Review of the Literature

Redefining Literacy

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Introduction

"Learning through the arts provides a vehicle for students to become actively engaged in the construction of their own learning" (Gamwell, 2005, p. 359). This review is an examination of literacy's historical definition in the educational system, which restricts it to rigid parameters that value the written and read language above all other modes of communication and the need for this definition to be broadened to other modes and methods such as visual art. The following topics present broader and more inclusive ways in which literacy can be defined, methodologies for teaching literacy that go beyond reading and writing, and the benefits of being able to transmediate knowledge, thoughts, and ideas between semiotic systems such as language and visual art, and finally, addresses possible challenges in implementing these changes and suggestions for overcoming them.

Literacy Definitions and Methodologies

Literacy: language, aesthetics, and interpretation

"Literacy has traditionally been defined simply as learning a set of skills that allow us to read and write." (Handerhan, 1993, p. 244). People who are unable to do one or both of these have traditionally been labeled ignorant, and by extension, assigned biased labels of having diminished intellectual abilities. In this model, language is privileged above all other cognitive processes in learning (p. 245). If we re-examine literacy as something that can be expressed aesthetically, the individual can be emphasized in the learning process (p. 246) as opposed to strictly being rooted in the narrow confines of one's abilities to read and write proficiently as a "functionality used in

all areas of everyday life" (p. 245). This review will focus on the value of broadening the definition of literacy and how it is taught and assessed in the classroom.

Methodologies for Teaching Literacy

"Many language arts teachers shy away from implementing literacy 'in other forms,' perhaps because 'most elementary teachers know little about the arts and often trivialize them in their classrooms'" '(Eisner, 1995, as cited in Albers, 1997, p. 338). Visual art offers visually symbolic ways to communicate that go beyond the written word. "Like print-based literacy, as students learn to read art media and create meaning using its techniques and tools, they become enculturated in the symbol systems operating within art". (Albers, 1997, p. 342). When writing is personally meaningful and culturally relevant, students are more actively engaged and intrinsically motivated to perform at higher levels. Student-generated comic books provide students with opportunities to "be creative in the presentation of their writing", (Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat, 2002, p. 759), expand their linguistic and visual-spatial intelligences, and be able to "reveal their understanding in a way that is more compatible with their strengths than if they are limited to traditional forms of expression" (p. 759). Paquette, Fello, and Jalogo's (2007) "Talking Drawings Strategy" (p. 65) uses children's' drawings and oral language to improve their ability to comprehend expository text and for teachers to get a more accurate understanding of students' prior knowledge and assessment of how that knowledge has been enhanced or transformed after instruction. Reilly's (2008) English Language Learner students engaged in "nonverbal 'dialogues' where two or more people converse by finger painting" (p. 99) and as a means to fill gaps in communication caused by students' limited or underdeveloped vocabularies (Armon & Morris, 2008).

Semiotic Systems of Communication

"Art-making, a process of expression and discovery, is about the weaving together of ideas into a unified, coherent creation (Eisner, 1998 as cited in Gamwell, 2005 p. 377). The act of learning could be described the same way. When students are able to weave together analogous and complementary meanings derived from multiple semiotic systems such as language, visual art, and the performing arts, the depth of their knowledge and strength of their interest in and retention of the knowledge is significantly increased. (Wilhelm, 1995, Buckelew, 2003 as cited in Barton, Sawyer, & Swanson, 2007 p. 128). Cowan and Albers (2006) demonstrate how literacy is gained through the use of a variety of communication systems, which is strengthened by the transmediation that occurs between them. Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson (2007) used abstract works of visual art to provide concrete texts for students to use to extract abstract meanings from "When abstract ideas are expressed visually, the strategies we use to think abstractly become more understandable" (p. 127) which allowed them to translate this understanding into traditional, written work, "Our goal here was to help students make increasingly complex observations and connections as they moved back and forth between art and text"

<center>**Literacy: Language, Aesthetics, and Interpretation**</center>

The Importance of Literacy

Reading and writing are skills everyone uses in their day-to-day lives. One of the most significant skill sets measured in standardized tests is literacy. It is also one of the most

challenging skills to teach and engage students in, particularly those who are from marginalized, low-income communities and whose first language is not English.

