Blue Listerine, Parochialism, and ASL Literacy

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There are not many elements of human life that have had as significant an impact on our development as literacy. Literacy has certainly been, and remains, a crucial issue especially in Deaf Education and in the Deaf World. The traditional definition of literacy has been exclusively understood as reading and writing. However, this article is intended to provide a thoughtful and provocative commentary that supports adopting new directions and comprehensive definitions for understanding literacy, which includes both written and signed languages. By applying ideas from Deaf Studies and New Literacy Studies we will conduct a thorough exploration of the fundamental components of literacy and illuminate important political and practical applications related to Deaf Education.

“Oh captain, my captain!” For those who have seen the film Dead Poet’s Society this line is a poignant reminder of one of the most dramatic moments in the movie. It represents a minirevolution where students reject the traditional approaches to teaching characterized by parochialism and false criterion. The line “Oh captain, my captain” is borrowed from Walt Whitman (a rebel in his own right) and his tribute to Abraham Lincoln. In this scene the students at Welton Academy realize the significance of looking beyond exclusive taxonomies as they climb on top of their desks (reciting this line) in honor of their dismissed teacher, Mr. Keating (Robin Williams), and their new, expansive vantage points.

Mr. Keating is the new poetry teacher (and a former student) at Welton. He is a talented and innovative teacher committed to encouraging creativity using unorthodox techniques. Early in the semester, students were shocked and reluctant to follow Mr. Keating’s instructions as he ordered them to rip the formulaic “introduction to poetry” out of their texts. This non-traditional challenge to limiting criterion was one in a series of steps designed to encourage the Welton students to become critical, creative agents. The realization that there was so much more to poetry and so much more to life than could be understood using rigid, canonical formulas came at no small price.

In much the same way, there is an ongoing national debate about literacy. A traditional, parochial perspective insists that American Sign Language (ASL), a signed language, has no literacy. An alternate perspective, which I share, adopts a more comprehensive criterion and argues “for” ASL literacy.

The implications for how we choose to understand literacy in both practical and political terms (it is important to realize that they are not mutually exclusive categories) are also significant, with real and serious consequences. A comprehensive understanding of literacy is essential for quality educational programming. Deaf Studies and Deaf Education have an especially relevant role because new ideas in each field have much to offer to the debate about redefining the traditional bounds of literacy.

This essay will address whether or not there is such a thing as “American Sign Language literacy.”

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The issue has been raised several times, most notably at the ASL Specialist Conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, and again at the Center for Bilingual ASL/English Research Conference in Washington DC. There, Stephen Nover made the claim in his presentation that ASL has no written form and therefore no literacy. He ably described his belief that ASL, instead, has something called “signacy.” Nover has written a number of interesting papers about this proposal (Nover, Christensen, and Cheng, 1998; Nover, 2004a). For Nover, the suggestion that ASL has “literacy” is a misrepresentation of the true definition of the term and indicates a general lack of understanding of literacy (Nover, 2004b).

ASL and ASL literacy have historically been considered from limited and limiting perspectives. Nover is surely an advocate for educational reform, so there is an element of irony in that the unwitting result of Nover’s approach turns out to be counterproductive to effective language programming for Deaf children. Nover wishes to separate expressive and receptive ASL and English skills into discrete and exclusive compartments that fit with the theories of Bench (1992) and Baker (2001) to establish a divide between oracy, literacy, and now, “signacy.” He appears to have coined this new term as an adaptation from his understanding of Bench, Baker, and Walter Ong.

Again, I respectfully disagree with his premise; I believe that there is such a thing as ASL literacy. I must confess that initially I thought our difference was merely a matter of labels. There is certainly a proclivity in many professional fields to apply new and distinct labels, and labels are not, in and of themselves, bad. So, at first glance, one could certainly conclude that our difference is as simple as that. But as Stephen Jay Gould (1987, p. 85) points out the “who cares what we call it” attitude is a bit disingenuous because “…anyone with the slightest ideas of rewards…knows in his bones that names and terms define status and priority.” As such, the defense of the terms we have personally coined becomes a bit more ferocious because they are “ours.” In addition, the priorities that different labels highlight may also be in tension.

After careful consideration, it became clear that our issue goes well beyond labels. Our differences center primarily on whether or not we will accept parochial attitudes and exclusive taxonomies that perpetuate a bias against all things not written. They boil down to making a decision to encourage professionals (and the children we serve) to see beyond what we normally believe to be true. As Ladd (2003, p. 76) points out “…the process of “unlearning” and deconstructing one’s own culturally inherited perceptions is the precursor to an engaged understanding.” The positive result of our differing perspectives is that instead of creating a problem, it generates an opportunity to look at the issue in a new and more comprehensive way (in much the same way that the students at Welton stood on their desks).

