Thinking and Doing Literature:

An 8-Year Study

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I am writing this as the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning concludes its final year of work. I present this brief overview of the studies we've done during the past 8 years as a way to share what I have learned. In 1987, when the Center was first funded, I felt I needed to learn more about the ways people think when they read literature, and ways in which instruction could support those kinds of thinking. I hoped my work would contribute to a reader-based theory of literature education -- one that, in an essential way, supports students' development as literary thinkers and as intelligent and thoughtful human beings.

I approached my research from both a constructivist and social/communicative tradition. I believed then, as now, that the reading and shaping of literature is both an intellectual and social process and that literature classrooms are particularly good environments not only for the learning of literary works (however we might wish to define them), but also for the development of literate thinking, intelligent reasoning, and human sensitivity. My studies built on two themes: 1) envisionment-building ([1987a](#)), where comprehension is seen as the development of "meanings-in-motion," meanings that contain questions as well as already-formed ideas that change over time, and 2) a sociocognitive view of learning and instruction ([1987b](#), [1991](#)), which contends that ways of thinking develop in accordance with the social traditions in which they are embedded, and that substantive changes in the ways students think and reason in classes require a major restructuring of educational beliefs as well as of instructional interactions. For changes in students' reasoning to occur, the essential culture of the classroom needs to change.

So, in 1987, I began two related strands of research: to describe the processes involved in literary understanding, as well as to describe the instructional "cultures," activities, and interactions that support it. Across both strands, over time, some 10 field researchers and I collaborated with about 50 teachers (15 very intensively) and their students. The participating classes included pre-kindergartners through adults, with a major emphasis on the middle and high school grades. The schools were in inner city and suburban communities and included students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds Almost all of the teachers collaborated with us from two through eight years. Together, we explored, reflected, and experimented with ways to bring classrooms alive with conversation and thinking, with and

about literature. Now, I offer a general overview of the studies, what I think we've learned, and where this has led.

THE PROCESSES OF LITERARY ENVISIONMENT-BUILDING

From the outset, we wanted to gain a fuller understanding of what happens when people "read" literature. Other academic disciplines (such as math and science) have broad ways to talk about reasoning that do not necessarily coincide with the reasoning people engage in when they create "poems" in [Rosenblatt's](#) (1978) transactional sense. If this is the case, our job was to search for ways to locate and describe acts of "literary" understanding. This part of our research was conducted across five separate studies:

1. How do people "make sense" when they engage in a literary experience and how do these ways of reasoning differ when the purpose is primarily discursive?

2. How do these ways of "making sense" play themselves out in everyday classroom activities (reading, writing, discussing) as well as when students engage in think-alouds?

3. How do envisionments develop during the literary experience and what knowledge sources do students call upon to gain ideas?

4. What is the role of literary understanding in other course work?

5. How do "better" versus ""poorer" readers (as judged by their teachers) engage in literary experience?

This group of studies took place across about a four year period.

During the first couple of years, after analyzing scores of transcripts of adults and students reading and discussing literature, drawn from classrooms in action as well as from interviews and think-alouds, we were able to discern two different orientations that characterize general mindsets individuals use to orchestrate and guide the meanings they develop: we called them literary and discursive orientations. And these are related to purpose. People take somewhat different overall orientations in order to build different kinds of envisionments, based on whether their primary purpose is to engage in a literary experience (literary orientation) or to gain information and understand ideas (discursive orientation). In activities involving language and thought, people move in and out of literary and discursive orientations all the time (the two together enrich the meanings we consider). However, based on our purpose for the activity, one orientation plays lead in how we orchestrate our thinking, helping us shape the ideas we are moving toward.