Literacy as language-based communication.

Literacy has traditionally been defined as the ability to read and write. "This view positions the concept of literacy in a narrow framework, excluding and devaluing other contexts in which literacy occurs. It excludes oral literacy traditions and devalues all but some written views of literacy" (Handerhan, 1993, p. 244). Literacy is one of the "solid foundations of elemental skills" (Stevens, 2002 p. 22) that school reformers prioritize "at the expense of those things that were once considered an important part of the curriculum that included the arts" (p. 22). Handerman (1993) summarizes Halliday's (1975) discussion of language learning "In learning how to mean, we learn language, learn through language, learn about language" (p. 245) thus it can be difficult to determine how thinking " can occur without language" (p. 245). This extends to a common generalization of thinking of learning as only occurring "through language" (p 245) and sets up dichotomies such as "literate versus illiterate or written vs. oral language" (p. 246) much in the same way that art has traditionally been categorized in a hierarchy that divides it into canonic fine art and something other than fine art such as craft.

Literacy as aesthetic expression.

Art literacies are "cognitive activities guided by human intelligence that make unique forms of meaning possible" (Eisner, 1988, as cited in Handerman, 1993, pp 244-245). Incorporating aesthetics into the definition of literacy expands it to "include ways that individuals interact within the complex sociocultural system" (Handerhan, 1993, p. 247). Since literacy "is attained through problem solving" (p. 247) aesthetics allow

students to "use different learning styles and prior knowledge, pulling together diverse cognitive and affective experiences and organizing them the assist students in understanding" (Selwyn, 1993, as cited in Stevens, 2002 p. 21).

Parallel symbol systems in language and visual arts.

Albers (1997) demonstrates four ways that "we can apply the same critique to art as we can to print-based literacy" (p. 339). The first is rooted in the dynamic meanings in both visual and written works that are situated in the personal experiences of the artist and the viewer/reader of the art. The second illustrates the similarities in the time needed for students to learn to recognize the tools needed to make meaning in their work, which in the visual arts and semiotic and aesthetic systems that include the elements and principles of art. The third parallels the process of creating, revision, editing, and experimentation that occur in both media, and the fourth is the need for both the artists and audiences in both media to engage in reflection (p. 339). The success of such methods can be seen in studies such as Richards (2003) who observed that

> The emergent kindergartener and first-grade readers who study the elements of art, the principles of design, and then study the composition in art remove the guessing game from decoding a word or a sentence. Kindergarteners and first-graders learning to read have the tendency to look at the first letter of a word and call out any word that begins with that letter. But young arts students would look at then entire word the same as they look at art pieces and quickly try to put meaning to it. The do the same with sentences and soon become fluent readers with sound comprehension skills (p. 20)

Literacy as interpretation.

"A good story often has a layer of deeper meaning lurking beneath the surface just waiting to be interpreted by the discerning reader" (Barton, Sawyer, & Swanson, 2007, p. 125) and in-turn, "the profundity of a reader's interpretations is dependent in large part on the ability to focus on important information in a given text" (Jiminez, Garcia, and Peterson, 1996; Pressley, 2006, as cited in Barton, Sawyer, & Swanson, 2007, p. 216). With this in mind, Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson (2007) developed "Tools for Contemplation" (p. 126), six strategies of interpretation that are applicable to both readers and viewers of art. These tools helped their third-graders to "observe and construct meaning in stories (and other pieces of art) we read and discussed throughout the school year" (p. 126). These methods allowed students to "visualize and interpret the knowledge they've co-constructed about key relationships in the text (Parsons, 2006, as cited in Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson, 2007, pp. 130).

