

LITERACY & IDENTITY

Are we having fun yet? Students, social class, and the pleasures of literacy

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I'm like most teachers I know; my reasons for entering this line of work were a mixture of aspiration and circumstance. And, like most teachers I know, no small part of my aspirations was to be able to work with ideas I loved. Like most teachers I know who read this journal, my love was written words. Fiction, poetry, essays, journalism, plays—I love to read and write. It is a passion for me, and I still find it surprising some days that I am fortunate enough to be able to do what I do for a living. As a senior colleague said to me recently, marveling on the good fortune of a professional life that had taken him far from a childhood of urban poverty, "I would never have dreamed that I would get to spend 40 years with literature."

Though sentiments like these often tread close to wearisome clichés about passions for reading and the unnamable, compelling desire to write, they are no less true for being familiar. And it is these passions and desires that make it all the more dispiriting when our enthusiasms for reading and writing are rejected by some of our students. Although it doesn't surprise me, my heart still sinks when, after assigning an essay, poem, or story that I love, the best a student can do in class the next day is to shrug and tell me it was boring. I feel the same way when there is an exchange like this one from a class last year:

Student: Do you really *like* this story?

Me: Absolutely. One of the perks of teaching is that I get to assign the pieces I like so I have an excuse to read them again.

Student: You *like* this stuff? I would never want to read it *again*.

I've been teaching too long to expect universal love from my students for my class, teaching style, or the works I assign. But that doesn't mean I've stopped hoping. Although many students clearly love to read and write, and others find works during a class that surprise them by igniting unexpected pleasures, for some there is never a flicker of pleasure in their eyes. Reading and writing are chores to be accomplished, tasks to be endured. Even if students do meet the pedagogical goals of the course, there is no love for the work.

Yet I know that these students find great pleasure in other activities in their lives, including ones where they make meaning from texts—in magazines, on television, in movies, on the Internet. When students talk about engaging with and interpreting other forms of communication the boredom slides away, and they speak with insight and delight about what they know. What, then, is the difference between the texts they endure in class and those they embrace outside of it?

A sense of play

Pleasure, as a concern in education, is something that may get talked about in elementary grades, where there is a great deal of effort and discussion about how to get young students to “fall in love” with reading and writing. Indeed, regardless of the pedagogical approach, literacy pedagogy for young students often takes the form of games and play. But by middle school the sense of play and pleasure all but disappears as an explicit area of concern in teaching writing and reading is replaced by a focus on “competencies” that allow students to complete their “work” (and prepare for the workplace) and then have their competencies assessed. Such a transformation is intensified by the growth of standardized testing and the attendant anxieties such tests visit on both students and teachers. By high school and university, pleasure and school are often seen as mutually exclusive (Williams, 2003a). As Johnson (2003) noted, “Ever since Plato banished the poets from his ideal republic and blasted the sophists for trafficking in a similar brand of ecstatic make-believe, the academy has frowned upon pleasure as an ‘unprofessional’ consideration” (p. xi). Yet if we want students to embrace print literacy, to excel at it and make it a part of their lives, then competency is simply not enough. We must find ways to help students discover pleasure in reading and writing well. If we don’t consider pleasure more thoughtfully and talk about it with students more explicitly, we should not expect students to love what we love just because we tell them they should.

Control, competence, and challenge

Finding pleasure in an activity is not simply a matter of chance. Research into the activities that give people pleasure, including literacy and popular culture practices, suggests that people find pleasure in activities over which they feel they have competence and control and that provide them with a challenge they feel they can meet

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Williams, 2003a). People find competence, control, and challenge in those activities with which they have substantial experience. That is certainly how I feel about reading and writing and some other activities. I return to those activities with which I have experience or that potentially offer the reward of competence and control if I continue to gain experience with them (writing, music, cooking, and cycling). I tend to avoid those that seem impossible and that would make me feel foolish or incompetent even for trying (painting, ice skating, and plumbing). All I have to do to understand how some of my students feel about reading and writing and pleasure is to imagine how frustrated and inadequate I would feel with a paintbrush in my hand in front of a blank canvas. To put me in that situation as a student in a classroom, with its attendant judgments and punishments, would make me weak in the stomach. I can envision my fellow students painting away, somehow understanding what the teacher wants and enjoying their work, while I would stay in the back of the room using resentment and resistance to mask my feelings of intimidation.

