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WHAT IS LITERACY FOR? A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

*William P. Bintz

The Teachers

(For Mother who was never taught to read or write)

Holy men, you came to preach:
'Poor black heathen, we will teach
Sense of sin and fear of hell,
Fear of God and boss as well;
We will teach you work for play,
We will teach you to obey
Laws of God and laws of Mammon...'
And we answered, 'No more gammon,
If you have to teach the light,
Teach us first to read and write.'

Oodgeroo Noonuccal
(Kath Walker)

Last year I was a Visiting Lecturer in the Aboriginal Studies Program at Armidale C.A.E. Before lectures began, I was invited by the College to a dinner honoring recently graduated Aboriginal students. At that dinner a number of graduates were introduced and invited to comment about their experiences in tertiary education. As each graduate spoke, it became apparent that many had shared similar experiences. For instance, many confided that they were initially very apprehensive about enrolling in formal schooling. Their apprehension was due to a sense of self-doubt as to whether they were willing to make the necessary sacrifices, as well as to a shared premonition that, as one student commented, "for most Aboriginal people, going through formal schooling is like taking a journey into the unknown."

Once lectures began, I soon realised that, like the Aboriginal students in my Communication I class, I too was embarking on a journey into the unknown. Our journeys started with the intent to better understand the multifaceted worlds of Aboriginal students

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enrolled in tertiary education. The students and I both felt that this understanding would provide an appropriate starting point for developing their communication skills. By the end of the year, our journeys had evolved as a collaborative exploration into a variety of important issues and learning strategies related to literacy and literacy learning. My purpose in this article is to share some of those issues and strategies with you.

THE ADAS PROGRAM

The Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Studies Program (ADAS)

aims to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal people to take their place as self-determining, well-qualified participants in the Australian economy...it provides students with an accredited, registered qualification, an opportunity to develop marketable skills, and an opportunity to explore Aboriginal culture, history and tradition.¹

Of particular importance in this program is the development of student communication skills. Communication I and II, then, represented foundational courses designed to improve student literacy skills with respect to reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

At the beginning of the school a total of fifteen students had officially enrolled in Communication I. On the first day of class I introduced myself, talked about where I was from, what I did there, and how I managed to get to Australia. Unfortunately, the students did not reciprocate. Instead, they were timid and reluctant to talk about themselves. To break the ice, I proposed two strategies which I hoped would make the students feel more comfortable in class.

The first strategy was called "Getting to Know You" (Harste Woodward and Burke, 1985). The purpose of this strategy is to afford people an opportunity to simply get acquainted. Basically, the strategy calls for students to pair off with people they don't already know, and then spend 20-30 minutes informally interviewing each other. Afterwards, the class reassembles and the pairs orally introduce their partners.

¹For a full discussion of the rationale, aims and objectives of the ADAS program, see "The Associate Diploma In Aboriginal Studies", Stage IV Submission to the NSW Higher Education Board, Armidale CAE, October 1988.

From this activity I learned a great deal about these individuals. I learned, for instance, that most were mature-age students, averaging approximately 30 years of age with a low of 18 and a high of 51; several were married, some were parents, and one was a grandparent. Many were born and raised in "bushy places" specifically rural and semi-rural regions of Queensland and New South Wales. Most reported negative past experiences with formal schooling, especially at the upper grade levels -

that's about the time when I was positioned in the rear of the classroom to be forgotten about...

that's when I really started to feel my minority status.

I learned that few had entered tertiary education immediately after graduating from high school; instead, most sought some form of employment. Consequently, over the years, most of these students experienced what could best be described as an on-again/off-again relationship with formal schooling. For instance, the three oldest students in the class were now returning to formal schooling after long absences, one absence amounting to twenty-three years.

Furthermore, I learned about student reasons for enrolling in the ADAS program. The most compelling reasons can be best illustrated by one student who stated -

I'm here because I recently realised that my todays offered no tomorrows. I was going nowhere fast. I wanted a new life, one that offered me no crime, no isolation, and no segregation. I wanted hope for my future. I just wanted a good tomorrow.

It's important to note that student visions of good tomorrows meant two things. First, it meant acquiring the skills necessary to secure a good-paying job.

I see education as the main issue for Black people today. Most of us Blacks don't get the kind of jobs we really want because early in life we stayed away from formal education. We stayed away because of racism and lack of cooperation and sensitivity in schools to Aboriginal children. We come back, though, because we know that without a proper education, we won't be able to get those good-paying jobs.

