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The New Adventures of Old Literature

Wisconsin English Journal's Associate Editor partners with a pre-service teacher to explore the relationship between the classics and new literacy practices.

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Column **Description and Scope**

What makes a classic a classic? What makes new literacies new? In this regularly appearing column of *WEJ*, I'll explore Italo Calvino's (1999) question, "Why read the classics?" via principles from sociocultural theories of literacy and new literacy studies. By exploring connections between *What makes a classic a classic?* and *What makes new literacies new?*, my hope is that we will have the grounds to clearly articulate our reasons for including the literature we do from year to year or generation to generation. A clearly articulated argument is not only helpful for ourselves, as we explain our choices to administrators or parents, but it also is helpful for our students, who should never be kept out of the loop regarding the reasoning behind their studies.

At the end of every column, I'll include your own ideas and experiences about how you've taught a classic piece of literature in ways that resonate with today's students. There is an open submission link on the *WEJ* website for you to contact me with a short description of how the classics can be used in new and innovative ways. Your ideas could certainly involve how you incorporate new technologies into your teaching. Equally significant to this column's scope is how you use the classics to help students critically engage with the complexities of the social and cultural world(s) they inhabit today.

Together, my hope is that *The New Adventures of Old Literature* can provide us with a space for thinking about "new literacies" in relation to the timeless characteristics that classics offer.

Introduction

In 1999, Italo Calvino, an Italian author and literary critic, wrote a book that explores the writings of Conrad, Hemmingway, Homer, Twain, Tolstoy, and Dickens, among many others. Entitled *Why Read the Classics?*, the thirty-six essays of Calvino's book are, in many ways, "an insight into what amounts to his personal canon of great classics" (McLaughlin, 1999, p. vii). Yet, as Calvino's list of authors indicates, these pieces of literature are more than a random sampling of Calvino's own personal choices. Indeed, many of the authors he explores throughout his book appear on required high school reading lists across the state of Wisconsin and beyond. Consequently, there's got to be something about a classic that goes above and beyond personal taste, Calvino's or otherwise.

So what makes a classic? The first chapter of Calvino's book puts forward fourteen definitions that may prove helpful when deciding which pieces of great literature ought to keep on keepin' on – and why timelessly "old" literature ought to keep its place in the curriculum year after year after year. In this particular column, as a starting point, I begin with just two of Calvino's definitions as they are related to sociocultural issues of power, identity, and self-representation.

At the end of this column, I share an example of using new literacies to teach a classic, in this case George Orwell's (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The lessons are provided by Jon Spike, a pre-service teacher in his final semester of studies in Secondary English Education. In his unit, Jon helps students critically compare

contemporary social networking sites such as Facebook with the telescreens and surveillance society depicted in Orwell's novel.

FAQ: *Why Teach the Classics*? Answer: Power and Identity

"The classics are those books about which you usually hear people saying: 'I'm rereading...', never 'I'm reading...'" (Calvino, 1999, p. 3).

Identity politics, issues of power, and the construction of the self through literacy are underlying principles of new literacy studies. Calvino's definition above relies on a (Western metaphysical) cultural imagination that there are some well-read people in our midst who have read "the classics." Yet as Calvino points out, no matter how "wide-ranging a person's formative reading may be, there will always be an enormous number of fundamental works that one has not read" (p. 3). Thus, to say one is "re-reading" a classic "can represent a small act of hypocrisy on the part of people ashamed to admit they have not read a famous book" (p. 3). This hypocrisy, though small, speaks volumes about the power of culture over identity (e.g., a feeling of shame for not reading a classic), as well as the power of culture over the *representation* of identity (e.g., *saying* you *have* read the classic, and are now just revisiting it).

Literacy, power, and identity are cornerstones to a definition of the classics, not only because of the thematic content available in some classic literature, but more importantly, because of what the very term "classic" implies. The issues of literacy, power, and identity are also cornerstones to the new literacy studies, from [Gerald Graff](#) to [James Paul Gee](#), and extending to scholars working within the realm communication and information technologies (e.g., Coiro, 2003; Leu & Kinzer, 2000; Leu et al., 2004).