Handernan (1993) describes the sense making processes used in understanding art and written texts as similar because "they both involve the act of interpreting a field of reference. (p. 247). When this field of reference is visual as opposed to text-based it becomes more accessible, "not everyone learns in the same way, and in our society some children are left behind because their logical/mathematical and verbal/linguistic intelligences are not developed" (Richards, 2003, p. 23). Albers (1997) describes the arts as something that "not only inform our construction of meaning but they expand our understanding of the world" (p. 338). This can be explained in part by the way that the arts allow "students the flexibility and freedom to control their own learning and to personalize their meaning making" (Gamwell, 2005 p. 373).

Methodologies For Teaching Literacy

Beyond Focusing Only on Reading and Writing

Given our rigid traditional view of literacy as encompassing only read and written forms of communication, art is marginalized as a "sidecar" (Stevens, 2002, p. 20) of curriculum and not a core component even though visual and non-verbal communication is one of our strongest and most ubiquitous methods of broadcasting and exchanging information.

The trivialization of art.

Despite its many benefits to student learning and achievement, particularly in the area of literacy, art has been trivialized in education because it has been traditionally viewed as a means to "elevate the masses to upper-class status" (Albers, 1997, p. 339) and its goal was to "teach the 'correct' interpretations of various artworks" (p. 339) as opposed to allowing the viewer to construct her own interpretations of the content. Consequently, art became severed from the "ebb and flow of human and social experience" (Beyer, 1995, as cited in Albers, 1997, p. 339) and as such was excluded from the day-to-day activities of most peoples' lives. The creation and interpretation of art was viewed as being "outside the experience of the 'ordinary' person, and within the minds of art 'experts'" (Albers, 1997, p. 339). As a result, elementary teachers tend to know very little about the arts and trivialize them in their classrooms (Eisner, 1995, as cited in Albers, 1997, p. 338) and language arts teachers "shy away from implementing literacy in 'other forms'" (Albers, 1997, p. 338) because they are do not know how to tap into the power art has to communicate and connect it with literacy.

Personally meaningful communication.

"Learning through the arts provides a vehicle for students to become actively engaged in the construction of their own learning" (Gamwell, 2005, p. 359). When students learn, it is critical for them to decide "which skills to choose as most relevant to the immediate sense-making activity rather than the teacher deciding" (Handerhan, 1993, p. 247). Cowan and Albers (2006) continually seek out "professional resources, ideas, and workshops that enable us to more thoughtfully and semioticaly engage students as they evolve their literacy." (p. 127). This enables their students to "talk about topics safely and, for some, with artistic distance" (p. 127). It is key for teachers to be aware of the unique learning styles of their students because when the teacher relies only on her expectations of how the student will learn, the student can become confused, disengaged, and fail to retain the skills or knowledge the teacher is sharing.

Comic book art.

Comic books have traditionally been excluded from the English Language Arts classroom because many teachers "fear that such a non-traditional approach denies students the time during which they could gain additional exposure to the canon." (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002, p. 758). They are considered to be frivolous and not rigorous enough for academic study.

The "Comic Book Project" described by Bitz (2004) engaged low-performing inner-city students in the creation of both textual and visual communication in the format of comic books. Its goal was to "forge an alternate pathway to literacy via the visual arts" (p. 33). "The participating children were not interested in making art, and certainly not interested in building literacy skills" (p. 33) and had students been asked to write a

traditional text only short story, the quality and depth of their end products would have been dramatically different

The project did not target children who had been identified as talented in art and many "may in fact have never been exposed to making art at all" (Bitz, 2004, p. 33). The comic book was a successful genre for their project because of its strong presence in the popular culture the students subscribed to and because it entailed an "engaging artistic process in which words fit intuitively with pictures" (p. 34). The children who participated were able to "assert their thoughts and beliefs, particularly their fears and perceptions about life and occasionally dismal predictions for their own futures." (p. 39). They were also motivated by the end product they were creating which could be shared with each other, displayed in schools, and presented online (p. 33). Ultimately, the success of The Comic Book Project can be attributed to the fact that the students were motivated by "desires fulfilled in the perception itself [and] not for the sake of something else" (Greene, 1978, as cited in Handerhan, 1993, p. 248). It enabled the teachers to "reach students who may not be easily reached otherwise" (Stevens, 2002, p. 22). In other words, the students were intrinsically motivated to work hard and create strong end products because of their interest in what they were writing about and the format it was being presented in and this accounts for The Comic Book Project's success.

