# BOOK REVIEWS

Willinsky, J. (1990). *The new literacy: Redefining reading and writing in the schools.* (Critical Social Thought Series). New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 276 pp., $17.95 (softcover).

Attempting to explain the New Literacy is a little like trying to pin water to the wall. And for the most part, Willinsky resists the temptation to try. Instead, through classroom scenarios, analogies, and historical parallels, he helps us to develop a feel for literacy as a means by which we construct our lives and for pedagogy as a collaborative partnership whose agenda is to enable participants to create both private and public worlds.

If this all sounds a little familiar it's because the New Literacy isn't really "new" at all. As Willinsky points out, the epistemological assumptions and political agenda of the New Literacy have precedents in the Progressive Education movement in both Britain and the United States in the first half of this century. Furthermore, Willinsky's insightful and sometimes provocative comments on the work of people like Donald Graves, James Britton, Ken Goodman, Jerry Harste, Frank Smith, Madeline Grumet, Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, and Henry Giroux make clear that his notion of the New Literacy has been strongly influenced by contemporary work in literacy education, curriculum theory, gender studies, and the new sociology of education.

However, the power and value of this book hinge not on its "originality" but on the perspective it offers on our efforts to date and for the future it suggests. As Willinsky says:

> Whether the use of "new" is warranted, however, is a decision upon which we have all learned to withhold judgement. The rub of it is that the "New Literacy" is an hypothesis on my part, not so much in its *originality* as in the currency of its challenge to the educational scene. (p. 4, original italics)

In this sense *The New Literacy* provides a substantive and timely contribution to teachers, curriculum planners, administrators, and policy makers.

Three tenets of the New Literacy that emerge from Willinsky's discussion are particularly insistent and tend to capture the state-of-mind it represents:

- that reading, writing, and talking be treated as ways of making personal meaning rather than merely as convenient, efficient ways of storing and transmitting public information;

- that literacy transcend the personal to include collective meaning-making and creating a new social order;
- that pedagogy actively promote and support personal enfranchisement and the interrogation of existing cultural orders and practices.

The first of these tenets has been extensively intellectualized over the past 20 years and increasingly (but by no means universally) is being lived out in contemporary instructional settings through initiatives like language across the curriculum, whole language, learner-centered schooling, and cooperative education.

In sharp contrast, the second tenet has remained largely unexamined. The social-political agenda of the New Literacy seems to have dwelled outside the conscious awareness and hence beyond the immediate concerns of mainstream literacy educators and even of reformers like James Britton, Frank Smith, and Donald Graves. Hence, the thrust of recent innovations has been toward the enfranchisement of individual thought and action with little or no attempt to explore the implications of changing social and political relationships entailed in personal empowerment.

The third tenet falls somewhere between the first two in terms of commitment and enactment in the education community. Although recent innovations in literacy education have supported the development of personal choice and voice in learning, the lack of understanding of the broader dynamics of change have prevented these innovative initiatives from developing any coherent or sustained social or political agenda.

In a scholarly, thoughtful, and lively commentary that never succumbs to the temptations of sanctimony or didacticism, Willinsky elaborates on these tenets throughout the book: their roots, strengths, limitations, and possibilities. In fact, I suspect that his even-handed treatment of disparate and opposing views and practices will infuriate some who prefer a more strident and abrasive stance. Instead, Willinsky advances his own vision of literacy and literacy education gently but insistently, by building on what he sees as the strengths of what exists and the promise of what might be.

Yet, despite his finely crafted analysis and commentary, two things suggest that Willinsky is still waging his own struggle with the realities of the New Literacy. First, his recurring call for "findings" to support the claims of the New Literacy and for joint studies with the folks who are "working the other side of the street," suggests some ambivalence about what counts as data or evidence. Although he accepts anecdotes, descriptions, and case studies as data, he also seems to endorse Hillocks's accusation that many of those currently working in learner-oriented literacy programs are guilty of "confusing observations with findings" (p. 171). Willinsky seems to equate evidence with quantitative measures, particularly test results, saying that they are necessary to allow those

who are trying to assess the debate "a fair basis of comparison" (p. 165) and further that "to ignore this issue of evaluation seems unfair and unrealistic" (p. 165). However, this doesn't seem possible where "fair" means "same" and where "evaluation" means "test." He seems to feel that the New Literacy needs to gain the respect of mainstream educators and researchers and that, he implies, necessitates playing by their rules.

This position, while politically pleasing to some, avoids coming to grips with the ideological differences and epistemological inconsistencies that will continue to separate the agendas of Mainstream Literacy and the New Literacy. As a close friend of mine often says, "The only way out is through." We need to acknowledge the differences and learn to live through and with them and not lull ourselves into believing that we really want the same things after all.

The second thing that raises speculation about the possibility of Willinsky's struggle is the absence of any substantive analysis on his own research and teaching practices. Although he does provide some brief references to his public school career and to some project work in schools as a researcher, there are no reflective accounts of how he is himself trying to live or, in his own term, "work" the New Literacy.

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## Kilbourn, B. (1990). *Constructive feedback: Learning the art.* Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 121 pp., $24.50 (softcover).

*Constructive Feedback: Learning the Art* is a case study of 13 supervisory cycles conducted by a secondary level science teacher and his department head, the focus of which is a unit on cancer and cell biology. The purpose of the study, the author says, is to offer a contextually rich account of one supervision process so readers can consider it in juxtaposition to their own practices.

Kilbourn is careful to assert that the book's content is not a model of what supervision should or should not be; rather, he says it is an example of constructive feedback, which he defines as any process of professional observation and/or exchange conducted in the name of professional development. Nonetheless, he clearly states that the case study "has its spiritual roots" (p. 6) in clinical supervision and it is equally clear that the questions he offers to guide the reading of the book will be familiar to readers with a background in clinical supervision.