There is no question that in the contemporary educational climate, all disciplines are being required to focus more explicitly on the teaching of reading. Across the P–16 English/ELA spectrum we are asked to identify what it means to read powerfully in disciplinary specific ways. Implicit in this definition is an emergent understanding of what it means to teach in ways that allow our students to become powerful readers. While explicit attention to reading is a staple of elementary language arts instruction, powerful reading strategies can and should be taught across the middle, secondary, and postsecondary levels as well. But what does it mean to teach students to read powerfully?

In my years of teaching from middle school to graduate-level education, I have generally begun my courses by asking students to reflect upon what it means to read powerfully at different levels of schooling. Together we articulate a theory of reading for the course that addresses decoding, basic comprehension, interpretation, synthesis, analysis, critique, and counter-textual production. I often share Robert Scholes’s (1985) three-part reading of a text that includes reading upon the text (background, context, knowledge of the author), reading within the text (understanding the internal logic of the text), and reading against the text (critique levied by experience, other texts, or deconstruction). As a class we decide what powerful reading is going to mean for us as a group. We always discuss the possibility that powerful reading is not something intended only for the upper reaches of the educational stratosphere. Early elementary students and adolescents in middle and high school have the capability to engage in all of these aspects of powerful reading.

So much is made of reading in our discipline of English, and it should be. Without having the ability to read, one is alienated from full access to citizenship and professional membership in our society. However, I want to make a distinction between mere decoding and reading. Of course, reading as an action subsumes all that decoding and comprehension imply, but it involves much more that is about questioning a text and its author.

One of the things that I have become convinced of is that reading is something that needs to be re-taught at every level of education. Just because kids have learned basic decoding and comprehension skills in elementary school does not mean that we don’t have to re-teach reading at the middle and high school levels. We can draw upon those initial skills, but reading takes on new and bold dimensions as adolescents confront texts from multiple genres and socio-historical locations.

We want students to engage texts, to interrogate texts, to demand meaning from texts; to talk back to texts; to juxtapose texts with their lived experiences, with their encounters with other texts, and with their rapidly expanding ideas about people and the world.

And we want students to be able to locate texts and their authors historically and, when possible, ideologically as well. Ideally we want our students to understand the power of the word to shape meaning and belief and we want them to understand how society uses language to promote certain ideas and values that sometimes cause pain and anguish to certain members of the human family.

Take, for instance, occurrences such as Apartheid and the Holocaust, that have been perpetuated by highly “literate” societies in the modern era. As human beings develop the capacity to split atoms and to have computers talk to one another, as we create factories and assembly lines that allow for the mass production of machines that redefine life and movement, we also often promote systematic hatred and xenophobia, religious intolerance, and sexism, that work together to maintain massive power imbalances in our world.

One of the ways that these systems maintain their legitimacy is that they are encoded in the language we speak. The legitimacy of race or the existence of the “black-white”
paradigm are largely unquestioned in our society because we accept terms such as race, black, and white as representing reality, when in actuality what these terms do is create the reality they in turn re-present.

Would brown and beige be equally powerful racial signifiers? If one asked a three-year-old who had just learned her colors and who had no concept of race, she might identify people as representing various shades of brown. Only after being conditioned by language will she learn to see people in black and white, which is useful only if one wants to categorize people as opposites or establish an immutable hierarchy of individuals. This young child will also learn terms like policeman, fireman, and Superman!

In this type of environment, simply teaching our students to be able to decode texts is not enough. Freire and Macedo (1987) offer that students, in order to be fully functioning as citizens and intellectuals, must be able to read the world and the messages it sends to them, for their own protection, and so that they may be able to contribute toward making the world the kind of place that they want it to be.

Reading the world involves reading all sorts of texts: written, visual, and digital. For it is in these texts and the language that supports them that many negative and harmful ideals are transmitted. Take for example, how women or people of color are portrayed in the stereotypical media. A big part of being able to read the world is having the ability to understand the ways that the media and other major institutions shape reality in order to promote value systems that are ultimately detrimental to this generation of youth. This critical reading, in this case critical media literacy, is important for groups such as women and people of color for obvious reasons, but it is important to everyone to learn that the information presented to us is often biased and needs to be understood as such if we are to process it meaningfully.

We see many of the same challenges in the literatures that we assign to our students. As Nobel Laureate author Toni Morrison (1993) has said, national literatures reflect what is on the national mind. While reading these literatures opens up our students to brilliant and poetic reflections upon the human condition, these works also reflect many of the stereotypes and discriminatory values that are present in the society at the time the author was writing. While many authors do take on the role of critiquing society and providing social commentary, any reading of literature has to be one that reads inside of texts to understand how they may be flawed or reflective of the flawed perceptions and values of their times. This doesn’t mean that we throw these works out; it simply means that we can engage in critical dialogue about these works as we enjoy the aesthetic dimensions and the wonderful stories they create.

As I think of many of the staples of the American literary canon—works such as The Scarlet Letter, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Great Gatsby, To Kill a Mockingbird, and The Old Man and the Sea, among many others—I see myriad opportunities for English teachers to involve our current students in powerful readings of the word and the world through the teaching of classic literature. Of course there is also a powerful argument to be made for the expansion of young adult texts, multicultural texts, and multimodal texts that offer more contemporary instantiations of the wonderfully diverse world of ideas we have at our disposal.

References

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