In the spirit of Mr. Keating, I believe we need to “strike out and find new ground.” The rigid taxonomy supported by Nover reinforces the outdated notion that literacy can only mean reading and writing and ignores the advance of ideas and technology that expands the vantage points we can assume. In his presentations Nover refers to Walter Ong (ASL Specialist Conference), a seminal source, in order to validate his ideas. Surely, encouraging professionals to look for new insights and valuable resources outside of the traditional parameters of Deaf Education, as Nover does, is laudable.

But, one thing I have learned in my 12 plus years as a teacher of Deaf children is to look just as critically at what people “leave out” because convenient omissions are often more telling than the elements people choose to include. I have read the Ong text that Nover cites, Orality and Literacy (Ong, 2002). If you read it, you, too, will see that Ong (like Nover) believes vehemently in the distinction between orality and literacy. Ong so wants to distinguish between the oral and the literate that he calls the term “oral literature” “monstrous” (Ong, 2002, p. 11).

What was not mentioned, but important to note, is that Ong considers his literacy (traditionally defined) a staple of civilized societies as distinct from nonliterate, primitive cultures. He also says that signed languages are “substitutes for speech and dependent on oral speech systems even when used by the congenitally deaf” (Ong, 2002, p. 7). After extolling the beauty of many oral cultures Ong continues...

Nevertheless, without writing human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot
produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy as will be seen, is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explanatory understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself. There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy. This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality. (Ong, 2002, pp. 14–15)

Ong dismisses the idea that oral cultures can record, save, edit, and share their languages by ignoring the technology we have at our disposal today. In fact, he characterizes all nonwriting, nonsound-based cultures as inferior to, and incapable of, development on a scale comparable to “writing cultures.” Later on, he engages in a treatise on the superiority of sound as a sense, claiming that sight “isolates” (in all fairness Ong means things and images—not people) and that sound “incorporates.” Using a strange example, he seems to imply that hearing is the “best” sense because in addition to all the citations above, it can “register interiority without violating—as in shaking a box rather than opening it” (Ong, 2002, p. 71). Interiority is a surprisingly significant theme with Ong because he also links the interiority of sound to the interiority of consciousness and communication (Ong, 2002, p. 70). He goes on to say that sound rather than the other senses envelops people, establishing hearers “at a kind of core of sensation and existence” (Ong, 2002, p. 71). And, of course, the perennial favorite “thought is nested in speech” (Ong, 2002, p. 74). I am fully confident that Nover has read Ong’s book. I am also fully confident that he failed to mention the main thrust of Ong’s work for a very good reason. It casts oral cultures, and especially nonsound-based cultures, like the Deaf World, as inferior or underdeveloped. Nover has made and continues to make many positive contributions to Deaf Education. He certainly does “not” state or imply that signed languages and/or the Deaf World are inferior in his work, but he glosses over the fact that Ong “does.” And because Ong does, it exposes an orientation that inherently diminishes the value of nonwritten languages and the contributions they can make toward expanding limited perspectives on literacy.

New Literacy Studies

A more comprehensive perspective, shared by scholars such as Harvey Graff, Paolo Freire, Jim Gee, and Brian Street, has illuminated the bias of Ong’s reductionist thinking. Their work has demonstrated that the traditional oral-literate dichotomy has collapsed. It is a fascinating fact that humans tend to organize the world and its elements into tidy, binary units. This propensity is often a cumbersome template that forces crude applications to ideas and circumstances ill-suited to simplistic taxonomies. So much as we would like, this is not an “either–or” world. This is true especially when we are talking about language and language abilities because they are “inextricably bound up with ideology and cannot be analyzed or understood apart from it” (Gee, 1996, p. ix). It is important to understand that “theories can harm people and create worlds we ought not want to live in” (Gee, 1996, p. 6). Reinforcing the distinction between orality, literacy, and “signacy” is one such theory. These distinctions are concerned primarily with form rather than function. Creating a taxonomy that focuses on modality, not what we do with the modality is, again, counterproductive especially when the politics of modality is so contentious.

