especially “critical” theory, and the social change aspects of service learning courses from an inside-the-school perspective.

The next two essays look closely at their authors’ own college classrooms, addressing the role English departments and English professors play in defining and practicing literacy in a democratic society. Sylvia Robins’s “Writing Back: The Research Writing of a Freshman College Composition Student” examines the evolution of a text of one of the community college students she teaches. The student essay, one defending the practice of deer hunting, is one in which the student struggles with academic discourse. This struggle, which Sylvia admits is not unlike her own struggle as a busy, classroom-focused community college professor to write within the scholarly discourse tradition, is about the importance of finding one’s own “voice” within an often foreign discourse community. Reminiscent of the ways in which Jay and his colleagues sympathetically and critically engage student voices in *Conversations on the Written Word*, Sylvia gives us a model of critical, reflective teaching upon which to ponder as she engages with her student in his struggle to construct an academic essay.

“Time, Talk, and the Interpretation of Texts in a Teacher Education Seminar” by John Lofty touches upon another of Jay’s lifelong concerns: that of the connection between oracy and literacy. In his essay, John explores the discourse of small groups, which have become a common learning format in composition, literature, and education classes at every level. If the full potential of learning through talk is to be achieved, John argues, teachers will need finely grained descriptions not only of the different kinds of talk that occur, but also an understanding of how one kind of talk prompts and relates to another. In a seminar discussing approaches to teaching, Lofty observes how one group of teacher education students achieves topic continuity, maintains conversational coherence, and negotiates the purposes of the task to meet personal and academic needs. Such observations provide a basis for Lofty to raise

issues and questions for how teachers might explore the oral, literate, and temporal dimensions of conversations that promote a wide range of learnings.

If Mikhail Bakhtin is correct, and “any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of utterances,” (Robinson 1990, xx) then Jay, and the voices of the vast numbers of students and teachers who have worked with Jay over the years, are speaking through us, and through these essays and stories. As we read through them, we hear Jay’s voice in the background of all of them, telling us, “In matters of teaching, in matters of learning—and especially in matters of the teaching and learning of language—all choices are inevitably contingent, all findings inevitably tentative. If we admit that, conversation becomes possible, and as Dewey said, ‘democracy begins in conversation.’” (1990, 3). We invite you to enter the conversation as well as you read these essays and think about the stories their authors tell.

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