Second, good tomorrows meant gaining an increased awareness of and respect for their own Aboriginality.

Of course, I'm hoping the ADAS program will lead me to a better job. But more importantly, I'm hoping it will lead me to a closer relationship with my fellow Aboriginal brothers and sisters. This is very important because, prior to turning about twenty, I really knew nothing about what it means to be Aboriginal. Growing up, I was shuffled from white school to white school and even lived with a white family for a while. It was during this period that I lost the feeling of what it means to be Aboriginal. I want to get that feeling back.

Once students felt more comfortable talking about themselves in class, I then proposed a second strategy. I introduced this strategy to the class as "The Walking Journal"¹. This strategy attempts to make journal writing and journal reading a highly social and highly generative literacy experience. It is based on the assumption that

actual writing for real audiences and real purposes is a vital element in helping students to understand that they have an important voice in their own learning processes.

(Delpit, 1988)

This strategy begins by designating a notebook (or three-ringed binder filled with lined paper) that will serve throughout the year as the class journal. Then someone in the class volunteers to write the first entry. In this instance I was unanimously appointed to start the walking journal. So I immediately wrote an entry, signed and dated it, and then passed the journal on to another person in the class. I then explained that it was his responsibility now to read my entry, react in writing, sign and date his entry and then pass the journal on to another student. That student in turn would read the first two entries, react to either one or both, or neither, perhaps electing instead to change the topic altogether, and then pass it on. This would be the procedure we would use throughout the year.

Fortunately we were able to maintain a walking journal for most of the year, although at times the journal did more sitting than walking. Nevertheless, the walking journal proved invaluable

¹My first introduction to "walking journals" came by way of David Heine (1988) who used it as a data-collection instrument in his dissertation at Indiana University, entitled "Teaching as Inquiry: a Sociosemiotic Perspective of Learning."

as a curricular resource to explore three fundamental questions: What is literacy? How is literacy learned? What is literacy for?

QUESTIONS ABOUT LITERACY AND LITERACY LEARNING

I believe that, as a way of knowing, generating questions is potentially more valuable than formulating answers. Indeed, according to Langer (1942) "what we can know depends on the questions we can ask." In the case of literacy, we have assumed that the most important questions to ask were "What is literacy?" and "How is literacy learned?"

Over the years we have come to know literacy as a concept involving the activities and skills associated with the use of print (Snow, 1983); that is, as comprising the abilities to read, write and compute, not only for our own purposes, but also for those that the institutions of our society require of us (McLeod, 1986).

More recently, however, we have come to know literacy less as a singular and monolithic concept, and more as a concept encompassing a "plurality of literacies" (Tway, 1987; Bizzell, 1988; Freeman and Sanders, 1986; Heath, 1980). This plurality includes such disciplines as visual literacy, computer literacy, cultural literacy, formal literacy, functional literacy, occupational literacy, critical literacy, academic literacy, media-literacy, non-schooled literacy, multi-modal literacy, and homemaker literacy to name just a few.

Likewise, we have come to know much about how literacy is learned. Essentially, two paradigms dominate our way of knowing in this area. On the one hand, the Positivistic paradigm argues that literacy is best learned through a technical-rational and programmed instructional approach. This approach assumes that all knowledge is sequential, hierarchal, and value-free in nature; it stresses the importance of individual performance and the need for frequent and comprehensive objective and standardised evaluation; and it emphasises the need for teacher and student efficiency and accountability. On the other hand, the Interpretive paradigm argues that literacy is best learned through an evolutionary, purposeful, and functional approach. This approach assumes that knowledge is qualitative, socially constructed, and value-laden in nature; it stresses the importance of social interaction within a socio-cultural and historical context; and it emphasises the need for on-going informal assessment.

However, by using topics which emerged out of informal discussions, readings, and walking journal writing, I've come to believe that these two paradigms aren't asking the most important questions. To illustrate this, let me share some student voices with you.

"I want a better working condition. Literacy can give me that. In my school days I didn't have a very good schooling. My family and I lived on an Aboriginal mission. That mission was 36 miles from the nearest town. There were no books or papers around for us to read. Two years ago I wanted to try and get educated and learn to read and write. By reading and writing I could help out better with my household, like paying bills and helping the children out with their schoolwork. Also, I could better know what's going on, especially, for example, when I come up against a salesman."

"Literacy can help me gain a higher position in life. It can also help me better understand the very controversial affairs that surround we Aboriginals on a day to day basis."

