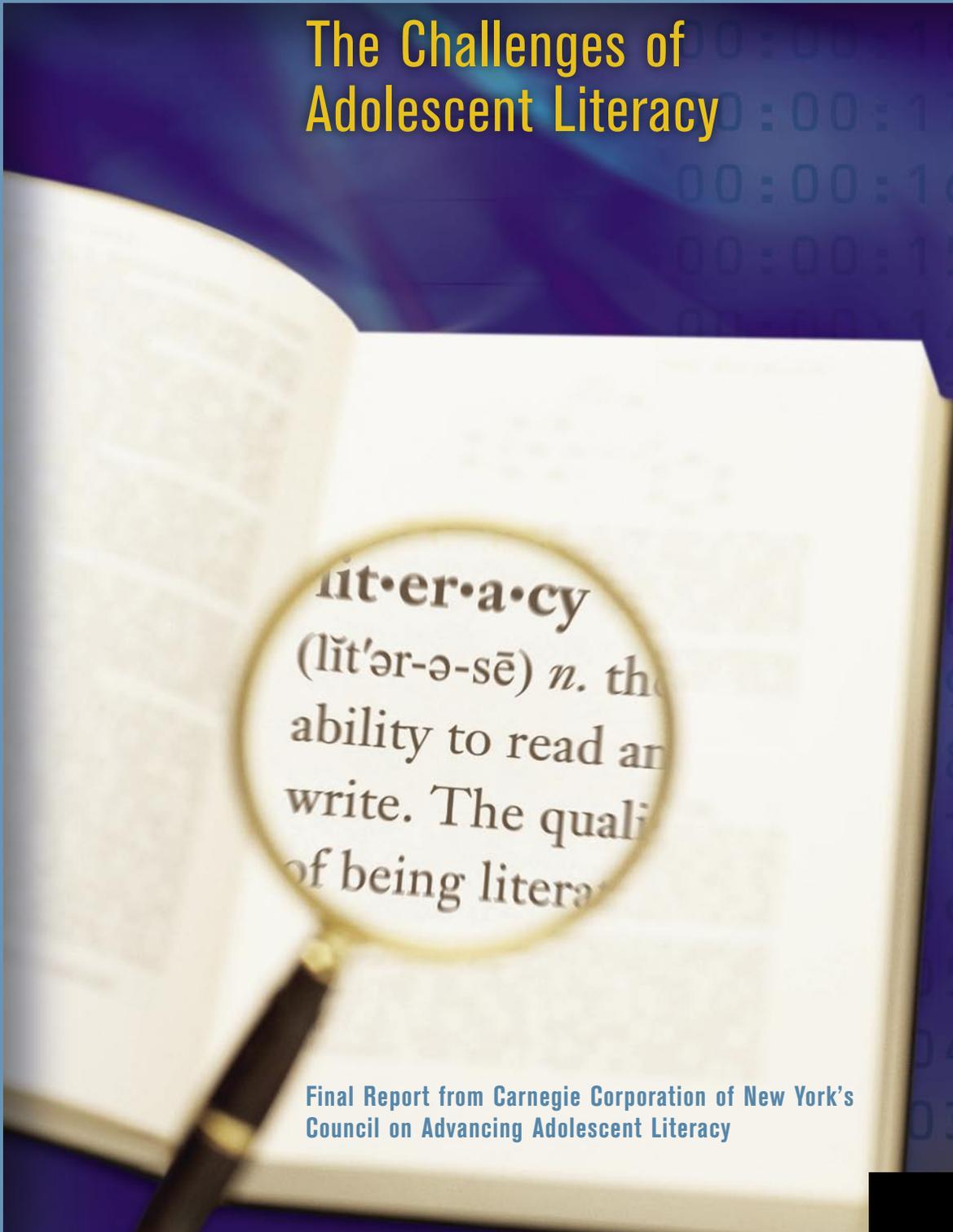


Reading in the Disciplines

The Challenges of Adolescent Literacy

An open book is shown with a magnifying glass held over it. The magnifying glass is focused on a dictionary entry for the word 'literacy'. The background of the entire slide is a dark blue gradient with faint, repeating digital-style time codes (e.g., 00:00:18) in a lighter blue color.