Non-verbal communication.

Comprehension of a text or a concept can be demonstrated both visually and linguistically. The use of "The Talking Drawings Strategy" (Paquette, Fello, & Jalonga, 2007) and the integrated assessments for English Language Learners described by Armon and Morris (2008) demonstrate how drawings can communicate far more about what a

student knows or understands than his words can. Reilly's (2008) "Art Conversations" can help English Language Learners write deep and meaningful poetry.

Talking drawings.

When Ms. Rab tried to use a KWL Plus chart in her science lesson and realized her students' knowledge about jellyfish was full of difficult to clarify misconceptions, she adopted Mc Connell's "Talking Drawings" strategy (2003, as cited in Paquette, Fello, and Jalonga, 2007 p. 66). This strategy enables children to share what they think they know about a project by drawing a picture that illustrates their knowledge, and then explain orally to the teacher, using the picture as a reference what they know. After the lesson is complete, students are asked to either modify their first picture or draw a second picture that demonstrates their new learning and then compare the first and second drawings with other students and the teacher (pp 65-66). This enables teachers to immediately gain "perspective on the students' familiarity of a particular idea by simply looking at what each child has produced" (p. 66) with the bonus of the fact that the strategy is "more motivating to students than an assignment such as 'write a paragraph about'" (pp 66-67). It also allows for differentiated instruction goals to be integrated into the lesson. Additionally, "students can use this strategy to develop higher-level thinking skills through self-reflection and analysis of pre-and post-learning drawings." (p. 73).

Similarly, Ms Adams was able to ask students to "construct on the spot drawings to demonstrate understanding" in her science class (Armon & Morris, 2008, p. 49). In the case of her student Emil, an English Language Learner, she was able to collect rich on-going assessments by integrating literacy and art into her lessons and assignments (p. 49). By integrating writing into her science class, she was able to use it as a "tool for

developing and articulating thinking" (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Armon & Morris, 2008, p. 49), and drawing enabled students to develop their eye for "details they might otherwise overlook" (Armon & Morris, 2003, p. 49).

Finger painting conversations.

English language learners can be freed from many of the barriers of communication they face in school through "nonverbal 'dialogues' where two or more people converse by finger painting" (Reilly, 2008, p. 99). The students sit opposite each other "with only a palette of paint and a sheet of glossy white finger painting paper (12"x16") between them" (p. 101) and engage in a visual conversation for twenty minutes. Over this time, multiple layers of paint are added to the paper, and the students images begin to evolve from ones inspired by the story they had just heard as a class to images that are personally meaningful to them on the topic or theme of the story.

Once these conversations were complete, the teacher modeled strategies for translating the images on the paper into a personally meaningful poem, and later, used one of the strongest students in the class's poems as a model for how to edit and revise a poem to create the strongest possible polished version. Reilly (2002) hypothesizes that "an experience a student captures in print may have been triggered in part by the visual image(s) the student perceives as s/he studies the painted conversation and thinks about the topic at hand" (p. 105). This is seen when students are struggling for the right words and "they repeatedly study the painting and their emerging poem" (p. 105). In sum, the teachers indicated "their students enjoyed writing more and were reading with greater frequency after the arts integration than during prior school years."

Semiotic Systems of Communication

The Importance of Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols used in communication. Knowing multiple semiotic systems of communication that extend beyond the linguistic enhance students' abilities to broaden and deepen their literacy skills. The arts provide additional semiotic systems that allow for differentiated instruction activating multiple intelligences such as visual, audio, and kinesthetic.

        The benefits of using a variety of semiotic systems.