Whether we like it or not, underlying these distinctions, explicit or tacit, is the belief that literacy (defined in traditional, limited terms) will make us civilized and lead to higher order cognitive skills. It should come as no surprise then that if the powers that be were to consider devoting resources (economic, political, etc.) to literacy (traditionally defined), oracy, or signacy, literacy would be the most esteemed. It may come as a surprise, however, that several studies have shown that literacy skills, as distinct from critical and creative social practices, become an unimportant indicator of cognitive success. In other words, function, and not form, is the critical element to understanding the implications of literacy. For a more comprehensive look at these studies, Gee offers an excellent summary
of the various research results in Chapter 2 of *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (Gee, 1996, pp. 54–65).

Amid this propensity to create distinctions, I am reminded of Jedediah Purdy’s reflection on Robert Frost’s poem, *Mending Walls*. In his book, *For Common Things*, Purdy points to the dangers of getting caught up in parochial patterns. Frost’s poem is about a crumbling, stone wall that serves no real purpose except tradition. He wonders why the wall, built by his and his neighbor’s father, and in need of continuous mending, is still devoutly tended to. Maintaining it is for him an “outdoor game.”

One on a side. /It comes to little more: There where it is we do not need the wall:/He is all pine and I am apple orchard./My apple trees will never get across/And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him./He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbors’./Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder/If I could put a notion in his head:/‘Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it/Where there are cows?/But here there are no cows./Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out,/And to whom I was like to give offence./Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,/That wants it down.’/

Then he continues…

/Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top/In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed./He moves in darkness as it seems to me~ /Not of woods only and the shade of trees./He will not go behind his father’s saying,/And he likes having thought of it so well/He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”/

Purdy uses this poem in order to remind us to look behind our father’s sayings and ideas. They can only remain alive he says, if we devote to them “energies that gives them life” (Purdy, 1999, p. 163). Frost wonders why, when there are no cows left, and therefore no real reason for the wall, they dedicate themselves to its existence? And are they walling in or walling out? It is irrational to want to reinforce the outdated line between pinecones and apples, or for that matter orality and literacy (as well as signacy). But being married to the words and ideas of his father, the neighbor mindlessly replies, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Traditional justifications can become obsolete and collapse much like the orality/literacy dichotomy. The changes in our lives, in the cultures in which we live, in how we think about the world and ourselves can result in “new meanings that would once have been inconceivable” (Purdy, 1999, p. 164).

Gee (1996) in *Social Linguistics and Literacies* talks about how the meanings we choose, especially as they apply to literacy, incorporate theories about the distribution of social goods and have important social consequences. Treating literacy simply, exclusively, and parochially as the ability to read and write obscures the multiple forms of literate behaviors that are necessary for effective communication in our diverse world. Additionally, this approach ignores the inter-relationships of literacy and power (Gee, 1996, p. 22). He warns against an approach that casts literacy as an autonomous and discrete entity that shapes minds and cultures as one that leads to a dead end that can only reinforce outdated distinctions (Gee, 1996, p. 58) and ignore the many forms of critical and recordable media/mediums we use today.

Street (1984) echoes this sentiment as he describes the oppressive nature of classical conceptions regarding “different social groups” describing them “in such terms as logical/prelogical, primitive/modern and concrete/scientific.” He argues that canonical conceptions of literacy have “given the tradition a new lease on life by the introduction of literate/preliterate” as a new criterion for division (Street, 1984, p. 24).

Again, definitions, terms, and what we mean by them are important. They can shape theories which impact educational policies and practice. How we take those ideas and translate them into useable applications must be developed around a comprehensive understanding of literacy. B. J. Bahan (personal communication, September 23, 2005) addressed this issue, albeit tongue in cheek, when he mused, “Let’s get this straight. Literacy is reserved exclusively for reading and writing, and literature is the term we use for the body of written materials. The proposal is to create this new category called ‘signacy’…what term do we then use for the body of signed materials—‘signature’?” An alternative and comprehensive approach is to capitalize on the potentially powerful role
that ASL and Deaf Studies can play in redefining and revolutionizing literacy studies. We cannot mindlessly accept old notions and simply create new categories because they do not fit with historical approaches. As Smith (1999, p. 38) explains “... if it is a good theory it also allows for new ideas and new ways of looking at things to be incorporated without the need to search constantly for new theories.”

Because the title of my essay requires its reference, I would like to relate a personal anecdote about my grandmother, who is 86 years old, Deaf and by no means mindless. She recently had knee replacement surgery, and during her recuperation she inevitably ran out of a number of things and needed someone to shop for her; and I volunteered to go.