To better understand "What's new in New Literacy Studies," I turn to Brian Street (2003), one of the main scholars and theorists of this movement. He writes that:

> What has come to be termed the "New Literacy Studies" (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1996) represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985).

> This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power. NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant. (p. 77)

To think about literacy as a social practice means that any definition of a "classic" is situated on contested grounds that cannot be taken for granted. Far from metaphysical, the fight over curriculum and classics has always been social (witness the [Texas School Board's recent decisions](#)), with politics overshadowing any concerted effort to consider the big educational questions, *What and whose knowledge is of most worth?*

For me, controversies over what counts as literacy and whose literacies are dominant are embedded in the definition of "a classic" represented above, with its assumption of a cultured reader who is "re-reading a classic," and who values that particular identity enough to express it to others. However, as Calvino (1986) notes in a different essay, "doesn't the act of supposing an ever more cultured reader detract from the urgency of solving the problem of cultural inequality?" (p. 85).

From a new literacies perspective, Gee (2004) would agree, stating that "it is simply wrong to discuss reading assessment, intervention, and instruction without discussing the pervasive culture of inequality that deskills poor and minority children" (p. 37). Put another way, cultural inequality is the source of assumptions about what interventions and approaches students need, and the interventions and approaches that appear as most appropriate are based on assumptions of what skilled and cultured readers look like. Thus, issues of power and identity are tied up with issues of racism, classism, sexism and poverty that are embedded in the institution of schooling itself. Moreover, it is not merely a political problem for students who are forming their identities under the umbrellas of discriminatory power structures; it is also a cognitive process of belonging and not belonging to certain groups. Gee (2004) writes that students "will not idenitify with – they will

even disidentify with – teachers and schools that they perceive as hostile, alien, or oppressive to their home based identities" (pp. 36-37).

The idea of an ever-more cultured reader probably is intimidating even to those whose identities rest firmly on the fact that they're re-reading a classic. This is because literacy is a social practice, and if you're a part of the social group that values re-reading classics, then you're probably sensitive to issues of power and status regarding classics. The luxury of having students in your class who are not intimidated by such things is that you can turn a potentially hostile situation (ooo, there's a classic in the room) into a site of learning, thinking, and deconstructing the very notion of "classic" itself. If we do away with the idea of an ever-more cultured reader, then we can focus on the cultures, identities, and sensitivities of the readers in front of us.

Stemming from [sociohistorical psychology](#) and [constructivist theories of learning](#) (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), sociocultural theories see identity as changing, constructed, social, and fluid. In particular, literate identities are formed in the social and cultural contexts in which communication occurs. *Being literate* in new literacy studies is not a single identity to possess because the social and cultural contexts in which communication occurs can be multiple. Gee's (1996) famous example of a professor walking into a biker bar sheds light on this phenomenon. Literate in one place, lost in another, we make do by faking or pretending or fitting in as much as we can. Or we just don't go to that biker bar anymore.

In light of cultural inequality, it seems to me that it is of utmost importance, in our socioeconomically stratified and linguistically diverse times, to teach classics in ways that create spaces where students can fit. The thing about identities being fluid means that we can try on different ways of "fitting in," but there has to be a reason for us to do so, otherwise we just won't go to that class or school anymore. Students need to have the sense that they are more cultured than they know (from their own backgrounds and experiences), and that they are indeed reading a "classic" as other people have only *pretended* to do. In the future, they are free to "re-read" the classic if they like, in the formation of an elite persona, as they post their book lists on the "weRead" tab of their Facebook

profiles. In the present, and from a new literacies perspective, students need to be told directly that the book itself is a social entity that can be used as a tool for specific identity formations. Thus, as teachers, we should never assume that our students are not cultured or less cultured than a person "re-reading" a classic may be. After all, depending on the social practice at hand, it is often just the *representation* of an identity, something learned and adopted for specific circumstances, that matters most. Throw that fabricating re-reader of a classic into a biker bar and see whether his or her story changes.