lit·er·a·cy
(līt'ər-ə-sē) *n.* the
ability to read and
write. The quality
of being literate

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Final Report from Carnegie Corporation of New York's
Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy

Introduction and Overview

Adolescents may struggle with text for a number of reasons, including problems with a) vocabulary knowledge, b) general knowledge of topics and text structures, c) knowing of what to do when comprehension breaks down, or d) proficiency in monitoring their own reading comprehension. Most recent literacy initiatives target younger readers and attempt to instill basic decoding and comprehension skills. But struggling adolescent readers in our schools face more complex and pervasive challenges. Supporting these readers as they grapple with the highly specific demands of texts written for different content-areas will help prepare them for citizenship, encourage personal growth and life-satisfaction on many levels, and open up opportunities for future education and employment.

In this paper we focus on one foundational aspect of adolescent literacy that has been relatively ignored by recent reports on the problem. Our starting point is the fact that the major difference between reading in grades K-5 and reading in grades 6-12 is the transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. The latter skill brings into play numerous academic concepts and modes of reasoning, primarily through the act of reading. Adolescents often need more sophisticated and specific kinds of literacy support for reading in content-areas, or academic disciplines. We call this more advanced form of literacy required of adolescent readers “disciplinary literacy” because each academic discipline or content-area presupposes specific kinds of background knowledge about how to read texts in that area, and often also requires a particular type of reading.

We will discuss some of the challenges for adolescents in our schools struggling with written texts in the differing academic subject-areas of history, science, mathematics and literature, and

then explore how standards, assessments, and teacher instruction might be strengthened in order to support these readers. (Note: There exist broader conceptions of disciplinary literacy that include writing to explain ideas in ways that are consistent with norms for rhetoric and logic within each discipline, problem solving using the logics of the disciplines, comprehending and composing digital media within the disciplines, and expanding the range of disciplines to include the arts and other areas of human endeavor, including popular culture. We focus here on the basic literacy problem of reading and comprehending texts that display highly specific features and styles of argument.)

Struggling readers are typically envisioned as a minority of students who have pronounced disabilities in reading. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has three levels of reading proficiency: basic, proficient and advanced. NAEP scores for 17 year olds consistently show the same pattern: a majority of students achieve the basic level of reading skills, and at this basic level there are no significant differences based on race/ethnicity or SES. At proficient levels, the scores show stark differences aligned with race/ethnicity and SES. At the most advanced level, less than 10 percent of 17 year olds, regardless of race/ethnicity or SES, are able to comprehend complex texts.

The NAEP data and its consistency across years suggests that the problems of adolescent literacy involve a range of readers, from those with the most basic skill needs to those who have developed general comprehension strategies, but not the specialized strategies, vocabulary and knowledge base required for understanding complex discipline specific texts. Attention to this problem of reading in the disciplines has the potential to meet the needs of a wide range of readers and thus address the problem of adolescent literacy in a comprehensive and productive way.

Reading Literature

As with reading in history, it is probably most easy to make the case for reading in literature classrooms. However, there have been attacks and debates regarding the function of the literature curriculum (Applebee & Purves, 1992). In this section, we make a case for why learning to read literature is important. We also highlight some of the problems inherent in how literature is typically taught in our high schools and how these problems contribute to the difficulties that struggling readers face (Applebee, 1996; Grossman, 2001; Lee, 2007). By demonstrating what is entailed in interpreting literature, we try to illustrate what readers—struggling and competent—need to know in order to become good and hopefully lifelong readers of rich literature.