My grandmother, as are many people from her generation, is “very” loyal to specific brands. She is also not exactly shy about pointing out errors, so the task was a little more precarious than you might imagine. My grandmother composed her list (she is very good at lists) on which she included Sunbeam bread, Land O’Lakes butter (not margarine), Tetley tea, and Listerine mouthwash. I managed to find everything on the list and, more importantly, the brands she specified. She smiled as she watched me unpack the various and sundry items until it came to the mouthwash. She looked at me in disbelief, shaking her head disapprovingly. What, I wondered, was wrong? It clearly was a bottle of Listerine, but I was soon made aware of the problem. It was not the old yellow kind. I was stunned; surely she knew that the blue (which I chose) tasted much better! I was, however, unable to convince her that the blue was just as effective despite comparing the labels and ingredients.

I soon realized that her taxonomy for an effective mouthwash required that it fight the germs that cause bad breath, prevent plaque build up, be yellow, and be “horrible” tasting. I realized, too, perhaps most importantly, it must be the mouthwash of her father. For her, this choice was the equivalent of settling for Scope or Listermint. They fell in to a different category altogether as sissy mouthwashes unable to do the job of a “real” germ fighter. I am not against yellow Listerine, but blue does everything yellow can, and it is much more palatable. For my grandmother, and for many others I am sure, it was unthinkable that Listerine would abandon its traditional roots. Innovation, in this case, was interpreted as something completely different and less desirable than the “standard.” You will be happy to note that if you make a quick trip to her spic and span bathroom you will now discover orange citrus Listerine! My point, of course, is that we ought to be critical in our understanding of literacy.

Why not use what we now know about ASL and technology to move definitions forward? We must not retreat into rigid patterns that make no room for difference. Being satisfied with new categories simply casts Deaf people and ASL, yet again, as the “other.” Smith, in her work, calls it systematic fragmentation, and she demonstrates that oppressed cultures and their features are always characterized as “the other” and not part of a comprehensive epistemology (Smith, 1999, p. 28). We need to have a critical understanding of the tools and orientations of our research. We must be ever aware of the factors that influence our perceptions about the changing world and the limiting or liberating meanings that they create.

The world is indeed changing, and not many would challenge the idea that “the most powerful changes now occur in technology...” (Purdy, 1999, p. 164). In his book, What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy, Gee (2003, pp. 17–18) clearly and convincingly displays the limitations of thinking about literacy first and foremost in terms of print. Gee proposes that we broaden our perspectives on literacy by considering what he calls semiotic domains. Semiotic domains are any set of practices that recruit one or more modalities (oral, written language images, equations, symbols, sounds, signs, etc.) to communicate distinctive meanings. For Gee, all of these things assume “different meanings in different situations, contexts, practices, cultures, and historical periods.”

This perspective allows us to recognize that people are literate (or not) in a domain if they can recognize (the equivalent of reading) and/or produce (the equivalent of writing) meanings in the domain (Gee, 2003, p. 18). The technologies at our disposal today allow us to create, record, and analyze limitless kinds of communicative events whose messages, meanings, and content can be understood and enhanced in ways that
were previously unimaginable. What is truly profound about understanding literacy in these terms is that it reinforces the idea that there are “different ways of knowing, different ways of making sense of the world of human experience, that is, different social epistemologies” (Gee, 1996, p. 59). Street’s (1984) influential work with New Literacy Studies reinforces the notion that “literacy practice involves a socially variable set of conventions” (Street, 1984, p. 29). We must heed the warnings of Ladd (2003, p. 80) and avoid “reductionist readings,” otherwise it will be all too easy to continue approaching our critical work with unthinking acceptance.

Another issue that Street (1984, pp. 21–24) talks about is the priority given to the written word because it is “two degrees removed” from thought (i.e., thought → spoken word → written/secondary code). Greenfield (1972) long ago discussed the notion that “while the spoken word stands for something, the written word stands for something that stands for something.” She and many others believe that literacy skills (defined traditionally as a secondary code) lead to significant mental differences. Her research supported the ideas that nonliterate subjects exhibited the following characteristics: absence of self-consciousness, egocentric tendencies, inability to shift perspective, inferior cognitive facilities, and increased dependency on context (as opposed to literate subjects). These findings have been refuted as culturally bound stereotypes that confused mental differences with learned social practices reached as a result of “misunderstanding by ill-informed European commentators of the meaning of what was being said or done” (Street, 1984, p. 24). See Street for an in-depth account of how the fundamental processes of nonliterate and literate cultures have been falsely characterized as separate and unequal.

