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Literary Theory

Reflection Essay

Redefining Literacy

Through out this course, my view on the definition of literacy has changed in several ways, particularly in regards to visual literacy in comparison to verbal literacy, especially in how they relate to education and the potential of rethinking the way that we approach it. What sparked my interest in this particular function of literary theory was the video by Sir Ken Robinson “Changing Educational Paradigms.” Robinson asserted that every country on earth was remodeling education systems to better prepare students for the new and changing economy of the 21st century and also to give students a sense of cultural identity that they will be able to maintain despite ongoing globalization (Robinson 2).

I agree that these are important goals and I also acknowledge that Robinson is right in saying that our current educational system is more a result of the past than a purposefully designed way of bringing us to an idealized future. Robinson made many bold statements regarding the problematic attitudes of schools and teachers, but I think he overgeneralized them and did so unfairly. He suggested several things as problems but offered no real solution or better alternative, particularly referring to his problem with classes being organized by age, what he views as a lack of sufficient collaboration, or the fact that standardized testing or curricula are becoming more common. Robinson suggests that conformity is an enemy of learning (3), but I might suggest the opposite. Conformity is the only way to ensure that every child truly has equal access to a full and thorough education; conformity is the best way we can access equality in opportunities and avoid the

furthering of the idea that Robinson fears that we have already fallen victim to: that “there are only two types of people—academic and non-academic; smart and non-smart people” (Robinson 2).

Before we can have this conformity and have it serve our students, we need to find the curricula that are appropriate for teaching students to be literate as they consume and produce texts of all types. We need to provide each student with the tools, devices, and techniques that will allow them to get the most out of the constantly changing culture and economy that we live in, rather than simply focusing on the standardized information that worked the past.

In her article “From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing,” Diana George suggests that “our students have a much richer imagination for what we might accomplish with the visual than our journals have yet to address” (12) and that the incorporation of the study of visual design into specifically compositional English classrooms is one such tool to aid students in their pursuit of literacy. George is suggesting that we pursue multiliteracies, which is not a new idea. As early as 1946, the Dick and Jane elementary reader series alerted teachers to the fact that teaching a literacy of printed text was not enough in regard to the teaching of reading.

Skill in interpreting pictures is becoming increasingly important as a means of securing pleasure and information. Adults today are exposed to ‘picture’ magazines, cartoons, advertisements, movies, and many types of diagrammatic schemes for the presentation of facts. Children are surrounded with picture books and ‘read’ the funnies long before they enter school. Regardless of age or situation, the individual who can ‘read’ pictorial material effectively has access to a vast new world of ideas. (qtd. in George 15-16)

So if we keep this focus on the visual as a means of communication outside of its function as a higher art form, we then as George says, need to get it into our English classrooms, but this doubles the amount of potential, responsibility, risk, and course content that needs to fit into a class period and school year that are quite frankly not getting any longer. Still, George reminds us that we cannot try to pit the visual against the verbal, largely because both still and always will play such a crucial role in our cultural literacy. Despite the fact that Lewis Meyers said that “drawings are generally more accessible than essays” (qtd. in George 21), drawings can say nothing directly; they can only suggest, again supporting the need for a multiliteracy.

Perhaps teaching the two literacies together is not as much of a challenge as George suggests. In the introduction of the “Rhetorical Handbook: An Illustrated Manual for Graphic Designers,” authors Eshes and Lupton are referring to the same rhetoric, the same modes of appeal, the same signs, figures of speech, and rhetorical figures that students need to interpret any linguist text. It all comes down to an issue of semantics: how the meaning and significance of any text is conveyed to the reader or interpreter. These rhetorical figures and devices are the tools that we ought to view all text through, whether visual or verbal. This is our way to decode it. And if this is our only method of genuinely accessing a text, then the teacher’s responsibility is heightened. Teachers must provide the tools and teach students how to use and apply them in multiple ways. Rhetoric is no longer limited to great speeches and classic novels; society is caring less and less about the potential divide between high culture and low culture. Instead, this rhetoric, this need to analyze more deeply, is a part of, and everything else around us, and now students need to be literate enough to access this rhetoric.

Marshall McLuhan argued that the medium is a crucial part of the message of a text in his article "Understanding Media" referring primarily to how technology has revolutionized the way that we learn and know things. But to pull his idea into a broader scheme, does the format of the text matter in whether or not we value it or pay attention to the rhetoric it utilizes? What is the difference between an advertisement, television, social media, cartoons, company logos, picture books, or bumper stickers? Is there a difference? I would say yes, but not as much of a difference as some would hope. As I mentioned before, the line between high and low culture is constantly blurring more and more. Some might argue that just as much effort goes into an advertisement for a pack of cigarettes as a well researched critique of a piece of art. So then an understanding of the rhetoric of visual and verbal images becomes all the more important. Everything must be analyzed objectively and with the same criteria to decide what it's true value is.

This brings us back to the matter of education and Robinson's rather severe criticisms, particularly on the American system of education. Robinson called for a shift in the paradigm, a revolution of our factory style schools, but perhaps this integration of a multiliteracy in both verbal and visual text will be enough, at least to start with. This of course will not be something that can be changed over night, but with individual teachers (someday, myself included) trying new projects and utilizing both student interests and student feedback. We can raise a generation of students who not only are prepared for the changing economy and have a strong sense of cultural identity, but who will demonstrate this new type of literacy as both consumers and producers.