"In today's society literacy for Aboriginals means that we have to be literate in two totally different types of societies. One society is my own with its particular language and customs, and the other is Western society which has overtaken our land and forced us to be like them."

I think what is important to hear from these voices is that each sees literacy as a functional, purposeful, and meaningful way to understand and transform their social worlds. It is this link between literacy and society, however, that the questions "What is literacy?" and "How is literacy learned?" have not adequately addressed.

For example, according to Wells (1987) most of our attention has focused on performative, functional and informational aspects of literacy. Performative aspects include the skills necessary for print to be decoded and speech to be encoded; functional aspects include the skills necessary to cope with the demands of everyday life that involve written language, i.e. reading a newspaper, writing a job application, completing an official form; and informational aspects include the skills necessary for the effective

communication of discipline-based knowledge, i.e. reading for information, and writing for the demonstration of learned knowledge.

Unfortunately, we have paid little attention to transformative aspects of literacy. These aspects not only include skills for understanding, but also strategies for transforming knowledge and experience through exploration, reflection, and critical evaluation. It is these transformative aspects of literacy which I feel are critically important, yet have been woefully neglected.

To a large extent, transformative aspects of literacy have been neglected for three reasons. First, the Positivistic and Interpretive paradigms ignore, or at least place at the periphery, the interrelationship between schooling and society. They both seem to view schooling as being carried on in a social vacuum (Young and Whitty, 1977), and "as a kind of parenthesis whose essential structure is immune to the influences of social class, of gender, or of race" (Friere, 1987).

Second, both paradigms view literacy primarily as an individual undertaking. They see literacy as a means for individuals to better understand their social worlds, and therefore focus attention principally on micro-level concerns. These concerns basically involve identifying, describing, and even prescribing discrete school-based aspects of literacy. They do not, however, provide a broader societal and macro-level perspective on literacy and literacy learning (Reynolds, 1980-81; Angus, 1986).

And third, both paradigms are more concerned with reformulating new answers to old questions about literacy and literacy learning, rather than generating new questions about old problems. The answers change but the questions don't. Perhaps that's why many problems in education never get resolved. I believe, however, if we are to know more about transformative aspects of literacy, we have to start asking different kinds of questions. One such question that needs to be asked is "What is literacy for?". I believe that the critical theoretical paradigm, more so than the Positivistic or Interpretive paradigm, offers a more viable conceptual framework for answering this question because it situates the relationship between schooling and society in a broader socio-cultural, historical, and political context.

LITERACY AND CRITICAL THEORY

It is important to first understand that several conceptual models exist within critical theory. Each model offers a different

perspective on the relationship between schooling and society. One perspective is based on the hegemonic model of schooling (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony, here, refers to a system of both conscious and subconscious social meanings and practices which members of a society hold as common sense knowledge (Apple, 1979). This model argues that school represents a hegemonic institution because of the way it unequally structures and distributes a hierarchally-organised curriculum to different social classes (Entwistle, 1986). Or, in other words, schools are hegemonic because they produce and distribute not only differential but also preferential forms of knowledge in order to maintain the dominant culture and status quo (Tunnell, 1978).

A second perspective is based on an economic-reproductive model. This model argues that the relationship between schooling and society is based on a direct one-to-one correspondence where the values, norms, and social relations of schooling simply mirror those found in economic organisations within a capitalist society (LaBrecque, 1986; Bowles and Gintis, 1977). According to this model, schools merely constitute social institutions that serve to reproduce economic, social, and political inequalities through such practices as tracking, the unequal distribution of resources, differential authority, and the implementation of a hidden curriculum.

A third perspective is based on a cultural-reproductive model. This model argues that schools aren't simply mirror reflections of society, but rather are autonomous institutions that reproduce the dominant class by producing and distributing specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, and ways of speaking which ultimately determine what it means to be an educated person (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). For example, this perspective purports that high social classes receive "high-status" knowledge via theoretical subjects which lead to professional careers in law, medicine, or management, while lower classes receive "low-status" knowledge via practical subjects associated with working classes such as clerical knowledge and vocational training (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Anyon, 1981).

A fourth perspective is based on a resistance model (Fernandes, 1988). This model argues that schools are sites of conflict where individuals actively, not passively, produce and reproduce their social worlds through explicit and implicit oppositional behaviours and attitudes (Giroux, 1983). This model views the relationship between schooling and society in dialectical terms where human action mediates between the structural determinants imposed by

schooling and society and the intentions and aspirations embedded in personal experience.

