

Talk Around Text

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I discuss here a number of ideas about how teachers and parents might support youngsters in reading or writing sessions, or in other formal or informal activities in which written or visual texts are involved. My comments draw on a range of research and professional literature in the area, some of it my own, but my overall goal is not to summarise that literature, but rather to mention some directions for thinking about the role in literacy learning of talk among parents and children, teachers and students, and that this may be helpful to you, or, at least, thought-provoking.

To preview my main points, these directions are: we should see 'literacy' as a term that refers to a multifaceted set of activities and capabilities, and we should inform our activities with that view.

Second, we should be clear that the ways in which youngsters learn what is important about literacy is through their exchanges with significant teachers and mentors, so that it is in our talk with youngsters in reading and writing activities that the core of reading and writing is to be found, not in some abstract idea about literacy.

And third, we should engage in extended treatments of text with youngsters, not jump from one to another once we sense that they have some minimal grasp of it, because of the range of capabilities that can be developed through familiarity with a text. This in turn, means that the texts chosen must have the qualities needed to sustain such extended, deeper treatments.

In considering how young people learn to be literate, it's useful to start more or less at the beginning. When young children are learning to read, we find that they go through a number of phases in the ways in which they relate to a book or a piece of paper or to a screen with writing or pictures. First, they may treat it as if it were an object like any other object. Very young children, for example, might bite a book or throw it at a sibling, or tap the screen with their finger, or hold a piece of paper this way and that. Youngsters then, generally, come to see, through their contacts with others, that a book is a special kind of object; that it creates a special event to do with how these 'marks' on the paper make meaning; they make talk, or they invite reactions and interpretations in talk and that this talk has meaning to us and so they're asked, 'What does it say?', 'What does it mean?', 'What you like about it?' or 'Isn't it scary?' and so on.

Young learners also come to realise that this language on the page is strung together into a coherent text of some kind and that different kinds of texts have different purposes in their day-to-day lives – to inform them, entertain them, persuade, explain, give help, give directions, and so on. Finally, these marks on the page or the screen help to structure different social events: they're part of the action of daily cultural experience, including how people are invited to believe some things and not others; and how certain kinds of new questions can be asked about books or pictures – about texts in general.

So the object becomes language, the language becomes coherent text, the texts do different things in daily life, and pass on values and beliefs and cultural and moral dispositions. The resources – and by ‘resources’, I mean the skills, knowledge, confidence and curiosity – the resources that learners develop in successfully negotiating these transitions; these different ways of seeing through the marks on the page gradually toward the society and the culture; and their own active part within that society and culture. These things make up what we can think of as how youngsters become literate, become participants in a literate culture.

Now, I have three main points to make about this issue of becoming literate in this discussion. The first is that when we, as educators, including as parents, and so on, are involved with youngsters in literacy learning events, we need to keep in mind that youngsters will probably have partial knowledge on all of these counts – on the ways in which the marks make sound and meaning, in our case, most prominently the combinations of letters in the English language; on the building of meanings as the language proceeds; and on the kinds of features of different kinds of texts; and how texts become special part of a growing range of their social competencies in different activities; and how they are built on and carry moral and cultural values of different kinds.

Developing all of these resources by asking students about or commenting on the codes and the meanings, the uses and the analysis of texts inducts them into a version of literacy and stresses that it's a multifaceted set of activities and capabilities. It involves a way of belonging and participating, and that it's ongoing: that being an effective participant in a literate society, calls upon increasingly deep and more sophisticated capabilities.

So, the questions and commentaries in which literacy educators, including parents and family members, engage their learners need to reflect these different aspects of becoming literate. Each resource needs to be developed in a deliberate and uncompromising way, potentially involving extended conversations and modelling. Sometimes mining a small segment of text or a single text puts learning potential rather than moving on simply when some minimal comprehension seems to have been achieved. Some of the research is critical of the rapidity with which parents or teachers move from page to page or text to text: perhaps in the interests of keeping attention, but the kind of attention that is kept is sometimes shallow and conveys its own relatively shallow conception of what adequate literacy is.

A second point to be made is that the kind of talk that goes on around texts – again, print, visual, or a combination of both – is not just incidental or an accompaniment to the literacy learning that goes on. Rather, it's fundamental to the youngster's growing understanding of what literacy is. Growing up to be literate is growing up to share in and value a particular set of skills, understandings, dispositions and beliefs – those that characterise the literate society in which we are brought up. Youngsters are acculturated into these only through their exchanges with the significant people in their lives: their parents, their brothers and sisters, other family members, teachers, tutors, their religious or community mentors, and so on.

These understandings, skills, dispositions and beliefs do not exist in some abstract, isolated form that is somehow hovering above our everyday activities with young learners; nor do we seem to have genes for them. We make them available, or we

don't, through our interactions with learners – particularly those interactions that have a special status as learning events, such as 'bedtime reading' with family members or lessons in school.

My third and final point is that literacy educators and researchers have often been critical of the pace with which school classrooms move. This issue relates to how uncompromising literacy educators need to be in their development of the distinct resources necessary for participating in all the nooks and crannies of literate societies, including in the school subjects, whose literacy demands become increasingly differentiated and increasingly important as the school years progress.

But this uncompromising attitude that we need to develop should not be translated into the kind of urgency or impatience, haste or anxiety that can result in rapid movement through texts, from text to text. If educators select texts that are worth reading or writing about in some important way, and if they construct activities that allow that particular 'worthiness' to shine through, then the literacy learning itself becomes one more piece of evidence for youngsters that all of the effort of becoming an active participant in this literate culture is worth it; that it's a realistic investment that will pay deep and abiding dividends, for each individual and for the communities and cultures into which they can grow and to which they can contribute. What that means is that a text used and explored in-depth in classrooms needs to be worth the trouble intellectually and personally to students as well as offering deep and durable learning opportunities about literacy. This is a key point on which educators exercise their professional judgement.

It's in our talk around texts with learners that they learn not only the capabilities they need to manage, use and produce effective texts, they also learn the value of participation to expand the range and the force of their social actions and to enrich their lives.