Just as there are limitations to the range of genres that students learn to read in other content area courses, there are also limitations in the range of texts to which students are exposed in literature classes, particularly in schools in low income communities serving students of color and in basic skills oriented classes in departments that are tracked (Applebee, 1993). The range of texts in such low track classes is quite different from, for example, Advanced Placement courses. It remains the case that the dominant source of readings in the high school English class is the commercial literature anthology. Just as there is little direct instruction about how to tackle the problems that disciplinary texts pose in history, science and mathematics classrooms, there is also insufficient attention in literature classrooms to the nuts and bolts of how to read a range of literary texts (Lee, 2001, 2004; Smith & Hillocks, 1988). It remains the case that literature teachers are more likely to ask students about the symbolism in literary texts than to model or teach how to detect the symbolic from the literal and how to re-construct

the figurative inferences to be made about symbols in literature. Only a small percentage of students graduating high school remain life long readers of the kinds of canonical texts that the literature curriculum hopes to apprentice them into appreciating.

Understanding the rhetorical tools that authors employ in narratives (fictional, autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, biographical) is necessary to understand a range of warrantable interpretations of complex literary works (Scholes, 1985). We say “warrantable interpretations” because literature invites multiple points of view (Jacquenod, 1987) . What is specific to this discipline is the nature of what counts as evidence and what kinds of questions are valued (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000). Evaluation of such works also requires, in an ideal sense, that readers understand how the author goes about shaping an imaginary world that we are able to subjectively enter.

Just as we have argued about the primary role of prior knowledge in comprehending texts in other disciplines, prior knowledge plays an equally important role in comprehending literary texts. The sources of prior knowledge that readers need include but are not limited to the following:

- Text structures going beyond the school based genres—defined broadly as the short story, the novel, poetry and drama. Students should know how to recognize irony and use of unreliable narration. They should also be able to recognize genres such as magical realism, science fiction, allegory, fable, myth, mystery. Specialized genres of poetry include haiku, sonnet, ballad and epic.
- Prototypical human practices and internal states, and the kinds of goal directed behavior that such internal states often trigger (i.e. for example, how jealousy and insecurity can lead to violence)
- A range of interpretive problems embedded in rhetorical tools employed by authors, including symbolism, irony, satire, and problems of point of view including unreliable narration. Readers need not only to understand that they can expect to meet such interpretive problems, but should be able to recognize the rhetorical signals of their use in texts; and to draw on a variety of sources of information—depending on the interpretive problem—to reconstruct what is typically a figurative message.

- The ability to make inter-textual links drawing on the reader’s knowledge about the author, other authors, related texts in which a given work of literature is in conversation (for example, many literary works make allusions to the Bible) or other texts within the same genre (for example, the use of magical realism by authors as diverse as Toni Morrison, Gabriel Marquez, Frantz Kafka, and Amos Tutuola), character types (for example seeing Hamlet and the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison’s classic *Invisible Man* as both exemplars of the tragic hero or its modern counter part, the anti-hero), and archetypal themes (not only from literary but other traditions as well) (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Smagorinsky & Gevinson, 1989; Smagorinsky, Smith, M., 1992).

One of the challenges to the literature curriculum at both the middle and high school levels is how to help students, especially struggling readers, develop conceptual understanding of all these knowledge sources to help them learn to appreciate and develop a disposition to read complex literary works across the lifespan.

Literary works that capture human experience and dilemmas from time periods from the historical past can pose particular difficulties for contemporary novice readers. The language of Shakespeare is difficult not only because of its poetry, but also because its syntax, use of pronouns, and vocabulary do not map on to contemporary uses of language as illustrated in the soliloquy from *Romeo and Juliet* (Box 6).