FAQ: *Why Teach the Classics?* Answer: Identity and Self-Representation

" 'Your' classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it" (Calvino, 1999, p. 7).

Calvino's various definitions of what makes a classic strike me as profound and insightful, not only because they provide me with a blueprint of sorts, but also because they help me to grapple with the issue of "self-definition" during a time when identities and avatars are often short-lived and constantly open to transformations. It seems as though "I think, therefore I am" has been replaced by "I represent myself, therefore I am," as we adapt ourselves differently for the parallel universes of text messaging, instant messaging, emailing, music sharing, podcasting, picture sharing, craigslisting, googling, gaming, or zines. And then there's our "real" life: our wardrobes, our everyday identities, the way we talk, the way we interact. These multiple universes are really one, or at least they happen simultaneously, as we receive texts from loved ones during professional development meetings, or as we oscillate between grading papers and catching up on emails.

The new and multiple contexts we interface with daily embody the essence of "new literacies," from the technological tools available for communication to the idea of literacy as entirely situated within specific contexts. Social by nature, and ever-changing to meet specific needs, the idea of "literacy" today extends beyond the print on a page and encompasses the idea of specific literate identities for specific

literate purposes (Gee, 1992, 1996; Hammerberg [Hassett], 2004; Heath, 1986; Street, 1984, 1993). Often with an eye toward the entire global situation, which requires adept negotiations of cultural and linguistic practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) and/or the development of critical consciousness about one's own circumstance (Freire, 1972; Freire & Macedo, 1987), the ability to be literate today requires not only reading the word, but also reading the world. To this, sociocultural and new literacy theorists add the ability not only to critique social action, but also to design social futures (Kress, 2002).

For our students today, identity politics, issues of power, and the construction of the self through social practices are experienced on the micro-level of daily high school interactions. Fluid and changing, the knowledge of most worth in any given moment can be arbitrarily left to the student's temperamental impulses. Updating your status on Facebook requires an autobiographical glimpse of you and yur BFF scoffing a taco. Someone comments "gross," and the pic comes down. A text from a boyfriend trumps the text from the English class. And so on.

So is there anything eternal, like ageless beauty or universal truth, in this age of multitasking and multiliteracies? Is it possible to engage the "I" (pod) generation with the timeless characteristics that classics are thought to offer? Calvino's definition above gives me hope that, yes, all things are possible. *You* can have a classic that defines who you are, moves your very soul, and represents an identity that isn't about how your virtual farm is growing or a sense of self randomly generated by an online survey.

It's interesting to note that none of Calvino's (1999) fourteen definitions of "what makes a classic" approach a definition of a classic in terms of how old it is, what kind of style it is, or whether it contains universal themes. He makes no justification of his use of the term "classic," other than to speak in terms of "a kind of resonance we perceive emanating either from an ancient or a modern work, but one which has its own place in a cultural continuum" (p. 7). *"Your"* classic, Calvino writes, "establishes a personal relationship" with you: "If there is no spark, the exercise is pointless: it is no use reading classics out of a

sense of duty or respect, we should only read them for love" (p. 6).

How, though, can this spark or love occur in a place like school? Calvino himself indicates that we should only read classics for love...*except* at school:

> [S]chool has to teach you to know, whether you like it or not, a certain number of classics amongst which (or by using them as a benchmark) you will later recognise 'your' classic. School is obliged to provide you with the tools to enable you to make your own choice; but the only choices which count are those which you take after or outside of any schooling. / It is only during unenforced reading that you will come across the book which will become 'your' book. (p. 6)

Likewise, because sociocultural theories view literacy learning as a cultural process rather than an instructed one, traditional schooling is often treated as a place where benchmarks and obligations – and enforced readings – dutifully run rampant over deep and loving relationships with texts.