We have found it helpful to think of the literary orientation as "exploring horizons of possibilities," because from this orientation, people explore emotions, relationships, motives, and reactions, calling on all we know about what it is to be human in order to make sense. Here, we consider feelings, intentions, and implications in our quest for the "real" story -- the

"hidden" story we must uncover. We often create scenarios as a way to explore. A literary orientation is essentially one of exploration, where uncertainty and openness is a normal part of the thinking, and new understandings provoke other possibilities. This is different in kind from the discursive orientation through which we want to gain or share ideas or information -- what we have come to call "maintaining a point of reference." In this case, from early on, we focus on the topic or point and try to relate our growing ideas and questions to it. Although the details of our envisionments continue to change when maintaining a point of reference, it takes a good deal of incongruence before we rethink our sense of that topic or point. Thus, the two orientations are related to both the kinds of ideas we consider as well as the kinds of meanings we might come away with. Each has the potential to change our understanding, but in a literary orientation we constantly seek new horizons of possibilities, while in a discursive one we focus more on refining and questioning the issue to hand. We shift in and out of both orientations as our ideas develop; together they have the potential to enrich our thoughts. Although individuals often have a number of reasons for engaging in an activity, and these may change, we have seen that one orientation holds more sway in a person's mind than the other at a particular time, and this affects what is being focused on as well as how.

As a result of our studies on literary envisionment-building, we were also able to describe ways in which people gather ideas as they read, write, or speak; they call upon a variety of options (I call them stances) that offer them qualitatively different perspectives into meaning. The stances are:

> **Being Out and Stepping into an Envisionment**. (When reading, for example, we try to gather enough of what we know from our knowledge and experiences to begin to develop an envisionment from which ideas can grow.)
>
> **Being in and Moving Through an Envisionment**. (As we think, read, write, and discuss, we become more immersed in developing our ideas -- ideas from the text and experience beget still others.)
>
> **Stepping Out and Rethinking What One Knows**. (Here, we use our developing ideas as a way to rethink and add to our experiences or knowledge.)
>
> **Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience**. (Here we distance ourselves from the ideas we have created and reflect back on them, sometimes analyze them, and make connections.)

These stances are crucial to the act of envisionment-building, because each one offers a different vantage point from which to gain ideas, both from within the text and within the reader. They are mobile and have the potential to recur and even co-occur at any time. Although they are an essential part of everyone's envisionment-building experiences, the particular patterns they follow, and the particular content they contain, are based on a particular reader's experiences while transacting with a particular text. This notion of stances provides a way for us to consider the literary experience as one in which readers have room to shift among their own experiences and histories, the text, social realities, the multi-voices of others (in a Bakhtinian sense, 1981), and their own imaginings. It helps explain the genesis of the multifaceted web of ideas that comprises a reading; and it suggests ways in which we can help students enrich their own understandings.

In these early studies, and all those that followed, we saw that there is no "best" map of meaning-making to follow, but an array of meaning-offering knowledge sources to tap, based on the individuals and their overt or tacit purposes. However, in our studies of better and poorer performing readers (based on their teachers' judgments), we found that the poorer readers did not seem to engage in "school-related" activities (in class or at home) in ways that were guided by a purpose of their own, either to engage in a literary experience or to gain ideas or information. The better readers more actively shaped their envisionments; they orchestrated and re-orchestrated their ideas and considered possibilities, guided by their sense of a whole (even though that sense of the whole was also evolving). In contrast, the poorer readers treated their growing envisionments as aggregations of bits of ideas rather than as cohesive and ever-changing wholes. They created thinly developed envisionments made up of disparate parts, envisionments that easily shattered when things became difficult or unexpected. However, when they were engaged in activities (Leont'ev, 1981; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) that they perceived as "authentic," and toward which thinking was poised, their envisionment-building processes were more like those of their higher performing classmates.

In this set of studies on literary envisionment-building, we also wanted to learn more about the roles literary approaches to understanding play in academic course work other than English. From our studies of science and social studies classrooms we found that although the students we observed in these classes attempted to "explore horizons of possibilities" some of the time, as a way to better understand the material (particularly when it was new to them), they were often thwarted by their science and social studies teachers who thought they were "off-base." In the science and social studies classes we studied, most often literature was used as an alternative text from which students were to gain information (in much the same way as from their textbooks) and the process of literary understanding, which involved more open-ended explorations from an "insider's" perspective (what it was like to live as a soldier in Haiti after the return of Aristide as President, for example), tended to be used as motivation at the beginning of a lesson or as a way of recapturing the students' attention when they were fading -- as a way into the "real stuff," rather than as an enhancement -- a complementary take on the content learning.