BOX No.6. | *Soliloquy from Romeo and Juliet*

Romeo: But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her maid art far more fair than she:
Be not her maid, since she is envious;
Her vestal livery is but sick and green
And none but fools do wear it; cast it off. (2.2.3-10)
(Act 2, Scene 2, lines 3 - 10)

Words that are not part of contemporary English in this excerpt include “yonder,” “thou” and “vestal livery.” The syntax of the opening sentence “What light through yonder window breaks?” is an inverted form. A more conventional and contemporary

syntax would read ‘What light breaks through the window over there?’ There are also literary debates about mythical allusions to the moon as Diana, goddess of the moon and patron of virgins in Roman mythology.

The social settings of older texts are often far removed from the life experiences and social values that young people understand. In “The Necklace” by French writer Guy de Maupassant, younger readers will not automatically understand the rigid class structure of Paris in the 1880’s, and therefore not appreciate how the desire for upward mobility is so strong as to distort the value system of Mademoiselle Loisel. Novice readers of Greek tragedies often find the literal plots ridiculous. However, we do know that experienced readers can subjunctively enter imaginary worlds that are far removed from their own lived experiences. They need tools to understand such worlds, to be able to map salient features of these unfamiliar environments to their own prototypical dilemmas as human beings. Greek tragedies often involve a tragic hero who suffers because of hubris or exaggerated self-pride and who engages in an act that reflects a fatal flaw of character. While the exact actions and setting of *Oedipus, the King* by Sophocles may not resonate with the average 11th or 12th grade high school student (whether he or she lives in a low income urban community or a more affluent suburb), many of these same students can predict what will happen when Erica Kane tells a lie in a scene from the soap opera *All My Children*.

Ironically, in viewing films, our students are pretty good at what Samuel Taylor Coleridge calls the suspension of disbelief necessary to enter imaginary worlds of fiction. Most filmgoers know they have and will likely never experience what they see in the *Star Wars* films, but they are able to map the adventures and challenges of a Luke Skywalker onto the kinds of adventures they can imagine and perhaps even experience. Our students even intuitively understand Luke Skywalker’s story as a coming-of-age story, and understand Anakin Skywalker, known

also as Darth Vader, to be a kind of tragic hero even though they do not have the language to describe him as such. They respond to his suffering as a potential source of salvation; they understand he will learn some important lessons from his suffering as he fights for right finally at the end of his life. Darth Vader’s complex attraction to the so-called Dark Side represents a tragic fatal flaw.

We make these assertions not simply to describe some of the kinds of prior knowledge that good readers need to interrogate rich literature but also to make the case that students from many different backgrounds typically have life experiences that when activated can serve them quite productively in interpreting narratives.

Overall, reading deeply complex literary texts offers unique opportunities for students to wrestle with some of the core ethical dilemmas that we face as human beings (Fernandez, 1977; Hynds, 1989). Learning to understand sources of threat and to adapt to a changing and difficult environment are major challenges that we have as humans across the life course. We learn lessons about such grappling from many sources—our family, friends, church, and other social networks. But we can also learn from reading literature. How to understand what makes a Raskolnikov (in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*) engage in an act of murder under the ostensible self-explanation of accomplishing good may provide insights into how ordinary human beings often align



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themselves with evil. Human enslavement of Africans in the United States remains a kind of Damocles’ sword over the consciousness of America that has never been fully resolved. What that experience meant in human terms is perhaps best captured in the characters of Sethe and Paul D in Toni Morrison’s

Beloved, a story invoking human resilience in the face of unbelievable adversity.

The point of these examples is to illustrate the quality of ethical reasoning that great literature invites. The growth of empathetic ethical reasoning is one of the most important reasons for schools to serve as unique sites for the development of capacities and dispositions to read complex works of literature. Students who enter high school as struggling readers are quite capable of engaging with such texts, in part because these same students are often wrestling with complex challenges in their own lives. Such students typically have a history of academic under-achievement which poses complex psychological challenges. One of their most important developmental tasks is to learn to be resilient in the face of adversity (Kunda, 1999; Spencer, 2006).

