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REVIEW: JOHN WILLINSKY'S *THE NEW LITERACY: REDEFINING READING AND WRITING IN THE SCHOOLS*

by

Susan Harman

Whole language has come of age. The Whole Language Umbrella, the loose national organization of TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) groups, held its fourth annual national conference this past summer. Heinemann alone publishes nearly 300 professional books on whole language; most of the elementary school suppliers advertise "whole-language basals" and "writing process workbooks"; and one multiple-choice, machine-scored standardized reading test claims to be an "Authentic Whole Language Performance Test of Comprehension." This is the time in a movement's history when those associated with it can begin to reflect on and critique it. John Willinsky, in *The New Literacy*, has become one of the first whole language practitioners to take this analytic step.*

He uses "New Literacy" to provide a broader and integrative name for several strands of theory and practice, including "Whole Language, Language for Learning and Writing Across the Curriculum, Socio-Psycholinguistics, Schema Theory, Reader-Response Theory, the Writing Process Movement, and the National Writing Project." He defines the New Literacy as "those strategies in the teaching of reading and writing which attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the student."

Despite this political definition, Willinsky sees most strands which form the New Literacy as apolitical, and frequently jibes at the naiveté of whole language proponents. He supplies a political edge by including in *New Literacy* the advocates of Critical Pedagogy, the Freireans, and "the Parisians": Derrida (the deconstructionist), Foucault (the poststructuralist), and Irigaray and Kristeva. It is certainly true that many teachers who are committed to the practice of whole language or writing process don't understand the political assumptions and implications of their work, but many—among them Dick Allington, Carole Edelsky, Brenda Engel, Ken Goodman, Yetta Goodman, Peter Johnston, Monty Neill, Richard Owen, Patrick Shannon—are deeply committed to political change and whole language's role in it.

In the first part of the book Willinsky describes what he means by the New Literacy as it is used to teach reading, writing, and literature. Perhaps the moving accounts by the other New Literacy authors, like Lucy Calkins, of children and teachers in whole language classrooms have spoiled me. But Willinsky's examples neither delighted nor moved me.

An exception was a lovely project of his own in which he "staunchly directed the students through 3,000 years of publishing ... in a half-dozen historical and contemporary techniques." He used as models Homer's recitation, Greek drama, illuminated manuscripts, moveable type, broadsides, and the *Paris Review*. This is a nice idea.

*Important others are Luke, A., & Baker, C. (Eds.). (1989). *Towards a critical sociology of reading pedagogy: Papers of the XII World Congress on Reading*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; and Edelsky, C., Altwerger, B., & Flores, B. (1991). *Whole language: What's the difference?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Willinsky thinks New Literacy practitioners don't know enough history, so he usefully traces its roots. A Canadian, he is in a good position to teach us parochial Yanks about the British contributions to the movement, and I learned a lot. He also does an excellent job of locating the New Literacy in the historical context of both Populism and Romanticism. He points out the enormous importance of the invention of the printing press for democratizing knowledge (indeed, it made it possible for Luther to invent Protestantism, where each person can read God's word without church intervention). He does not mention the modern equivalents which put book production in the hands of everyone: copying machines, personal computers, and desktop publishing.

He traces several New Literacy convictions to Romanticism: that art creates—not mirrors—the world; “questioning authority”; the metaphor of mind as a garden, not a machine; the power of imagination; the use of “common language”; and “undoing of the book” (an example of his odd use of language). This historical tour supports the current understanding of reading as a constructive, rather than a reproductive, act.

He also connects the New Literacy to other liberation movements of the past 30 years, through their common emphasis on the competence of denigrated groups: blacks, women, the poor, illiterates, and young children.

Willinsky chastises whole language for being ignorant of its historical contexts, but he himself ignores the historical importance of the present restructuring movement. School-based management and shared decision-making offer both the opportunity and the obligation for us to make our theory and practice accessible to teachers, parents, administrators, politicians, the press, and the public. Instead, this book is written for academics.