But the usefulness of the literary experience in content course work (not only when students are reading literature, but also when grappling with the ideas of their course work) suggested that both approaches toward understanding, exploring horizons of possibilities and maintaining a point of reference, are mutually beneficial. They are alternative sources of meaning that complement and add depth to students' growing understandings; we saw this in some social studies and science classes where teachers were exploring many ways to help their students consider the topics, events, and issues being studied. Thus, we are alerted to an issue that needs to be addressed as the field explores the benefits of the cross-disciplinary course offerings that are becoming increasingly popular in many schools

I invite the reader to look back to the beginning of this section of my paper, where I list the five major studies we undertook to help us learn about understanding literature. My goal was to suggest a way my colleagues and I in the field of English education can think about reasoning in our discipline -- and talk about it to others. I offer the findings described above as a way to help us explain the centrality of English studies in students' intellectual development as well as the unique contribution it can make to students' reasoning and learning in other course work.

THE ENVISIONMENT-BUILDING CLASSROOM

In our second strand of work, we focused on how teachers can support students' thoughtful literary experiences. It was carried out over approximately six years (the two strands of work overlapped). We hoped to learn the following:

1. What kinds of classrooms support students as envisionment-builders and foster their approaches toward literary understanding (what defines the classroom cultures)? What are the teachers' and students' roles?

2. How do the teachers go about supporting students' understandings and what does such support look like in these classes?

3. What indices or knowledge do teachers rely on to make day to day decisions when interacting with their students -- as well as in long range planning? (What do teachers' "new bones" look like?)

4. What is the role of traditional literary knowledge in envisionment-building classes (e.g., literary elements, genres, terminology)? Do they get taught, do they get learned? If so, how?

5. How can notions of the envisionment-building classroom be used to support literacy development as well as literature learning in classes of linguistically and culturally diverse students?

This part of the work also involved a very close collaboration with many classroom teachers, across the grades, from a range of school communities and instructional traditions. The teachers were very different from each other; their backgrounds, experiences, ages, and interests differed, and their curricula and teaching styles differed. What they had in common was a desire to make their classes as thought provoking as possible, to use literature in ways that engaged their students as an interacting community, and a willingness to explore new notions of teaching and learning in their classes.

From our collaborations, we were able to describe what I call the "envisionment-building classroom," where students have room to form and develop their own understandings, where they use interactions with others to explore possibilities of their own, and where mutual support is offered by students as well as teachers as part of the social network of interaction. It is an environment that recognizes individual and group histories and the roles they play in the classroom interactions as well as in the participants' developing interpretations. Here, the community develops a real and consistent belief that literature is thought provoking, and that the way to engage in a literary experience is to be thoughtful. In this section, I describe what we learned about how such classrooms work; in Langer (1995), 1 augment these descriptions with many examples of ongoing classrooms-in-action.

Our earlier work in this strand permitted us to identify the following broad principles that underlie and explain the "culture" of these classrooms:

1. Students are treated as lifelong envisionment-builders.

2. Questions are treated as part of the literary experience.

3. Class meetings are treated as a time to develop understandings.

4. Multiple perspectives are used to enrich interpretation.

The social interactions and rules of participation that characterize these classrooms grow from the social activities the students are engaged in, the ideas they are thinking about, and where they situate themselves as learners and participants. Because understandings are considered to be developing and open to exploration, both teachers and students assume that misreadings or misinterpretations or weakly founded views can and will be noticed and rethought by the individual, often using ideas from others to stimulate thinking. Thus, disagreements and differing views as well as a confluence of ideas support students' envisionment-building efforts. They contribute to a thought-provoking social context in which students learn to interact with others about their interpretations, where they can develop a sense of ownership for their own developing understandings, and where they can hone their own literacy abilities by creating richness from complexity.

