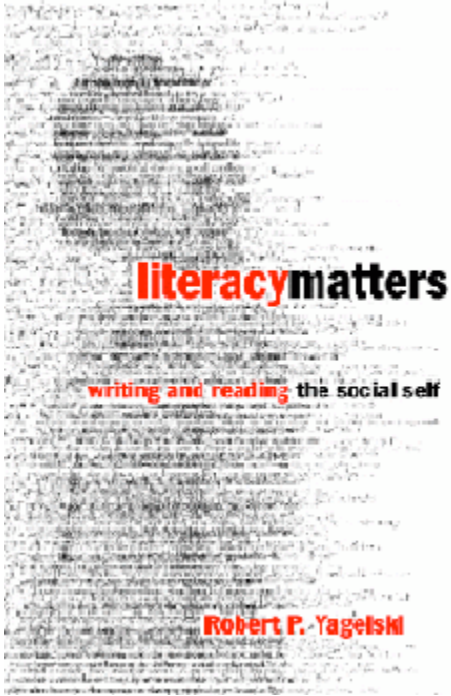


Chapter 1

Abby's Lament: Does Literacy Matter?



Literacy remains a human invention contained by social contract, and the maintenance of that contract in education betrays our ideas of humanity as surely as our use of literacy enforces them.

--Elspeth Stuckey, The Violence of Literacy

Never write anything; you'll only regret it.

--Don Whillans, mountaineer

Write as if your life depended upon it.

--Adrienne Rich, poet and activist

Abby doesn't believe she matters. She is sixteen years old, a junior in a rural high school in upstate New York, and she doesn't believe that, in the larger scheme of things, she "can make a difference." She doesn't believe, in fact, that anyone her age can make a difference. She's irrelevant. They are all irrelevant. They don't matter in "society."

Abby told me all this during a visit I made to her school, Queensbury High School, a large public high school located in a small town in the Adirondack Mountains. I had been invited by her teacher, Kim Marker, who was then the head of the Queensbury English Department, to talk to her colleagues and some of her students about the possibilities for literacy learning with computers, which I had been studying with both college- and high school-age writers. I had spent the day at Queensbury cheerleading for the great communications revolution represented by the rapidly evolving use of computer technologies and the growth of the Internet and World Wide Web. My pitch was something like this: You're in the midst of the Information Age, a time characterized by an explosion of information fueled largely by computer and video media; if you're going to have any control over what happens in your lives, especially your political lives, you need to be able to participate in what's happening around you. That means you'll have to be able to confront this new information technology, to find a way onto the much-heralded Information Superhighway and its many by-ways, and to make critical decisions about what information matters and what to do with it. Otherwise, those with the knowledge of and access to these emerging communications technologies will make the decisions for you. You'll be left behind, on some dead-end off-ramp.

It was, at its heart, a classic American argument for self-determination, and I pitched it as a kind of New Age exigency, a step toward a futuristic technological revolution that opened up untold possibilities for those with the knowledge and skills to participate. And for many of those teen-aged kids, who sat politely and (for the most part) attentively through my animated presentations, it seemed to resonate. At the very least, it was a mildly interesting diversion from the daily grind of English class (about which much more later). But Abby

wasn't buying it. When you're irrelevant, you're irrelevant, computers or not, she was saying. The people who make decisions don't listen to kids, she argued: we have no say in what gets decided. I countered that she *did* have a say, that her views could be expressed in all kinds of ways: through letters to editors and political bodies such as town councils and school boards, through petitions and rallies, through student publications. You *can* make your voice heard, I asserted, especially through writing. The Internet and World Wide Web offer even more opportunities to make that voice heard and to gather information that can give impact to your voice. And when you're old enough to vote, you'll have a powerful way to register your views. What difference would that make? she asked in what was more than an affected adolescent dismissal. I didn't know this young woman, but it seemed clear to me that she wasn't putting on a show for her classmates. She was in earnest. Here was a twist to the Generation X apathy regarding political affairs that the popular press likes to describe. This young woman wasn't uninterested; she was angry about being perceived as unimportant and she was skeptical about my claims that she mattered. And she wouldn't give me an inch.