Of course, I could learn to paint and perhaps eventually feel some competence and control (and pleasure) in doing so. But the real issue is experience. The more I put paint on canvas the greater the chances I would improve and enjoy what I was doing. The implication for students is that what they have experienced, can control, and can be competent in but challenged by will provide pleasure. That much seems obvious.

But if we are talking about the nature of students’ experiences, we are also talking about social class. This issue often makes teachers uncomfortable, particularly in the United States where they are caught in the paradox of a supposedly classless society that allows social mobility but also implicitly regards working class and poor people as if they are inherently less intelligent. Such simplistic perceptions are not helpful. Still, if we want to consider how experiences of reading, writing, and other forms of popular culture

influence students' perceptions of pleasure and literacy, social class has a role to play. Intelligence and pleasure obviously have no class boundaries, but the experiences students have with different forms of texts and communication often do have them. For example, 96% of households in the United States own at least one television. The consequence of this is that most people have some experience with television. Many students have a great deal of experience with television (even if they don't have one at home), and they feel competent and in control when they watch television and can talk about programs with confidence and pleasure (Williams, 2002, 2003b). By contrast less than half of U.S. households purchased a book last year, and that half had a higher median income and level of formal education than the population at large (American Booksellers Association, 2003). Quite simply, students who live in print-rich environments have a better chance of having more experience with print, develop more of a feeling of competence and control, and talk more about pleasure in reading and writing. Students from affluent families have a greater chance of living in a print-rich environment. Almost all students can talk about television with authority and pleasure, but far fewer can switch to talking about print literacy with the same level of experience and pleasure.

To close this gap would seem simple. The more the literacy experiences that we provide students lead to competence, control, and challenge, the more students will find pleasure in reading and writing. What is troubling, however, is that we often unwittingly play into these expectations of pleasure and social class in how we identify, label, and teach students in school. Because we often don't acknowledge how social class influences our pedagogy and curriculum, our courses and approaches often reinforce existing student expectations and perceptions of literacy and pleasure.

In part, this is a result of the way that social class can shape how we perceive students. For example, there is often an implied class label in identifying students as "basic" readers and writ-

ers. Asked to characterize students with "basic" literacy skills, most teachers would probably not describe such students as affluent. Indeed, when affluent students struggle with literacy the initial assumption is often that there may be some kind of learning disability—that the problem is somehow biological rather than social.

Literacy for work or for art?

In terms of pleasure, however, social class is more influential in terms of course goals and pedagogical approaches. *Pleasure* is not a word that immediately comes to mind in regard to basic literacy courses. Such courses are assumed to be more connected to skills and competencies than to the pleasures of reading and writing. What is deemed most important is to help students attain the literacy skills that will allow them to work effectively, whether in the classroom or on the job. Literacy in such contexts is a tool of economic empowerment and social mobility, and it needs to be focused on the practices that will enable students to achieve both of these ends. There is no doubt that sophisticated literacy skills can benefit poor and working class students in tangible economic ways. It would be unethical to deny students who have been marginalized economically and educationally the opportunity to develop literacy practices that will offer them greater choices in their work and school lives. In U.S. higher education such an approach extends beyond basic literacy students to provide the philosophical foundation for many university first-year writing courses. The explicit goal of such courses is to teach students acceptable academic writing conventions that they can take to other classes in order to succeed in their university careers. In all of these courses, pleasure is rarely discussed and seems frivolous to even consider in the face of such "serious" issues of economic and social inequities.