Nover is also concerned about a similar issue regarding ASL and its lack of “secondary codes.” He considers the recording of signs on video as a “replay” of the same original modality (S. M. Nover, personal communication, July 24, 2005). In other words, because signing on video does not record information using an abstract secondary code, it is not literacy. Interestingly, Nover states that if and/or when we can use a sign writing “code” we could then lay claim to ASL literacy skills, again, highlighting form and not function.

Throughout the course of this essay I have employed the technique of juxtaposing spurious stories and metaphors related to ASL literacy in the hope of illuminating the parochial positions that make comprehensive understanding an awkward task. I hope it has, thus far, been effective. So, in the interest of consistency I present the captivating tale of Napoleon Sarony. The current debate about the role of primary and secondary codes can perhaps be better understood by consulting this wonderfully appropriate historical example I stumbled upon while reading a fascinating article by Mitch Tuchman in Smithsonian Magazine.

Napoleon Sarony was a pioneer in the field of photography and a preeminent studio photographer of the late 19th century. As a result of his ingenious business and marketing acumen, he was able to secure a photo session with the famous Oscar Wilde when the latter made his first trip to the United States (years before writing the Picture of Dorian Grey and The Importance of Being Earnest). Wilde, as well as his style, was a national sensation, and as a result, articles of clothing in the “Wilde fashion” were in great demand. Not surprisingly, an apparel company, called Erlich Bros., attempted to cash in on his notoriety. They were promoting a new line of hats that presumably represented Wilde’s “English Renaissance” style. In their advertisements, Erlich Bros. used one of Sarony’s images (No. 18) that featured the “Wilde” hat they were selling. As part of their marketing campaign they reproduced 85,000 copies of Sarony’s photograph.

Sarony, upset at the unauthorized use of his photograph sued, charging copyright infringement. Rulings in the district courts favored Sarony, but appeals took the case all the way to the Supreme Court and here, at this final stop, is where we find our metaphor. The Erlich Bros. defense proposed that pictures, generated from this new technology called photography, were reproductions of nature, created by the operator of a machine. Their lawyers, a century before Greenfield and Nover, argued that photographs were not something (like a drawing or painting) that stood for something (the original image). Instead, they claimed that photographs were merely exact copies of the original image, and they could not be “owned.” They...
insisted that creativity (much like the taxonomy proposed for literacy) must involve "2 degrees of separation." In essence, they were applying a rigid definition that could not adjust to innovations brought about by this new technology. It is refreshing to note that the court did not buy it. "If congress had intended copyrights to be so narrowly applied," Justice Samuel Miller wrote for the majority, "it would not have extended protection to maps and charts in the first copyright act in 1790" (nearly half a century before the invention of photography). And "an author," he added, "is simply the one 'to whom anything owes its origin.'" In the end, the court ruled that Sarony's portrait of Wilde was "an original work of art, the product of the plaintiff's intellectual invention, of which the plaintiff is the author, and of a class of inventions for which the Constitution intended that Congress shall secure to him the exclusive right to use, publish and sell..." This comprehensive outlook has helped to establish the art of photography as an indisputable form in the great function of the arts. In much the same way we can look at creative recording, editing, and sharing of ASL on video as a new and enlightening development in the field of literacy.

The emphasis I place on function is perhaps a result of the significance I put on application, which is the fundamental result we want from any sound theory. These comprehensive perspectives have been applied with great success at the Scranton State School for the Deaf (SSSD) and as part of "The Magical Literacy Camps (TMLC)." Our team has moved beyond the canonical understanding of literacy and applied groundbreaking ideas in the semiotic domain of ASL literacy and how it relates to English literacy. We have composed a variety of ASL works for, and require ASL compositions of, Deaf children. In addition, by virtue of this process we have established conventions for the application of ASL literacy skills that further reinforce the idea that ASL is a literate language.

The application of video-editing techniques has allowed us to create standard devices that codify the structure of ASL compositions. Capitalizing on the parallels between cinematography and ASL is not a new idea. However, what is new is the application of those ideas to comprehensive ASL instruction as we do with TMLC and at SSSD. This technology allows us to compose, analyze, and edit sign-by-sign, sentence-by-sentence, and paragraph-by-paragraph.