        When learners "translate their thoughts into a new material product, [they] often develop new ideas about the object of their thinking" (Smagorinksy, 1996, as cited in Gamwell, 2005, p. 376). Cowan and Albers (2006) are "convinced that literacy must be viewed as a complex process that necessarily involves thinking across and within multiple sign systems" (p. 135). This entails translating words into sounds, actions, pictures or a combination of some or all of the above, and vice versa which results in a deeper understanding of the messages being communicated in each. When students engaged in performing and visual arts activities in Gamwell's (2005) language and literature class in response to the literature they were reading, they "temporarily constructed a new reality that allowed them to explore feelings and sensations that were different for them" when they were reading and analyzing texts. They were able to personalize their experiences and in-turn become "actively engaged in the construction of their own learning" (Gamwell, 2005, p. 359). Similarly, the multiple semiotic systems used in comic books enabled the low-performing students in The Comic Book Project (Bitz, 2004) to create works that were significantly richer and deeper than what they

would have produced had they been restricted to the single semiotic system of language in a traditional "write a paragraph about" assignment.

Literacy through transmediation of semiotic systems.

"Semiotics positions students to inquire into and create texts that demonstrate their power, or lack thereof, in ordinary life settings such as family or school" (Cowan & Albers, 2006, p. 127). Like language, art is a system of communication.

Visual art's semiotic symbol system.

Students intuitively associated "angular lines with concepts such as anger, war, and violence, and curved lines with calm, peace, and order" (Cowan & Albers, 2006, pp 129-130). The same observations can be made about how students respond to particular colors and textures. Students can use elements of the visual semiotic system such as these to visually respond to the moods and emotions they feel when reading literary texts, and then translate these into words. "At the same time, the create drawings of their protagonist, moving between these two sign systems to generate imagery. By this time, their creative juices are flowing, and they write at a tremendous pace" (p. 130). Through transmediation between semiotic systems in lessons such as this, "students develop habits in strategy use and habits in knowledge and practice of sign systems that help them develop strong literacy practices." (p. 133).

From abstract art to abstract thought.

Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson (2007) used abstract art to enhance third-grade students' abilities to comprehend written texts abstractly as "the profundity of a reader's interpretations is dependent in large part on the ability to focus on important information in a given text" (p. 126). They used both modern and contemporary sculpture to allow

students to have concrete, tangible experiences with abstractions. When abstract ideas are expressed visually, the strategies we use to think abstractly become more understandable" (p. 127). Students also created their own abstract sculptures to illustrate their abstract thoughts and ideas, and over the course of the school year Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson's (2007) "students became gradually more conversant with new observation strategies as they manipulated and discussed them with different texts" (p. 128).

Literacy: a process of weaving, not scaffolding.

In 1975, Bruner and his colleagues began using the metaphor of scaffolding, "shaped by the theoretical ideas of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978)" (Dyson, 1990, p. 203). In this system, adults, and more highly skilled peers give interactional support to students with weaker skills so they can improve in a linear progression. This system is flawed however because it is not effective when the adults and children involved do not share a common purpose (Dyson, 1990). Dyson suggests the use of "weaving" which "adds a horizontal dimension" (p. 204) to the "vertical metaphor" (p. 204) of scaffolding. Weaving combines students' progress in a variety of activities including those in visual art to support overall development, which may or may not follow a prescribed linear path. It "portrays teachers as helping children weave literacy from a rich diversity of resources that they bring to school with them – resources nurtured by their intentions in varied learning spaces" (p. 211). Weaving incorporates the transmediation of multiple semiotic systems such as children's designs and pictures, and a broad range of experiences from school, home, and other places that the students bring with them to the classroom.

Suggestions and Considerations to Redefine "Literacy" in Education

The following suggestions and considerations are made in regards to improving literacy levels in students using art are made for all subject area teachers. The include the broadening definition of literacy and broadening the semiotic systems used to instruct and assess students beyond the written text.

