

THE  
CONSTRUCTION  
OF NEGOTIATED  
MEANING

*A Social Cognitive  
Theory of Writing*

Linda Flower

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## Literate Acts

### I. Conversations about Literacy

The public discussion of literacy in crisis is like a long-running soap opera that continues to ask: Why can't Johnny read, write, or think? In this ritual tale, test scores and literacy rates reappear as shocking evidence of a decline from better days. But defining the "basics" to which schools should return as well as the "basics" that must be taught first is also a chief source of conflict among the players in this drama. For some of them, written literacy is equated with error-free, standard written English. For others, "basic" is equated with a more elite set of conventions—the ability to write an essay or five-paragraph theme associated with the belletristic essay tradition in English studies. (Each group assumes that its valued skills constitute the basic building blocks with which instruction must start.) For still other voices in this discussion, literacy, true literacy, does not merit the name until one can read, write, and talk about some valued body of knowledge such as the traditional literary canon of middle-class, male-authored works taught in English departments. But whatever the definition, when talk turns to "Is it true high school students can't read and/or college students can't write?" the discussion will echo with the language of deficits—deficits in students' cultural backgrounds, the embarrassing gaps in their knowledge, and their measured failure to achieve (and teachers to impart) some aspect of either functional, essayistic, or cultural literacy.

The public talk of literacy has become a ritual discourse defined by a powerful set of commonplaces and concepts. However, because it has so clearly failed to account for both the personal and social practice of literacy, it is being challenged by a new conversation in social, cognitive, and rhetorical theory. At issue is a focus on literate actions rather than on texts alone. In this conversation, the concept of literacy has been exploded into *literacies*, defined as *diverse discourse practices* that grow out of the needs and values of

different communities. That community may be academic literacy theorists, African farmers, or cognitive anthropologists who, like Scribner and Cole (1981), interpret the practices of the first two groups using the discourse strategies of the third. Gee describes a capital *D* "Discourse"

as a sort of "identity kit" which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize. Being "trained" as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think, and act like a linguist, and to recognize others when they do so. Some other examples of Discourses: (enacting) being an American or a Russian, a man or a woman, a member of a certain socioeconomic class, a factory worker or boardroom executive, doctor or a hospital patient . . . a student of physics or a student of literature, a member of a sewing circle, a club, street gang, lunchtime social gathering, or a regular at a local bar. We all have many Discourses. (1989, p. 7)

That was a linguist speaking. Other voices that we will hear in this social cognitive conversation shift attention from the features of a discourse to the *practice* of literacy. Described from this angle, literate action is a socially situated *problem-solving process* shaped not only by available language, practices, partners, and texts, but by the ways people interpret the rhetorical situation they find themselves in, the goals they set, and the strategies they control. When the discussion turns from the conventions of discourse to the practice of readers and writers within it, it becomes clear that literate acts are also moments of making meaning. Literate actions emerge out of a *constructive* cognitive process that transforms knowledge in purposeful ways. And at critical moments, this constructive literate act may also become a process of *negotiation* in which individual readers and writers must juggle conflicting demands and chart a path among alternative goals, constraints, and possibilities.

This more expansive view of literacy is both the foundation for and, in the long run, the justification for this book and its study of how meaning is constructed. In place of a literature review (which academic "Discourse" might suggest here), I would like to ground this alternative view of literacy in some cognitive and social specifics by sketching four distinctive but everyday constructive acts as cases in point. From this basis, we will explore how a social cognitive perspective on literacy not only challenges our public, textual view with some strong claims about what is basic, but may also force us to deal with a potentially generative conflict that is at its own center.