At the time, I was glad for Abby's feisty engagement with my ideas. After all, this was the kind of discussion I often try hard to foster in my own classrooms: lively dialogue about important issues intended to engage students and get them to think hard about those issues. I suspected that Abby spoke for many of her silent classmates, some of whom followed our exchange closely. This was, as I saw it, an opportunity for me to make my case that those kids did matter, to try to convince them that they could take some control over their social and political lives through a critical understanding of literacy and the careful and savvy use of the written word. It'll soon be your world, I told them, if you want to take charge of it. And you can do that through literacy. Abby's complaints fueled my own animated pitch, and I wasn't about to leave that day without convincing at least one of them that I was right--that they *did* matter, and that literacy was the vehicle for their claims to the world.

In essence, I was offering Abby and her classmates my canned and somewhat oversimplified version of the kind of "emancipatory literacy" that theorist Paulo Freire, among others, advocates. As Henri Giroux (1987) explains it, Freire's view rests on the assumption that literacy is "a necessary foundation for cultural action and freedom, a central aspect of what it means to be a self and socially constituted agent" (p.7). For Freire, "literacy is fundamental to aggressively constructing one's voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment." From the time I first encountered Freire's (1970/1984) views on literacy in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a young graduate student in the early 1980s, I had begun to see my own teaching as based on some version of a Freirean critical literacy as a means of social change and individual empowerment. Such terms as social change and individual empowerment are slippery, especially given the sometimes problematic ways that they are used in the professional jargon of scholars and educators. But for me they refer generally to the crucial role that reading and writing can play in our individual and collective lives within a democratic political system and a capitalist economy. Like Freire, I see reading and writing as acts of participation in a wider project of possibility and empowerment, as a way to construct our roles in that project, as a vehicle for participation in the discourses that shape our lives, and as a means of making sense of our lives in the context of others' lives. Literacy is central to the ongoing struggle for democracy and self-determination. It is a matter of individual empowerment in the way that it can enable one to negotiate the complexities of life; it is empowerment in a broader sense in that literate acts are always inherently social within the political, cultural, and economic contexts within which we lead our individual lives. And literacy represents a kind of joy as well: the joy that comes with using language to structure your world, to give voice to your ideas, to create a space for yourself in an endless stream of discourses, to work toward change, to reflect, to expound--to act.

It was that set of beliefs about literacy, in a watered-down form, that I was sharing with

Abby and her classmates at Queensbury High School. I was genuinely interested in the ways in which those students are "socially constituted agents" and literate beings with the potential for committed political action. I was interested in helping students gain access to a literacy that opens up opportunities for them to claim agency for themselves, to participate in the many discourses that shape their lives--including those in evolving electronic media. And like Abby that day, I was in earnest.

I am still. But not without reservations. And it is in large measure the tension between my continuing belief in the potential power of literacy on the one hand and the many reservations I have come to hold about literacy and especially about how we teach it on the other that energizes this book. Since that visit to Queensbury High School, I have thought--and spoken--often of Abby and what literacy might mean to her and students like her. And like many educators who have devoted their professional lives to the teaching of literacy, I have begun to wonder uneasily about what I do in working with those students. I have begun to wonder, for instance, about the relationship between Abby's view of the world--and her participation, or lack of it, in that world--and my role as a teacher of writing and reading, a researcher committed to broadening our understanding of literacy, an educator who has helped train the English teachers with whom students like Abby study. How much of what I do actually empowers students in ways that Freire and other theorists describe? How much of what I do actually works *against* such empowerment?