As an example, consider the stages used for developing an ASL-based expository videotext about the Roman Empire (just one of many we have developed). The first step is to conduct research about our topic. For our ASL classes, we try to use ASL sources as the basis of our research. We have created a number of primary videotexts that students must use; however, the paucity of available material is certainly a challenge. Once students complete their research, they record their work on video in the ASL Studio. The most common approach is to record sentence by sentence. Once the videotaping is complete, students import their work onto our video-editing computers. They carefully organize their research into clips and arrange them in linear form on a time line. This approach is a standard practice of cinematographers, but it also parallels the process that master ASL storytellers use. For example, Ben Bahan describes how he composes "story boards" both visually and graphically and arranges them in a fashion that helps him compose his classic stories (B. J. Bahan, personal communication, September 23, 2005).

At this point, the editing process continues, and students must make a variety of decisions about their compositions. They consider factors including the clarity of individual signs and sign choices (which can all be edited and revised) as well as grammatical features. At the next level, they must decide which sentences should be grouped into paragraphs and then into sections/chapters. This process requires the application of different informational elements of video editing that will signal the end of a sentence, paragraph, chapter, or topic.

In addition, students have to decide where they should include elements of other semiotic domains. Because effective expository texts use a variety of media and graphic devices, students are encouraged to include a variety of examples that contribute to their projects such as charts, maps, icons, and graphics. Products of ASL literacy can be organized in both linear and concurrent patterns and as such have the potential to revolutionize the traditional ways that we deliver information. With the advent of video-editing techniques we have been able to use ASL literacy skills
to compose many examples of “new” genre types, and as such we have redefined traditional conceptions about the role of ASL and educational practices.

Though we must continue to improve, the practical reality is that technology has made it possible to think about a variety of media and mediums as recordable, sharable, editable, and preserveable. The political result is that students, staff and families have come to appreciate the role of ASL in academic programming as more than just a bridge to English mastery, but another indispensable literacy skill.

J. P. Gee (personal communication, October 6, 2005) has pointed to Deaf Studies as a field that has great potential to create inroads toward a profound understanding of literacy and “literacies.” By applying comprehensive perspectives about ASL literacy, Deaf Studies can offer new ideas about language and its critical relationship to technology and social conventions. In lending our insights to New Literacy Studies, we can combat the notion that the modality of signed languages renders them inferior or considers them to be a stepping-stone toward “literate” behaviors.

Deaf Studies, like any field, aspires to make contributions toward understanding social arrangements. A huge task for us in this field is to educate others about respecting and understanding the significance of diversity as it applies to language, culture, and perspectives. It is in influencing this last category that perhaps the greatest potential lies. Deaf Studies can use the literacy debate as a vehicle to effect fundamental change throughout education. Deaf Studies can shed light on the importance of considering a multitude of semiotic domains in effective and comprehensive literacy development. If Deaf Studies can help shift the focus of educators, teacher trainers, parents, and professionals to “function,” as opposed to “form,” we can allow more children to take advantage of the tremendous range of communicative media at our disposal.

It is hard to counter incumbent attitudes that, to many, seem natural. But this is an opportunity to expand the parameters of the discourse of literacy and to enhance understanding of the function of language and communication. Interestingly, if we take it a step further, this orientation also invites us to consider how instruction that has been characterized by an obsession with mindless discrete skills and unthinking decoding practice is a reflection of the general failure to acknowledge function while celebrating form. This propensity diminishes the role of comprehension and meaningful application in favor of maintaining neatly packaged, formulaic boundaries. It is important to remember, however, “… the borders that disciplinary experts have created, and which they police, dissolve as we humans go about making and being made by meaning” (Gee, 1996, p. 190).

And so we return to Walt Whitman and his reverence for Abraham Lincoln. A large part of his reverence was because Whitman recognized and admired what Lincoln knew to be true; there are no exclusive claims to the truth. In his words, since immortalized in perhaps the most famous inaugural address ever delivered, Lincoln said that we should proceed “… with firmness in the right, ‘as God gives us to see the right’.” The majesty of Lincoln was how well he understood what it took to move forward together. He urged progress, but he understood that progress did not require us to reject convictions. And yet, he qualifies the “firmness” by reminding us that we cannot, and must not, blindly accept our favored myths. We, therefore, should strive to be comprehensive, critical, and at the same time be prepared for the next element of our dynamic world that will move us forward. Conversely, in terms of literacy and education, we should resist parochial patterns that construct limited “canons of truth.” So, let us explore ASL and ASL literacy because as creative beings...

we shall not cease exploration
and at the very end of all our exploring
will be to arrive at where we have started
and to know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding.

Note

1. The addition of the italicized word “sign” has been added with the permission of James Paul Gee, October 6, 2005.
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