

APPROACHES TO LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

81-556

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is about current research in literacy as it relates to the development of a variety of literacy skills in schools. We will begin by examining different texts that define literacy focusing on two competing schools of thoughts about literacy as a set of tangible skills vises literacy as discourse. We will proceed to examine theory and research associated with various aspects of reading and writing. Additionally, we will examine instructional/ methodological approaches to reading and writing. What informs a theory of literacy instruction is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, intertextual, socially and historically aware and politically motivated. This means we will draw our readings from such diverse fields as philosophy, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, post-structuralism, critical theory and women's studies as well as pedagogy. It also means that readings will not stand alone; we will be using texts to interrogate texts.

COURSE TEXT

Journal articles and chapters from books have been put together and will be handed out in class.

COURSE FORMAT

Readings: Each week has a set of readings. Some of these may be quite difficult but there is also material that can be read fairly quickly. The point of all this reading is to gain some understanding of how various researchers and theorists see the issues and to use their arguments to help uncover our personal beliefs about language and literacy development in schools. My expectation is not that you memorize what these various authors say but that you use the readings to explore your reactions to what you have read, to think about how it confirms or challenges your assumptions about literacy, how it helps you examine your own reading and writing strategies, how you might try new strategies and how it helps you question your teaching practices. In effect, I want you to use the readings to begin reflecting on what you believe about learning and teaching.

Self as informant: These readings are just one way of helping you explore literacy issues. We will also be using ourselves as informants. This means that we will be examining ourselves as learners, as readers and as writers to check the validity of the ideas raised in the readings, that is, to use ourselves as lenses to examine the theory.

Learner as informant: Another vehicle for helping you develop as a reflective practitioner will be to work with students from your classroom, to engage them as informants to help you (and them) understand literacy and literacy development.

Writing: Each week I will be asking you to reflect, in writing, on what you have been reading. The purpose of this reflective writing is to help you clarify your ideas and raise issues from the readings that are of concern for you. To help with this, you may want to consider asking yourself the following questions about the readings:

- Does it make sense?
- Do I understand?
- What helped me understand?
- Is this true for me as a learner/educator?
- Is this consistent with my beliefs as a learner/teacher?
- Is this what happens in my classroom?
- What questions does it raise about my own reading/writing/teaching?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There will be three assignments:

1. Each week you will be assigned various readings which will be discussed the following session. From these readings you are expected to write two response papers. These papers should be prepared for use in class and to hand over to me thereafter. This means that for whatever reading you do you will be expected to share your paper with others and to use it for class discussion. You will be assigned a reading on which to base one of the two response papers and the second response paper is self-directed. With the assigned response you will be expected to use it to lead discussion in class. For response paper writing refer to the above questions. Each response should not exceed two pages double space. *Aim:* to be able to examine, reflect and make connections between text and own experiences. Also to learn key concepts and debates in literacy development. 20%

2. This assignment concerns an application/examination of the conceptual framework to our own literacy practices (see week 6 & 7 of course outline). For this assignment you will be expected to examine how you developed your own literacy practices and the theories that best inform your own processes of literacy development. This examination will be prepared for an in-class presentation. *The purpose* of this exercise is to give forum to explore some of the theoretical issues examined in class so far. What is important with this assignment is presenting your own literacy development in ways that are clear to others. Additionally, you will have to demonstrate how your development process is connected with the examined theories. Here I do not expect you to present deeply on the theories – but just to make meaningful connections. 30%

3. Choose one of the following assignments:

i. Choose one perspective of writing and discuss a particular philosophical perspective that includes the key theorists, relevant research, practical application regarding instruction, learning materials and ways to evaluate. This paper should be approximately ten to twelve typed and double spaced pages and should have a complete bibliography

ii. Develop a literature review of a topic from this course. From the literature conducted in assignment 1, use at least ten to twelve articles/book chapters to develop the review. The literature review should be approximately ten to twelve pages in length with complete bibliography. Include your literature search.

iii. Review a current text in language arts by discussing relevant theory, research and practice espoused by the author. The text must be at least 200 pages or equivalent and approved by the instructor.

iv. Develop an argument regarding the teaching of literacy to diverse populations – be it language or cultural specificity or both. Examine relevant theorists, relevant research, practical application regarding instruction, learning materials and ways to evaluate. This paper should be approximately ten to twelve pages typed and double spaced and should have a complete bibliography.

v. Self directed assignments are encouraged; however, these should be discussed with the instructor. *The purpose* of this assignment is to enhance research, academic writing and analytical skills.

For this assignment please submit a one page proposal for my approval by November 11. This assignment is due December 9. 50%

COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS

Week 1

- Overview of course (purpose, content, operation structure and evaluation)
- Introduction to course topics/concepts and ideological framework

Basic concepts to be dealt with include literacy, ideology and discourses, learning and acquisition; various approaches to literacy (e.g. instrumentalist vs. constructivist approach) etc.

Weeks 2 & 3

Defining literacy and debates in literacy learning and teaching

These two weeks will be devoted towards developing a working definition of literacy and at providing an overview of current debates in the teaching and learning of literacy. Gee's article is key to our understanding of what literacy is and Richardson provides an overview of current debates in literacy development. Gee's article is not an easy read, therefore, some of the ideas and concepts will be unfamiliar at this stage in the course. Do your best with them. They are terms that you will become familiar with as we work through the readings in different discussions.