It is not that I disagree completely with such sentiments, but at the same time, I sense that the arbitrary and multiple identities our students' inhabit daily are not strangers to Lawrence Sipe's (2008) concept of the "personalizing impulse" (pp. 190-191). Sipe notes that "unless we make the text our own, it remains distant and remote" (p. 190). For me, this hearkens back to Gee's (2004) assertion that students won't identify with teachers or schools that strike them as hostile or oppressive (pp. 36-37). The personalizing impulse is the tendency to want to personalize everything to yourself and your own world so that something unusual (like a classic) no longer seems distant and remote, or hostile and oppressive. The personalizing impulse is about finding something in your life against which you can rate the text as true (or meaningless). It is finding connections in the text that you can tag as "like yourself" or "not like yourself" so as to measure, inform, or transform your own identity. It strikes me that the personalizing impulse is not at all foreign to students today who are able to personalize just about everything – far from it. However, the impulse to personalize a classic may indeed require education: a teacher who is a

conversationalist, devil's advocate, and role model; a system of schooling that has seriously considered the damaging effects of benchmarks and forced readings.

Alfred Tatum (2009) has traced the "textual lineages" of African American males over time: the enabling texts that have served as strongholds for African Americans from the mid to late 19th Century to the late 20th Century. Upsettingly, the early 21st Century is yielding fewer and fewer texts that African American males in middle and high school identify as significant to their own lives, or even texts they believe they will always remember. Tatum writes:

> Texts that African American males can identify as central to their development and thinking (or texts with qualities that have enabled them) have been severed and severely compromised during the middle and late twentieth century because there is a tendency to expose these young males to fewer texts in schools – and because the existing literacy paradigm in U.S. schools focuses on reading scores and has produced a testing frenzy. (pp. 76-77)

So the enforced readings, benchmarks, and duties of testing have teamed up with the power of politics and "the pervasive culture of inequality that deskills poor and minority children" (Gee, 2004, p. 37). This makes it extremely difficult to imagine how the personalizing impulse works for students who find the texts they encounter increasingly distant and remote. It's sometimes just easier not to go into that biker bar (i.e., classroom or school).

Our pedagogical motive as teachers, then, is to acknowledge the multiple identities that students embody, and provide them with some literature and significant questions designed to tap into a personalizing impulse. This is not simply a matter of helping students form text-to-self connections. Their identities are far more complicated than that, and they can see right through such pandering moves. For students to construct and represent their identities through classics that fall on a cultural continuum of textual lineages, they will need to be able to fit "their own" classic into something bigger that will supply conversations and thoughts about it for years to come.

Incidentally, this is not something that most students will do on their own – recall that they inhabit multiple worlds where personalizing impulses are based on sudden urges and abbreviated vocabulary. As it turns out, teaching is still necessary. Tatum (2009) recommends that teachers think about asking "essential questions" that "students can respond to from their multiple perspectives and in terms of their multiple identities" (p. 91). Tatum provides several examples of these essential questions such as: *Is a person's life outcome determined by race, gender or economics? Is the individual in control of their destiny? Do we find or create ourselves?* (p. 91).

Obviously, this takes some planning on the teacher's part. However, the collaborative conversations required to debate and consider essential questions highlight the social and situated construction of knowledge. The power of culture over identity means that we can create such cultures in our own classrooms. From a new literacies perspective, school *is* obliged to provide the tools by which students can make their own choices or design their own futures. Whether or not the literature being read today will become anybody's "own classic" in the future – the book that defines a student and to which they cannot remain indifferent – is anybody's guess. But at the very least, the reading of a classic can escape an aura of "suffer through it in school whether you like it or not" if we capitalize on our students' multiple perspectives and help them to think about and represent themselves in new and innovative ways.

Identity, Surveillance, and the Thought Police:
Jon Spike's Social Networking vs. Telescreens Lesson

In line with the discussion of power, identity, and self-representation, this series of lessons provided by Jon Spike uses the ideas of identity, surveillance, and the thought police found in George Orwell's (1949) novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in comparison with contemporary social networking sites such as Facebook.