Broadening the definition of Literacy

Literacy refers to one's ability to communicate. Historically, it has been defined as the ability to read and write, however given the linguistic diversity of our society and the broad range of learning skills, intelligences, and pathways to learning students possess, it is in need of revision.

Suggestions and considerations for broadening the definition of literacy.

Literacy is, at is core, always about the act of interpreting a field of reference. The field of reference should not be limited to a written text, but instead include visual, oral, audio, and kinesthetic texts. Thus, teachers should place "arts at the centre of the language curriculum [to allow] for children's expressive interests to guide their approach to learning" (Gamwell, 2005, p. 363). Harste (1994, 2000 as cited in Cowan & Albers, 2006) suggests that literacy "involves experience with a variety of communication systems" (p. 124) such as language, drama, music, and visual arts allowing students to have a broad range of ways to experience "fields of reference" and media in which to demonstrate their ability to interpret them. Teachers, curriculum designers, and policy makers would need to be trained to de-trivialize their views of art and overcome their feelings of fear and discomfort in teaching or partaking in it. This can be acheived if teachers and administrators in charge of professional development "continue to seek out

professional resources, ideas, and workshops to enable us to more thoughtfully and semiotically engage students as they evolve in their literacy" (Cowan & Albers, 2006, p. 127). They need to be shown the connection between art and life and to use the arts to empower students to construct their own meanings and interpretations both visually and linguistically. In doing so, students would be able to make personally meaningful connections to the material they are being taught, greatly enhancing their engagement in their learning and in-turn, their achievement.

Broadening Semiotic Systems Beyond the Linguistic

Semiotics are systems of symbols used in communication. Currently, linguistic semiotics are often the only systems students are asked to use to communicate with the teacher and their peers, and to demonstrate their knowledge.

Suggestions and considerations for broadening semiotic systems beyond the linguistic.

"Cross-cultural studies by anthropologists, for example, highlight the diversity of learning literacies (Handerhan, 1993, p. 246). Albers (1997) describes literacy as something that is and must be "a social undertaking where teachers and students come together in speech and action to create different perceptions of their world. This is an enormous challenge for language arts teachers." (p. 347) however, doing so expands the ways literacy can be demonstrated and expressed beyond the written and read word and into the arts.

There are many ways for teachers to broaden the semiotic systems used to instruct and assess students ability to comprehend, analyze, interpret, and respond to content that extend beyond the linguistic. Oster's (1993) interdisciplinary unit on Sub-

Saharan Africa's studio art component "allowed students to express their understanding of the academic material in art work that reflected their personal vision and creativity" (p. 28). Teachers can also broaden the genres of texts they use in their classrooms beyond the traditional literary canon to popular works that incorporate visual-spatial communication such as comic books, TV shows, movies, and so on. They can give students opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through popular media similar to projects like Bitz's (2004) "The Comic Book Project. They can also facilitate activities such as Reilly's (2008) "art conversations" to enrich the learning and linguistic skills of all students, not just English language learners. When strategies such as these are combined with weaving together the knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom (Dyson, 1990), students are free to make choices and take control of their own learning, unrestricted by a narrowly defined path set by the teacher. In doing so, students "may be able to reveal their understanding in a way that is more compatible with their strengths than if they are limited to traditional forms of expression." (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002, p. 759).

Summary

"In schools where works of art and the artistic process provide models for learning and knowing, the school becomes a studio" (Stevens, 1997). The student is seen as an artist who experiences joy in interpreting, presenting, performing, and influencing his or her medium – the quintessential learner" (Stevens, 2002, p. 20). The purpose of this review was to examine the ways that art can be used to enhance students' literacy skills, analyze the reasons why art is not commonly included in the definition or teaching of literacy, and provide examples and rationales of how it can be successfully

incorporated. Of key importance is the teachers' ability to utilize students' multiple

intelligences through differentiated instruction and assessment, and to overcome the

traditional definitions of literacy, pedagogical practices, and personal biases and may

prevent them from doing so.

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