English Education and the Violence of Literacy

Elsbeth Stuckey's (1991) angry book, *The Violence of Literacy*, articulates some of my own concerns about literacy education. In her book, Stuckey argues that the "usual speculations" about literacy and its importance are wrong "because the assumptions about economic and social forces on which they are based are faulty" (p. vii). Literacy, she says, does not inevitably lead to economic success and social opportunity, as our social mythologies would have us believe; rather, it is implicated in an "entrenched class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it" (p. vii). Moreover, literacy is "destructive" in the sense that it helps perpetuate that unjust class system. She documents that "destruction" in the form of exclusionary educational and social practices in which literacy figures centrally, unequal access to economic and social opportunity for citizens from certain classes, and institutionalized racism and sexism. And she attempts to describe "the extraordinary power of the educational process and of literacy standards not merely to exclude citizens from participating in the country's economic and political life but to brand them and their children with indelible prejudice, the prejudice of language" (p. 122). In these ways, she concludes, "literacy and English instruction can hurt you, more clearly and forcefully than it [sic] can help you" (p. 123). It is a sobering analysis--particularly so for those of us who have worked within the belief that "literacy really made us human" (p. 124). No, Stuckey unequivocally says, "literacy was never this way, and it was wrong to think it was" (p. 124).

Like Stuckey, I have come to understand some of the ways in which, "far from engineering freedom, our current approaches to literacy corroborate other social practices that prevent freedom and limit opportunity" (p. vii). I don't believe that Abby's rejection of my optimistic arguments about literacy and technology were driven by a careful analysis of literacy and its relationship to class and political power in the way that Stuckey's argument is. But I do believe that Abby, like so many students in English and language arts classes in this country, sensed some of the ways in which Stuckey may be right about literacy. And I believe Abby and some of her classmates may be onto us. Her ambivalence about her own literacy learning, which emerged in some of her statements that afternoon, grows, I'd argue, out of experiences with literacy that belie the mythology of possibility in a classless

democratic society, a mythology that, as Stuckey points out, continues to drive our views about literacy and is continually reinforced by traditional curricula, popular media, and cultural practices. In other words, Abby's experience in the world contradicts much of what her English teachers--and other representatives of the educational and political establishment, including me--tell her about the importance of writing and reading, about the difference it can make in her life; moreover, as I hope to show in this book, most of what Abby is asked to do as a writer and reader in school has little relevance to her social, political, cultural, and economic life outside school.

I have come to believe that in some unsettling ways Abby is right: she is largely irrelevant. As a young citizen about to enter the adult world that has determined so much of her life, she is in many ways far removed from the political and institutional structures that shape her life. Her experiences teach her that she does not figure in any significant way into the political workings of the society she inhabits, and regardless of what her teachers say, her encounters with literacy have done little to challenge that. The texts that she confronts daily--those "sanctioned" classroom texts like Shakespeare and Edith Wharton alongside the more prevalent cultural "texts" available to her on MTV and network news broadcasts with their hi-tech "town meetings"--do little to encourage a sense of participation in the political life of a society that seems so familiar to her yet out of her reach. Indeed, the texts she encounters outside the classroom encourage a different sort of participation--that of consumer--in ways that reduce political awareness to simple desires like having more "disposable income" or owning a particular kind of car or pair of athletic shoes, material goods that are presented as the measures and rewards of "success" in an economic system that defines Abby as a consumer. Worse, so many of those "texts" deny the existence of a political life in ways that reinforce Abby's sense of disconnection and encourage her lack of participation. Think of the not-so-subtle images that accompany the consumerist mantras like "Life is good" (from a popular ad for beer in the mid-1990s) that we are continuously exposed to in television and print (and now Internet) advertising for all kinds of products. Think of the daunting numbers of these images and slogans and the numbing regularity with which "consumers" like Abby are exposed to them. Think, too, of the messages about what matters contained in those images. Pop singer Bruce Springsteen's cynical indictment of cable television, "57 Channels and Nothing's On," recalls the famous TV-as-wasteland metaphor from the 1950s. But something is "on" those 57 channels: an endless stream of slightly different versions of the same text, the same continuous advertisement for a consumer culture in which agency is defined as the ability to choose which products to buy. How does one "read" such texts, which suggest that the only real power a student like Abby has is her "purchasing power?" The "sanctioned" texts like Shakespeare and Wharton that she encounters in her English classes--and the passive ways in which she is likely asked to engage those texts--do little to help her learn to negotiate those popular consumerist images and slogans and to consider what they might mean in her political and economic life. Given what she typically encounters in her "official" literacy learning in school and what she encounters outside that institutional setting, it's no surprise that she feels irrelevant.