Jon is graduating this month from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in Secondary English Education. Jon is very interested in creative writing, visual learning

and literacy, critical analysis, and exploring new technologies in his work as a teacher. These traits come out in many of the lessons Jon provides, and he's definitely made technology a big focus of his teaching. Jon wrote: "It's the literacy almost every student will need down the road, so exposing them while still incorporating the 'classics' of an English curriculum is crucial." He also noted that today's students not only need to be exposed to ever-evolving information and communication technologies in school, but that they also need to develop a critical stance toward the technologies available. He taught this unit to 12th grade students in an urban high school setting.

The purpose of Jon's social networking lesson was two-fold. At the very least, he wanted students to view social networking sites using a critical eye, questioning how these sites can be used for positive projection and observation, as well as negative projection and observation. In order to reach this teaching goal, one of the written portions to Jon's assignment asked a series of prompts leading students to compare and contrast social networking sites such as Facebook and the telescreens in Orwell's novel. The second aspect of the assignment involved creating a profile for one of the characters in *1984* – either portrayed as an obedient follower of Big Brother or a rebellious member of the Brotherhood – and then actually posting it on Facebook.

Jon's assignment started with some introductory handouts. At this point in the novel, the students had just learned enough about a few characters to allow them to assume the characters' points of view and write reflectively about them. Jon talked with the students briefly about how the next class period would be spent working on the social networking project, including some of his expectations for students to create Facebook profiles for a character. He then allowed the students to find a partner to work with and start brainstorming ideas about the character they wanted to select.

On the second day, Jon reviewed his expectations and goals for the assignment with the students, and together, they went down to the library computer lab to work on their character profiles and responses. Jon was pleased with how smoothly the registering for both e-mails and Facebook accounts went, which truly shows how technologically literate the new wave of students have become. Most of the students in the class were familiar with Facebook and how it operates. Although there were some technical difficulties with one or two students, the rest got started on creating their profiles within five minutes or less.

Jon was really thrilled with how engaged the students were with the assignment. Many of the students eagerly called him over to pitch their ideas to him about how to customize their character using the Facebook interface. Some students sincerely did a great job utilizing the medium, even writing to each other over the network while in character (something Jon didn't require). Others still did the bare minimum of the assignment, but Jon was impressed overall.

Jon's advice for teachers who wish to try an assignment such as this is that a medium (such as Facebook) is not the message after all. Even though most of these twelfth graders knew the workings of Facebook, Jon recommends modeling the types of information and insights various characters from *1984* might post. On this topic, Jon wrote:

> The students were treating the medium as they do outside of class. Their information on the profile was brief, in list format, and did not really push the assignment as far as I wanted it to be pushed. It allowed them to be lazy, and that was a direct result of me not giving them a model to show my expectations.

He would also spend more time modeling his expectations for the reflective writing assignment that followed the social networking activity. He gave the students a few prompts that asked them to compare today's social networking sites to the telescreens found in *1984*. Although the students enjoyed making contemporary connections to their aging text, Jon felt that some could have gone further, looking at the comparisons more deeply.

From an interest and engagement standpoint, though, Jon couldn't have been happier. His normally passive and disinterested seniors were actively engaged with the assignment, showing genuine interest in the task of creating their character profile. Students who showed little-to-no creativity in their daily work were coming up with ideas he hadn't thought of.

Jon would definitely teach this lesson again. He liked having the students work in

pairs because they had more ideas to discuss with each other about what the characters might post, and if one student had a computer at home, they could work on it outside of class together. Jon noted that this lesson also has possibilities for differentiation. For students who are English language learners, Jon felt the Facebook multi-lingual format, including Spanish and French, would allow different students to write in their first language. If ELL support staff did not mind, a teacher could allow the student to create a profile in their own language and have the support staff translate the work for the teacher.

It strikes me that Jon's lessons about a 1949 novel use two features of new literacies to teach a classic – one, the new technologies we have available today; and two, the use of students' contemporary communication systems to delve into issues of autonomy, policing, and self-representation. He brought an old classic into the present time – and he made me remember that data-mining technologies designed to keep track of our every interest are not just a fiction of "Big Brother."

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