By contrast, affluent students are often offered ways to bypass such courses by testing out of them. They are also encouraged to take courses

in writing and reading where the goal (often the explicit goal) is to engage their imaginations and minds with humanity. They learn to “expand their horizons” and even to have fun and find pleasure in reading and writing. Such courses in honors programs or in creative writing are recognized as reserved for the elite. First-year composition may be required for the masses, but creative writing and honors courses often require a demonstration that students have risen above their peers and are deemed worthy of being rewarded with the fun courses. Students from different social classes can and do get into these courses, although my experience in teaching such courses at public and urban universities and in working with K–12 teachers is that honors and creative writing courses tend to be dominated by students from more affluent backgrounds. Teachers also prize being assigned such courses and administrators often hand them out as perks. If the goal of basic writing or first-year composition is to indoctrinate the masses into the institutions of education, the goal of the creative writing course is to give the elite a place to have fun, create art, and set their souls free. There seems to be an implicit barrier between workplace literacy and art, between economic development and individual growth, and between improving skills and improving souls.

Such barriers influence not only who gets to take what courses but also pedagogies and expectations of students and teachers. For example, though individual teaching styles vary, basic writing and first-year composition courses tend to have a more traditional pedagogical culture of a teacher in charge of a roomful of students. Creative writing courses, on the other hand, tend to operate on the model of the master artist with a roomful of apprentices who someday are expected to be artists on their own (Schweitzer, 2004). Honors courses also often have more of a seminar feel than a traditional classroom. Having taught writing in all of these settings—basic writing, first-year composition, creative writing, and honors seminars—I have fallen into these same assumptions about writing goals, pedagogy, and pleasure.

Basic writing and composition courses, like bad-tasting medicine, are regarded as necessary courses that students are required to take for their own good, even though they won't like them much. Honors and creative writing courses are elective and done out of a love for reading and writing.

Encourage students

An increasing number of teachers are rethinking the role of pleasure in teaching reading and writing (Johnson, 2003; Schweitzer, 2004; Tobin, 2004) as well as examining their assumptions about social class, literacy skills, and pleasure (Alvermann, 2004; Coles, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). What they and others advocate is breaking down the barriers by encouraging all students to find pleasure in their reading and writing as well as economic and cultural empowerment. They advocate finding ways to make all students find writing and reading intelligent, engaging, and enjoyable.

Taking pleasure seriously (if that's not an oxymoron) in the literacy classroom is not a matter of making everything a game or being rigorous in teaching. It is a matter of realizing that all students deserve the opportunity to do creative work that feeds their souls as well as work that addresses their material conditions. It is a matter of encouraging all students to find the pleasure in critical, intellectual work that teachers and scholars do. And it is a matter of encouraging students to bridge the supposed barriers between creative and critical work and to understand how pleasures in interpreting and creating texts of all kinds can connect to building pleasure in academic literacies.

Most of all, what teachers need to do is help students understand the sources of pleasure. If we offer students assignments and opportunities to recognize that what brings them pleasure is connected to experience, competence, and challenge, we can make a better case that the more experienced they become in reading and writing, the more pleasurable they will

find the activities. If we help students recognize how they find pleasure in the intellect they bring to activities involving sports, cars, cooking, films, fashion, and so on, we can make the case that more experience with literacy practices will help them find pleasure in intellectual pursuits at school and beyond. Finally, we need to create assignments and courses that offer students not only challenges but also some control in how they meet those challenges as a way to help them find the pleasure in writing and reading creatively and critically.

When I get my students' teacher evaluations once a course is finished, there are many comments that I hope to find in terms of what the students learned, which assignments they found valuable, and how they liked my teaching style. Yet perhaps the ones I like the best, the comments that make me feel I am doing my best work as a teacher, are like this one I received last year:

I never imagined I could ever like writing or be any good at it. And I know you made us work hard, but by the end of the semester I felt like I really liked what I was writing and that I kept wanting to do it.

The department editor welcomes reader comments on this column. E-mail bronwyn.williams@Louisville.edu. Mail Bronwyn T. Williams, University of Louisville, Department of English, Humanities Building, Louisville, KY 40292, USA.

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