But how does a teacher foster this kind of interaction? From close analyses, we were able to describe two kinds of instructional support that teachers offer while interacting with their students in envisionment-building classes: support for "ways to discuss" and for "ways to think." These grow from the human communications that develop when the participants interact in their literary community. They are offered by students as well as teachers within the group and function as a way to help the collective as well as individual thinking move along. Such support helps students become more familiar with discussion routines (such as turn taking, agreeing and disagreeing), as well as ways to make themselves understood and sharpen, focus, and extend their ideas. It is all by way of mutually sharing and communicating in the envisionment-building classroom.

However, over time, we found that even teachers in our project, who wanted to embrace this perspective all the time, had difficulty doing so. They were held back by their more traditional notions of literature teaching that included single "best" interpretations, plot retracing from beginning to end, close readings for the author's message, and using class time to fill in what the students didn't "get," instead of as a time to help them develop strategies to move their thinking along. Traditional notions of "good" teaching were so internalized that they were difficult for most teachers to overcome, although this is what they wished to do. Through collaboration, we came to realize that we needed to develop what I call "new bones," routines and options the teachers could internalize as completely as the old -- that could give them ready-to-hand alternatives when interacting with their students on a day-to-day basis.

Through action research, we developed a framework of teaching options that takes a grand view of the literature lesson as a complete activity. From this conception, students are involved in readings, discussions, and other tasks en route to some overarching goal that always involves

them in developing their own understandings of the work or works being read and doing something with those understandings. Such lessons, which can extend across one or many days or weeks, can be thought of as including five major sections (which are themselves options -- developed from the teacher's perspective and the students' ideas and interactions, thus never necessarily linear): 1) easing access before reading, 2) inviting initial understandings, 3) supporting the development of interpretations, 4) inviting critical stances, and 5) stocktaking. From the vantage point of the full activity, reading, writing, discussion, drama, art, and media of all sorts are an integral part of the envisionment-building experience, as are opportunities to develop ideas and engage in critical readings. We found that when teachers with whom we worked felt they had developed "new bones," they had internalized these options and made them their own. Thus, they were able to develop broad-based activities that involved various kinds of solitary and group efforts, that provided ample room for students to shape directions, and that were responsive to the social and communicative forces that sustain a dialectic community where people expect to explore, argue, think, and learn.

In a later study, we tackled a tough question many people asked from early on: Do traditional literature curriculum goals (literary knowledge, such as literary elements, genre, terminology) get lost? We found that they don't. In envisionment-building classes where the focus is on the development and communication of ideas, literary concepts and language become part of the fabric of ongoing thought and communication. Literary language and concepts creep into almost every discussion in which individuals are creating and exploring their own responses. They constitute the ideas that come to mind as students form, reflect on, and defend their understandings. I was able to describe a number of kinds of teaching-learning interactions that support students' development of literary concepts and language. They are, in many ways, similar to the process of language acquisition in young children, because they describe ways in which teaching in envisionment-building classes occurs in response to what students wish to convey as well as what they know.

Literary concepts and language are taught (by students and teachers) in different ways when 1) Students have neither the concepts nor the language to talk about them; 2) Students have the concepts but not the language; 3) Students have less complex understandings than their language implies (Vygotsky's notions of pseudoconcepts); and 4) Students have the language and the concepts and are ready to think about them in more sophisticated ways. But in each case the teaching and learning moments grow from the rich and thought-provoking literature discussions that are part of the ongoing way literature gets "done" in the envisionment-building classrooms. The literary language and concepts grow from the students' engagement in discussions that matter.

The final phases of our research have focused on connections between literacy acquisition and literature instruction. In one set of studies our emphasis has been on the ways literature can support the process of literacy development in English as a Second Language and bilingual classes for students who have been designated as having "limited English proficiency." In another set of studies we investigated the role literature can play in literacy development in classes of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Here, in collaboration with a variety of teachers from pre-school through adult, we developed broad-based literature sharing activities (based on Vygotskian and Bakhtinian notions of activity) where students engaged in writing books of "stories from home" that involved them in initial story gathering, telling, writing, or