Although each model has much to offer, I believe the greatest potential for positively answering "What is literacy for?" lies in a theory of resistance. Central to this theory is the notion that human behaviour is symbolic action (Geertz, 1975). Thus, unlike the other three, this theory offers a perspective on human behaviour that interprets resistance in symbolic terms; that is, as a positive attempt to construct alternative social worlds. For example, the social world of schooling is often cluttered with instances where students deliberately misplace books, forget homework assignments, interrupt class discussions, act inattentively, and so forth. These instances are commonly viewed by teachers as needless distractions "to those who really want to learn." In many cases, of course, that is indeed the case. In many other cases, though, alternative interpretations need to be considered. Resistance theory offers one such alternative. It suggests that instead of negative distractions, these instances are better viewed as examples of resistance-in-action.

For instance, during the year I encountered a good example of resistance-in-action as I worked with students on what they called "academic writing". In their view, academic writing is a type of formal writing done by lecturers and found in school textbooks. They especially cited formal essay writing as a prime example of academic writing, although they were quick to include summary, persuasive, and argumentative writing as additional examples.

It is, of course, quite common for schools to routinely require students to demonstrate proficiency with these types of writing, and my course was no exception. Over time, though, I began to notice that on days when rough drafts of essays were due, lack of preparation, lethargy, and apathy (bordering on downright refusal), seemed to permeate the class. I was particularly disturbed over their obvious lack of effort and enthusiasm. I wanted to help them, but they appeared not to want my help. Not knowing what to do, I finally decided to apply Kelly's first law of psychology: "When in doubt, ask the clients" (Boomer, 1982). This is what they said:

"I've always thought that you could either write well or you couldn't. It isn't something that you could learn. Writing essays is for the elite and talented people. I was told at school that I would never be

able to write well. My teachers were always saying what was wrong with my writing but never telling me how to correct it. I just can't write essays."

"I've always thought for some reason that literacy was associated only with smart people who can write books, essays, and that kind of writing. I've never thought I could do it."

"The other day I was thinking about what it means to be literate as I was writing in my sociology workbook. The writing in that sociology book is so difficult. It just isn't in plain English that I can understand. I don't know how to write in that kind of language. It was hard putting my thoughts into their meanings which may have been the reason why I can't understand the way in which I have to write it all out in the workbook."

Before hearing these voices, my first inclination was to assume that any problems with academic writing lay primarily with the students, not with the writing task. After hearing these voices, however, I felt compelled to re-examine my own beliefs and assumptions about academic writing. After much reflection, I've come to believe that the behaviours and attitudes exhibited by these students symbolically represented not a passive resistance to writing per se, but rather an active resistance to a particular form of writing, and to a particular situation where a specific form of writing took precedence over meaning, function and purpose. Academic writing was perceived by these students not as meaningful, but as meaningless.

I've also come to believe that the major problem with academic writing is that it represents an unquestioned, undemocratised, and mystified form of knowledge. It is regarded as a necessary skill regardless of whether students value that skill or perceive it as having any value for them in their social worlds. It is simply taken for granted by most as common sense knowledge for no other reason than because it is externally sanctioned by "experts", that is, by teachers.

The danger in all this is that it engenders a situation where much knowledge in school "gains an aura of mysterious invulnerability" (Shor, 1980) to the point where it functions as a means for educators to unilaterally impose their constructions and meanings of the world on students (Young, 1971). Over time this knowledge becomes reified to the point where it no longer functions

as a part of the everyday world of students, but rather becomes, like students themselves, an object to be examined in teacher-structured tasks (Dyson, 1984). Academic writing and our use of it in formal schooling is a perfect example of this kind of reified knowledge. We end up reifying form over function in student writing.

As an alternative writing experience, I proposed setting up an "Authoring Cycle" (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1985; Harste, Cairney, and Pierce, 1985) which would function as a curricular framework for providing students with meaningful experiences in reading and writing. This cycle is designed to support students in generating meaning in reading and writing, as well as to provide a means for students to explore various forms for representing that meaning. In order to help students generate and refine ideas in writing, they participated in a wide range of writing activities, including freewriting, focused freewriting, brainstorming, semantic mapping, storying, cloning an author, picture setting, authors' circle, author's chair, peer conferencing, and editor's table, among others.¹

At first, these strategies actually seemed to make writing more difficult for students. They required students to continually generate questions, consider alternatives, and make refinements about the meaning of their writing. Over time, however, these strategies, coupled with the support of other struggling writers, helped demystify the act of writing. One student, for example, while sitting at the editor's table making his final revisions on a personal essay mused:

We should have been doing this authoring cycle from the very beginning. I've always been taught that writing is an individual thing, something students do at their own desks. On the one hand, this cycle has made me realise how difficult writing really is, yet on the other hand, my writing has been better because I'm writing about what I know, and I've had the chance to have other people read it and respond to it while I'm still writing it.