But I don't believe it needs to be that way. While Stuckey may be right about the relationship between literacy and the maintenance of an unfair and often oppressive political and economic system, literacy *does* constitute power. It is not the "personal empowerment" implied in much of the professional jargon that educators and theorists use, nor the simplistic literacy of "economic empowerment" that political leaders invoke as they announce "new" initiatives to "fight the literacy crisis"; rather, literacy represents a kind of power to participate in extraordinarily complex ways in the social, cultural, and political discourses that shape people's lives. That power resides not solely in the capacity to understand political discourse in what is supposed to be a democratic society or the so-called basic skills required for adequate employment in a capitalist system, but in a myriad of more mundane ways that often have a far more direct and profound impact on our lives:

- the ability to understand a lease or notice from a public agency;
- to negotiate a car loan agreement;
- to make sense of a curriculum document from your child's school;
- to submit a petition to a town council or school board;
- to respond to a request to sign a petition;
- to understand the risks inherent in a mortgage document;
- to engage a philosophical argument about welfare reform published in a local newspaper;
- to register for a course at a local college;
- to request information from a government agency about local water quality;
- to decipher a report from the therapist who has examined an aging parent;
- to decide on an insurance policy;
- to lodge a complaint about working conditions at a place of employment;
- to understand the minimum wage law announcement posted on a bulletin board at a workplace;
- to find a site on the World Wide Web with trustworthy information on a local toxic dump clean-up;
- to place the editorial of a local newspaper columnist in critical perspective;
- to be skeptical about the subtle messages contained in an advertisement for athletic shoes;
- to delight in the subtle language of a popular song;
- to compose a letter describing a divorce proceeding to a distant family member.

Such local acts of literacy do not at first glance seem to carry the political weight that theorists like Giroux and Freire suggest literacy represents; indeed, they seem almost petty in light of the theoretical arguments and political debates about literacy and school curricula that occupy elected officials and academics. But these acts of literacy amount to the very kind of political and economic participation about which Freire writes; they are local manifestations of the broader ideological struggles inherent in literate acts. And they represent the many complex, sometimes overlapping, often conflicting discourses within which people function every day, within which they negotiate the constraints and challenges of contemporary life, within which they make the many small decisions that can determine how much control they exercise over their lives. In this sense, an understanding of literacy in the context of those many discourses, and the ability to participate through literacy in those discourses, represents power. Moreover, as Eli Goldblatt (1994) has so poignantly

noted, written language serves a "realizing function" (p. 28) by making "real" the institutions that shape our lives: "At the same time that writing confers an institutional validity to both our public and private lives, writing done by individuals effectively creates and maintains the reality of social institutions" (p. 29). In other words, individual writers and readers shape our collective reality through written discourse. To participate in those discourses is thus to shape our lives and the cultural and institutional ground on which we live those lives.

For me, then, the task of the literacy educator is not simply to teach students how to write and read or to help them "see" meaning in a literary text deemed "great" or even to encourage them to engage in cultural critique, but to enable them to understand how literacy functions as a means of participation in those ever-shifting discourses that shape our lives and to find ways to give students like Abby some measure of access to that power--even as we, like Stuckey, continue to acknowledge and examine and elucidate the ways in which literacy *is* violent.

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