Readings

* Gee, J. (1992). What is literacy? In Shamen & Patrick (eds.) *Becoming Political*. London: Heinemann.

Rather, L. (1998). Meeting the challenge: Expanding the meaning of literacy. *Cable in the Classroom*, pp. 7-10.

* Richardson, P. (1998). Literacy, learning and teaching. *Educational Review*, Vol. 50, #2, pp.11–34.

Freebody, P. & Luke, A. (1990). Literacies' Programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Australian Journal of ESL*, Vol. 5, pp. 7-16.

Week 4

Early literacy

What do the initial stages of literacy look like? How do we learn reading and writing? This week we will examine theories of early childhood literacy. McCarty offers a historical overview of theories in literacy development; Genisio et al take us to the whole language classroom and give us a process picture; while Church et al offer a critical view of the application of whole language in classrooms. All articles are enjoyable short reads.

Readings

McCarty, B. (1991). Whole language: From philosophy to practice. *The Clearing House*, November/December, pp. 73-76.

Genisio, M. Bruneau, B. Casbergue, R. (1997). The literacy pyramid organization of reading/writing activities in a whole language classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 51, 3 2, pp. 158-160.

* Church, S. et al (1995). Reconsidering whole language: Five perspectives. *English Quarterly*, Vol. 27, # 1-2, pp. 5-14.

Week 5

Subjectivity in literacy teaching and learning

Willie van Peer reminds us that writing is a cultural practice. This class will address the issue of subjectivity in the teaching of literacy. How we teach should reflect knowledge of the people we work with. That is, we will examine how learning to read and write is connected to who we are and also how it is connected to our environments. Freire redefines the meaning of literacy by arguing that reading the world comes before reading the word; therefore, literacy without knowledge of the world is meaningless. Dlamini, like Freire, narrates her own literacy journey through identifying the different people, environment, etc. where her literacy skills were developed, modified and enriched.

Readings

Freire, P. (1987). The importance of the act of reading. In *Reading the Word and the World*. New York: Bergin and Garvey.

* Dlamini, S. (2001). Literacy, womanism and struggle: reflections on the practices of an African woman. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 2, #3, pp. 78-93.

Weeks 6 & 7

Week six is devoted to the preparation of class presentations in week 7. For this presentation refer to week 5 readings as a way of beginning to think about the content of your presentation. For this assignment you are to present to the class your own literacy development. This may include the way you learnt a particular language, the way you learnt to read and write, the way you learnt how to navigate a particular way of being in a

given setting, or a combination of all. For this assignment you are to work in pairs and are encouraged to use each other in order to understand live processes of literacy development. To prepare for this assignment ask yourselves the following questions:

- How did I learn to do what I will present about – reading/writing/how to write academic essays/ prepare for exams/ how to behave in culturally foreign spaces, etc?
- Who were the people who made the most impact during this process, what impact was it and how did it shape the way I view the process of learning and /teaching?
- Which of the theories examined so far address some of my own literacy experiences and how do they do this?

Weeks 7 & 8

Literacy models

How then do we teach literacy? What practices work for whom and under what circumstances. Of all the methodologies that exist how do we select one that will work and for what situations. Shirley Brice Heath examines a few myths about writing and offers alternative ways of teaching students essay writing. Together with Heath, Deborah Tannen argues for the interconnection between conversation and writing arguing that students write what they talk about.

In addition to discussing the readings these two weeks will be devoted towards discussing students' proposal for the third assignment. Each student will be given an opportunity to talk about her proposal and will receive feedback about her plans. Note that these are not presentations (as in weeks 6 & 7) but are "work in progress", that is, informal talks designed to assist you with direction regarding your paper.

Readings

Heath, S. (1989). Talking the text in teaching composition. In S. De Castell, A. Luke & C. Luke (eds.), *Language, Authority and Criticism: readings on the School Textbook*. London: Palmer.

*Heath, S. (1994). The literate essay: Using ethnography to explore myths.

*Tannen, D. (1994). The orality of literature and the literacy of conversation.

Weeks 9

Student text as literacy

Pam Gilbert argues that in writing classrooms, the "innocent" stories of children have been placed beyond criticism and have been given privileged positions in school libraries. We will devote this week towards examining the role of students texts in literacy learning and teaching. Issues of gender, sexuality and race are often at the heart of these texts but positioning writing as a personal act often neglects the socially constructed nature of the narrative form.

Readings

* Gilbert, P. (1989). Student text as pedagogical text. In S. De Castell, A. Luke & C. Luke (eds.), *Language, Authority and Criticism: readings on the School Textbook*. London: Palmer.

Schuett, E. (1999). Two scary stories in a Texas town. *Cox News Service*, January.

Weeks 10 -12

Research literacy

These last weeks are devoted to the last assignment in which students are required to conduct research on a given topic. The topic should be well developed and should include intensive examination of the debates and research conducted in the area. Students will be working individually and will consult with the professor each week about progress or lack thereof. See course requirements for assignment details.