drawing, and wherever possible the eventual development and publication of their stories in both languages. Collaboratively, they formed a writers' community. Here, everyone had a role to play and a strength to offer; each student offered assistance, and sought it. They focused on the language, content, and presentation of the pieces from both the author's and audience's perspective, and so were engaged in reflecting on genre characteristics and linguistic conventions as well as subtleties of word choice, structure, and meaning that were appropriate from a variety of cultural and linguistic perspectives. The goal was to develop culturally appropriate pieces that could be shared with others. Some of the major findings indicate that writing from their individual perspectives; following a set of guidelines to help focus on content, organization and presentation; and working with others to sharpen their pieces for publication offered opportunities for the students to become aware of and discuss language and discourse differences as well as to learn English literacy. Despite their ages, be they 2 or 42 years old, they were members of a language and literacy-rich environment where they learned to talk about and control features of language and form -- where the literature that was sought and valued was their own.

SO WHAT?

Across the eight years, we have come to understand a lot about the ways in which literary understandings develop, particularly the ways in which the open-ended exploratory nature of considering possibilities from a variety of stances helps enrich and complicate meaning. We have also learned that supporting students' development of literary understandings is often difficult for teachers to sustain for lack of instructional models (because the very reasoning processes they wish to support are often in conflict with some well-worked pedagogical routines). As a result of our work, we have also been able to offer a set of new bones that provide an alternative pedagogy; and have been able to reassure ourselves that essential knowledge from and about literature won't be lost in such an approach. The new bones grow from the notion of the envisionment-building classroom as a social community, composed of individuals with multiple social identities as well as personal interests and concerns that necessarily affect individual understandings. However, in envisionment-building classes, students are also part of a group; they bring their differences; hear those of others, and expect those differences to move their own thinking toward more individually rich, but never singular, interpretations. We have also been able to develop some useful ways to assess students' progress that we view as ongoing -assessments that are an integral part of the life of the envisionment-building classroom and engage students as well as teachers in reflection and dialogue about changes and challenges. Further, the "principles of practice" offer options to teachers, ones that work across ages and diverse cultural groups as well as with those the system has often failed. They generate the kinds of interactive literary communities that consider all students as lifelong envisionment-builders, diversity the norm, thoughtful discourse as provocative, and English classrooms not only as sites of conflict, but also as safe houses (Pratt, 1991).

Because our collaboration involved a group of highly professional teachers over an extended period of time, we were drawn in to the web of new projects that attracted them. High among these were a variety of multidisciplinary approaches in which they collaborated with colleagues in other subject areas. We saw a number of truly collegial efforts in which all teachers planned, taught, and reflected to ensure that students' experiences were actively enriched and the content intellectually potent. However, we saw other efforts where literary works were used as textbooks, for students to mine for selected information rather than as an opportunity to gain new understandings of the content from the interiorized perspective that the literary experience can offer. We also saw false collaborations, where English teachers were asked to suggest literature appropriate to particular topics of study, and asked to do the teaching -- as an add on to the "real" goals. However, all were efforts to enter into sincere collaborations and we took them to be work-in-progress. From our interactions with the students, we became convinced that literature and storytelling can play an important role in enriching students' understandings across subject areas, and the process of exploring horizons of possibilities can be helpful in content classes even when literature is not read and point of reference learning is the goal. From our interactions with teachers we became sensitive to the many shapes cross-disciplinary efforts can take. In some cases they involve collaborations where the participants value each others' differing knowledge and expertise and maintain these distinctions to everyone's advantage, in other cases disciplinary differences become sites of contention and collegial interactions break down, and in still others collaboration turns into disciplinary turn-taking, and the sense of purpose breaks down. As a field we need to become aware of the variety of approaches that are being labeled cross-disciplinary, as well as the advantages and problems that seem to accompany them. It is an area where much research is needed.

This report has been my attempt to offer a brief overview of my last eight years' work -- the studies, findings, and what they can mean for instruction. I hope the ideas I've sketched begin to provide a pedagogical frame to help students and teachers use what they already know to think more deeply with literature -- to voice their ideas, hear others, explore the multi-sidedness of situations and meanings, and gain richness from diversity.

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