As a result of this experience, I believe that generation of meaning must always precede selection of form in the teaching

¹For a full discussion of the reading and writing strategies described in this article, I recommend Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1985; Short, Harste, and Burke, 1988.

and learning of writing. We cannot teach "iron conventions... imposed without rationale or grounding in communicative intent" (Burgess, 1975/1977) but can, as Cazden (1987) suggests, provide students with "continuous opportunities to participate in some authentic bit of unending conversation, followed by a periodic, temporary focus on conventions of form, taught as cultural conventions expected in a particular community." This, I believe, is sound advice. But if we ignore this advice and allow form to precede function, then we run the risk of interfering with student ability and willingness to generate personal meaning in writing, interference that is likely to leave them silenced, alienated, and disempowered.

EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERING

The purpose of literacy, however, is not to silence, alienate, or disempower, but to empower. This argument, of course, is certainly not new. Recently, however, like academic writing, the notion of empowerment has also become problematic. Much of the problem is due to how it is currently conceptualised in the literature. Essentially, it is conceptualised as "a means to give ability to, to permit or to enable" (Maeroff, 1988; Ayers, 1986; Yonemura, 1986; Cummins, 1986; Simon, 1986; Ashcroft, 1986). It is viewed as a commodity; that is, as something in the form of specific skills, abilities, or attitudes which can be directly transmitted from one person to another.

I believe that this view is flawed, because it assumes a linear, top-down, mechanistic, and non-reciprocal conception of empowerment. It assumes that there are individuals who are already empowered, and those who are not; that those who are already empowered are the best persons to empower those who are not; and that once individuals are empowered, they remain empowered.

Besides this, what is also problematic is that we have not asked "What is empowerment for?". The common belief is that empowerment provides conceptual and analytical power to individuals so that they can better understand their social worlds. Once again, this view, like the Positivistic and Interpretive paradigmatic view of literacy and literacy learning, is inadequate because, for many people, especially minorities, the ability to better understand their social worlds doesn't necessarily result in an encouraging sense of hope, but very often results in a despairing sense of hopelessness. This sense of hopelessness was poignantly expressed by one student who wrote the following in his journal:

"I understand that schooling is important, and I want to be educated. But when you see your family and friends in dead end jobs and on unemployment even though they've gone to school, you lose hope and wonder why you bother at all."

LITERACY AS TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

If literacy is to offer a sense of hope rather than hopelessness, we need to extend the notion of literacy beyond the ability for individuals to better understand their social worlds. Marx alluded to this when he stated in his "Theses on Fierbach" that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." In my view, we need to conceptualise literacy as a transformative potential.

An important first step in this direction is to discontinue using empowerment as a noun and start seeing it as a verb. We need to abandon the notion of empowerment and embrace the notion of empowering. That is, we need to cease using empowerment as a transmissible commodity or set of skills and start using it as a process of critical exploration and reflection. We need to view empowering as a continuous, lifelong process where people come to not only better understand, but also transform their social worlds. In short, empowering is a means for people to take control of their own lives.

A good starting point to begin linking understanding and transformation is to legitimate personal experience, make it problematic, and to view conflict and resistance as positive, not negative, aspects of learning. Only then will we be able to critically explore and potentially resolve the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions which underlie many of our personal experiences. It is important that empowering along these lines is not reduced to a private and individual affair, but rather is viewed as a social phenomenon that occurs through a range of contexts (Luke, 1988). With respect to schooling, that context involves such things as teaching materials, curriculum, and pedagogical practice. For the remainder of this article, I want to discuss the link between empowering and pedagogical practice.

