

C O M M E N T A R Y

## Opening Up the Conversation on Literacy, College, and Career

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I had an unexpected realization recently as I finished a major grant proposal with a good friend and colleague: It was fun. My reflection would be curious to an outsider, given the late nights and weekends consumed by this task, the volume of reading required, the challenge of melding my thinking and writing with that of another person, and the laser-like attention to tedious details—particularly because all of the hard work might not pay off in actual funding. But I looked forward to arriving at the Starbucks in my university's library the moment it opened on Saturday morning, arming myself with a latte and dual access to electronic sources through my laptop computer and the print-only options upstairs in the stacks.

I read, thought, wrote, thought, read, and thought until I felt I would burst and sat down later for a conversation via Skype with my colleague to toss around the ideas that had begun to brew and to hear about just the perfect article that he had found while doing research. Consistently, those talks left me with even more interesting ways to think about things I would have never come to on my own. In truth, I thought about this work almost constantly, nearly obsessively. I was absorbed in the best possible way.

We came away from that experience, grant award or not, changed. We could not help but reflect on how much distance we had covered in our thinking. We both have goals that blur the lines between personal and professional, that is, a mission to improve the quality of the present and future lives of children through literacy. This hard work carries us further to that end. It is fun, and it is personally fulfilling. Oh, the luxury of life in academia.

I confess, though, that my introduction to higher education, long before I decided to make my career there, was a far cry from this scene. As an undergraduate many years ago, I never truly appreciated the time in my life that could be set aside to study, think, and learn with others who were there to do the same thing, at least in theory. To put it bluntly, I squandered that opportunity.

I am certain I am not alone in that regret, even among some of my peers who, like me, were reborn and made anew as students, eventually achieving several advanced degrees. But as an 18-year-old, I was unprepared,

unmotivated for academic work, and clueless about myself as a learner. In high school, my identity was that of “A” student, and within that context, this identity was enough to make me very successful. My first few weeks in freshman calculus class, however, obliterated that self-narrative.

## The Current Conversation

College and career readiness, much like the state of adolescent literacy in general over a decade ago, has been branded a national crisis, and the widespread concern is aimed at students far less prepared than I had been. In reading various policy documents and position papers on this issue, you might infer that there is general agreement on what might seem to many as an obvious solution to the problem, at least when it comes to literacy: Determine which reading, writing, and communication skills students will need and triple our efforts in middle and high school to see that an acceptable level of competence is achieved.

For instance, in 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices released the Common Core Standards, which are anchored in skills and knowledge deemed essential for success in college and the workplace. In theory, adherence to the literacy and mathematics standards, which are sequentially more difficult and complex from kindergarten through 12th grade, will equip students to manage the heavy lifting of postsecondary work. *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success* (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010) underscores the improvement of basic and advanced reading and writing skills, teacher preparation, and the use of data for monitoring progress and planning instruction.

These are certainly not new kinds of suggestions. Less than 10 years after the International Reading Association’s Commission on Adolescent Literacy called for heightened concern about the rights of adolescent learners (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999), more than 20 national-level responses emerged (Jacobs, 2008), most of which emphasize the same types of goals and actions as those in recent recommendations for postsecondary readiness. For instance, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and*

*Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006) delineates “the fifteen elements of effective adolescent literacy programs” (pp. 4–5) that also highlight explicit instruction in skills, teacher expertise, and assessments.

More recent conversations differ from previous versions, however, in their attempts to connect early literacy and later learning. The Common Core State Standards demand a comprehensive look at grades K–12, and the Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy (2010) gives an explicit nod to Reading First, even while acknowledging its failure to create substantial improvements (p. 7). They insist, instead,

the instructional focus of Reading First must be enhanced, extended, and deepened over grades 4–12 in order to fully support our adolescent learners, raise the overall level of literacy in schools, and help our students to become highly literate adults. (p. 18)

The downfall of Reading First, as this group sees it, was “problems with its oversight and implementation” (p. 17). Fundamentally though, the tenor of the current conversation is clear and has remained relatively unchanged as we extend our thinking to life and literacy past 12th grade: To get students ready for college and the workplace, make sure they know how to read and write difficult things.

That is certainly one way to think about the problem, and I suppose this is the dominant message among those who have elected to speak out. But there are perhaps different ways to approach this dilemma. One option is to entertain the idea that we do not actually have a firm grasp on the literacy skills needed after high school, and that to forge ahead clinging to the same old, same old could be futile.