And not written well, at that. Willinsky uses language idiosyncratically, which makes the text often difficult and sometimes incoherent. The book is also poorly edited, with distracting errors (for example, “sometimes in occuppies,” “she accentuating,” “we now ready,” “work will have to be done to development a literacy,” “what we should do,” “Elasser” for Elsasser, “Guy” for Gay Sue, “Schor” for Shor, and “*Rethinking Education*” for *Rethinking Schools*).

Willinsky does not discuss the new news of our very recent understanding of how children learn to talk and to write. There is now universal agreement that young children acquire language by inventing the rules of grammar and usage, that they all do this in a systematic and predictable order, that they do it from the “top” down—beginning with intention and then discovering syntax and vocabulary, that they do it in a “sociable” context, and that the people who occupy this context teach them by responding to the meaning and not to the form of their utterances. We have also learned that children acquire written language the same way, moving consistently through the stages from scribbling through invented spelling to standard forms.

This research has transformed our perception of infants and young children from empty vessels learning bits and pieces of the world by imitation, to meaning-makers, constructing systematic, logical, holistic, and intelligent theories about the world. These findings have also profoundly changed the way we teach: from beginning at the “bottom” level of the separate letters and sounds of language, to starting at the “top” level of meaning and giving children the mechanics as they need them. Frank Smith adapted the British adage, “Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves” to describe this psycholinguistic approach. His version is, “Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.” Willinsky terms it going from intentions to techniques, and adds one of his many ambivalent taglines, “with its top breezily down.” (These

frequent pokes at the New Literacy left me wondering if he likes it or not.)

Given his evident appreciation of the difference between top-down and bottom-up approaches, it is surprising that he misidentifies (like almost everyone else) Jeanne Chall's Great Debate as between "decoding-emphasis and meaning-emphasis." Instead, her research compared teaching parts of words (phonics) with teaching whole words (look-say), both of which are bottom-up methods and neither of which begins where children do—with whole stories and their meaning. The studies comparing the effectiveness of one cueing system over another (e.g., graphophonic vs. semantic) are just beginning.*

I particularly like Willinsky's introduction into the literacy conversation of the word "sociable"; it implies more than just "social" or its hyphenates (social-linguistic, psycho-social). It adds an affective implication of coziness and pleasure which ought to accompany reading and writing. Children writing collaboratively aren't just a work detail; they are, in fact, often a work party.

He is bothered by whole language teachers' enthusiastic acceptance of every piece of writing children produce, regardless of quality or content. He joins a thoughtful group of critics (notably, Pam Gilbert, Allan Luke, and Valerie Walkerdine) who are concerned about the consequences of encouraging children's personal "voices" while ignoring their reproduction of society's sexism, racism, and violence. When I hear these critics, they often remind me of the old comment, "He's so open-minded his brains are falling out." Willinsky hears them as raising an important question: What to do "if the self finally expressed in student writing is not the one we were hoping to see emerge?"

The uncritical acclaim of every child as "a writer"—regardless of the quality or content of the writing—is not a necessary part of the New Literacy; I know of a kindergarten class who had several serious discussion about the racial and social homogeneity in the Berenstain Bears books.

In the last chapter, called "Critical Futures," Willinsky enjoins the New Literacy to (a) "integrate reading, writing, and literature" (to which most of us would add the other subjects as well); (b) "elaborate its research program," by which he means make comparisons to traditional approaches, which many whole language researchers think of as irrelevant; and (c) "inquire into the relationship between literacy and subjectivity," which he calls "the writing out of oneself." If I understand him, he is raising here the important problem of how there can be political critique if there is not shared interpretation, if a text can mean whatever anyone says it means. We New Literacy folk are just beginning to talk about this together and don't have answers yet. Willinsky frames this problem another way, asking, "What is to come of all this reading and writing?" Indeed.

*The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has relevant and valuable data on 320 children from the pilot of its 1992 reading test, but has not released it.