REDEFINING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

I believe that for empowering to occur in schools, a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between teachers and students must take place. This redefinition must not be based on

a hierarchal relationship where teachers are viewed as dispensers of knowledge (Friere, 1972). Rather, this redefinition must be based on a reciprocal relationship where teachers and students function as subjects, not objects, in their own process of empowering. In short, they must function as advocates for each others' learning. For example, mid-way through the year, students expressed an interest in reading *A Fortunate Life*, by A.B.Facey (1981). After several days of independent reading, one student made the following comment:

"I've read almost half of this book and haven't understood a thing. I've stopped reading it out of frustration. I'm not enjoying the book at all. I don't even know what to do. I want to read it and understand it, but I'm stuck."

Sensing a valuable opportunity, I demonstrated a variety of reading strategies and invited students to use them as they continued to read the text. These strategies included "Say Something," "Sketch-to-Sketch," "Macro Close," "Interrogating Anomalies," "Making Connections," "Save the Last Word For Me," "Literature Circles," among others.¹ These strategies apparently proved successful. The "Say Something" is particularly illustrative.

Essentially, this strategy calls for students to work in small groups (2-3 persons). The group selects a piece of literature and agrees how much they will read in a given period of time, i.e. a chapter in one hour. The group then determines how much each person will read, i.e. a paragraph, a section, etc., and then places an asterisk at the spots where one reader stops reading and another reader starts. Reading is done orally and at each asterisk the reader stops and somebody in the group just "says something" about what has just been read. This "something" is not intended to be a final pronouncement, but rather a springboard for extended discussion.

After several days, students reported in literature circle discussions that the "Say Something" strategy was very valuable. They felt that talking about the book as they were reading it significantly increased comprehension. They also felt that, by dialoguing about the book in small groups, a greater sense of community had developed. This sense of community engendered feelings of social connectedness and mutual responsibility by

¹ See footnote p.13.

affording students an opportunity to hear, see and feel how others negotiated meaning from the text.

"I noticed two things happening with this strategy. One thing was that when I had a chance to talk about the book and to hear other people's views about the book and the troubles they were having with the book, it really started to make sense to me. And the other thing was that I found myself really listening to people as they were orally reading the story. These were people I never really had talked to before. Now, I felt closer to them than I ever had before. They helped me, and now I knew that I could even help them."

It was, or course, tempting to declare that the "Say Something" strategy empowered these students. It would also be remiss and incorrect. Strategies can't empower people; people empower themselves through the support of other learners. Empowering occurs in context, not in content. The "Say Something" strategy was merely an invitation. If any empowering occurred, and I believe it did, then it did so only because students accepted the invitation and thereby created a context where learners supported other learners.

One caveat, however, seems in order. It is important to understand that an important factor in establishing and sustaining empowering relationships between teachers and students, or in the previous example between students and students, is based on perception. Perception is critical because it is a cognitive act, a critical way of knowing (Neisser, 1976). In fact, it was Epictetus who alluded to the power of perception when he stated that "man is not affected by events, but by the view he takes of them." A relationship, then, is empowering only to the extent that it is actually perceived that way. It is this perception and not the relationship itself, that allows teachers and students to see themselves, see each other, and see their social worlds in transformative terms.

WHAT IS LITERACY FOR?

Because we were willing to create and sustain a collaborative relationship, my students and I learned that literacy is for many things. We learned, for instance, that literacy is for asking difficult questions rather than seeking comfortable answers; that literacy is for taking collaborative journeys with other learners; that literacy is for exploring cultural-specific social issues; that literacy is for extending current understandings; that

literacy is for interrogating tensions, contradictions, and anomalies in our lives; that literacy is for empowering; and that literacy is for legitimating and critically reflecting on past experiences so that desired future experiences can be realised. But, most importantly, we learned that literacy is for taking a never-ending journey into the unknown. It is exactly this strategy of continuously and critically exploring the unknown that offers us the greatest potential in the life-long process of coming to know.

Finally, I began this paper with the poem "The Teacher" by the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) because it helped me and my students to better understand that literacy is a political act. Learning to read and write involves much more than the ability to decode and encode print. It also involves people in critically reading, writing, and reflecting on their social worlds. Thus, as Friere (1985) suggests, "reading (and writing) the word is reading the world, and reading is rewriting what is read." It is this possibility of reading and rewriting our social worlds that makes literacy a transformative potential, one which affords people an opportunity to ask compelling questions about what schooling and society can be, instead of what it is.

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Consider information exchange as a part of your relationship with someone, and for specific issues, start with the known information and share it, then use triggering devices and wait until the knowledgeable person is prepared to give his information.

(Eades 1985:105)

I feel that the "knowledgeable person" in the classroom situation can equally be the student or the teacher.

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