## Rethinking Expectations

Yancey (2009) argued that *college* and *college-level literacy* no longer mean something definitive, given the range of options for education (e.g., community college, online degrees, liberal arts colleges, research institutions) and new kinds of literacies. While expectations for literacy might be unpredictable, according to Yancey, what is certain is the need for students to acknowledge that they are novices in this

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new context, and they must figure things out where they are.

Related, the capabilities for technology in most middle- and high-school classrooms come nowhere near approximating the resources available in a college community. On a university campus, for instance, except for some rare exceptions in some conservative private colleges, particular websites are not blocked; access to scholarly journals and

other sorts of publications are nearly limitless and immediate; and more fundamentally, there is more than one computer for every 25 students.

Given the current rhetoric on literacy and college and career readiness, I fear two equally misguided scenarios in middle- and high-school initiatives. One is a naïve vision of college literacy that results in a cross-curriculum focus on basic strategies for reading textbooks, superficial experiences infusing technology into reading and writing, and a uniform process for writing persuasive essays. Another is the commercialization of college-readiness programs conveniently aligned with popular reading and writing standards that perpetuate old ways of thinking about literacy and its uses. In both cases, the expectation is set for students merely to manage, navigate, or perform existing texts individually rather than to create new texts or generate knowledge within a community. I worry that these frameworks not only underprepare students for life after high school, but will actually mask the more interesting possibilities for learning and productivity that await students in college and career.

A second option for approaching the problem is admitting there is a more pressing issue than reading and writing skills, *per se*. Shockingly absent from current conversations on improving adolescent literacy and, in particular on college and career readiness, is the problem of student engagement in school and in literacy building.

### **Considering the Personal**

Undeniably, students who are most successful in college are those who are academically prepared

(Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Research provides evidence that student engagement is a crucial component of academic development (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), but lack of engagement is a chronic problem in high schools (Marks, 2000). The engagement problem is also specific to literacy in high schools. One study of 15-year-olds in England demonstrated that one year of schooling yielded neither measurable improvement in reading nor an increase in students' willingness to read for personal reasons (Luyten, Peschar, & Coe, 2008).

Students who experience failure in school literacy are often the same students who struggle to see value for it in their everyday lives (Knobel, 2001). Not surprisingly, social and psychological factors often associated with engagement (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy) are also linked to struggles in college (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Robbins et al., 2004).

The Common Core State Standards do acknowledge that a limited focus on reading and writing skills is insufficient groundwork:

While the ELA and content area literacy components described herein are critical to college and career readiness, they do not define the whole of such readiness. Students require a wide-ranging, rigorous academic preparation and, particularly in the early grades, attention to such matters as social, emotional, and physical development and approaches to learning. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 6)

However, this limitation still misses the point. Literacy development and social and emotional development are not distinctive, mutually exclusive constructs. Indeed, it is the "whole" of readiness that needs to take center stage in these conversations.

As Eccles and Roeser (2011) argued, we must acknowledge the integration of various kinds of development within adolescents and aim for "the design of instruction to cultivate interest, meaningfulness, and challenge as well as deep cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with the material" (p. 226). Literacy instruction, then, must not be fundamentally grounded in improving skills, but instead elevated as a tool to enhance students' intellectual and relational development. That is a better match for life in college and beyond.

## Transforming the Conversation Now

I admit that I am partial to these two alternative means of approaching the problem, and not just because these ways of thinking about things resonate with my own best learning experiences, such as the example I used to open this commentary. I also believe these perspectives address a missing thread in the conversation on readying students for life and literacy, and that is the possibility afforded by both choice and uncertainty after high school.

Pursuing one's own ambitions and taking on the unexpected or unpredictable, as contrasted with the confines of a standard curriculum of K–12 classrooms, should be the essence of the postsecondary experience. If students leave high school without ever having passionately pursued a personal interest through literacy, figuring out the hard stuff about reading and writing in that context, it is unlikely that they will understand much about stamina, self-regulation, the power of social learning, or how literacy can be a tool for changing their lives or the lives of others in substantial ways.

This challenge to change the conversation and our practices toward this end is not trivial. However, if we persist in generating language and policy that suggests that literacy, or a lack thereof, operates outside of other dimensions of students' lives and motivations, we are bound to create much a bigger crisis than whether or not we are preparing students to read a freshman's chemistry textbook.

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