*Oren: Constructing a Life*

I am sitting at the kitchen table with Oren, who at 82 is gazing out the window but is in actuality looking back over years, marshaling what he

sees into a finely forged chain of events. Like Studs Terkel and his interviewee rolled into one, he is constructing the story of his working life. This is a selective account that links and transforms telling bits of information, building a meaning out of facts. It starts with the year he spent reading water meters to get enough money to attend a local college, which led the water company—an unlikely first mentor—to create the part-time job platting city mains that allows him to stay in school. His goal was engineering and Iowa State, but the depression and tales of 400 unemployed graduates cancel the dream. A local minister helps him land work in the Kansas wheat harvest. Adventure and a Colorado uncle keep him working in the Rockies through fall roundup. His Model A repaired with baling wire barely makes it back to Iowa, but he has heard that Chillicothe Business College in Missouri can guarantee a job for its graduates. He works for his board and room; Grandmother sends him money from selling her cinnamon rolls. The road of this working story leads through Chillicothe, Ottumwa, Chicago, Wichita; each chapter is a job won in hard times, an achievement always connected in some way to friends, teachers, or bosses who find him a place, and put in a word and also to effort and persistence that sometimes pay off. These three themes—an inescapable social context, interpersonal support, and personal initiative—are sources of coherence and significance in this constructed life.

Events often hinge on persuasion. It was 1941. Germany had invaded the Netherlands and the British were building tanks in a plant outside of Chicago where the factory was on three shifts and the staff worked 12-hour days. It is clear the general manager on the other side of the desk needs to hire a buyer: a pile of unfilled requisitions are stacked in front of him. For Oren this job could mean staying in Chicago, near Peggy. But the interview is not going well.

I could see we weren't getting anywhere. So I got up, took off my jacket, hung it on the back of the chair, and then pulled it around to his side of the desk. "Let's look at these requisitions," I say. "Oil cans. You need oil cans. O.K., I can help you here; I know where to find these. [Oren is at that point a hardware buyer for the Montgomery Ward Company.] I have been getting these for two years from Eagle Oil. Let's see what else is here." We began to work down through the stack. When we were done, he asked me to report tomorrow or as soon as I could leave Ward's. You see, what they needed was someone who was willing to roll up his sleeves and pitch in.

Oren, my father, is constructing the story or rather a story that makes meaning out of a part of his life. This constructed meaning is framed and

shaped by both conventions and personal themes—hard work, persistence, reading a situation, seeking and making opportunities and always the mentor, manager, friend, or contact who helps you out, gives you a chance. Each new episode is an oral paragraph with a topic sentence that picks up this thematic thread as he recovers from brief tangents. The conventions of narrative, the tricks for achieving focus, give structure to this gaze into the past, as do other conventions of depression discourse. I hear, for instance, the optimistic echos of Horatio Alger simultaneously undercut by a sense of the tremendous vulnerability and interdependence of all the characters in his story—like the college friend fed with rolls smuggled in baggy sweaters from the dining hall after his college savings disappeared overnight in a bank failure, the boy that might have been anyone of them.

If we step back slightly to regard this as a literate act, we see the familiar threads of other literate practices like autobiography and documentary. A variety of local discourse conventions like repetition, thematization, parallelism, and chronology based on critical incidents give this meditation coherence and direction, while other moves, such as shifting perspective and pausing for commentary, create a space for reflection and wonder at it all; they allow a kind of eloquence. But *meditation* is the wrong word, for this literate act is also driven by a desire to communicate, to bring the daughter and son-in-law at the kitchen table into his life and into the experience of a distant time. When we reach Wichita, his asides show he is anticipating places I would remember and thinking where he needs to fill Tim in on background. But for my father himself, this account is at its heart a constructive act, an attempt on this November afternoon to construct a meaning out of experience, perhaps to explore the comment he had made about his working life the night before: “I have been lucky. I may not have accomplished something great, but what I have done has been satisfying to me.”

This account of a working life is not only a constructive, literate act itself, it creates a meaning for these events in which literate practices play a distinctive role. Working in Chicago begins with the challenge of taking legal dictation (accurately interpolating the gaps in your shorthand), followed by writing and filling requisitions in tight times as a buyer for Ward’s, crafting imaginative sales letters and job applications, like the one that convinced Mrs. Beach to make him the wartime buyer for Beach Aircraft in Wichita and, of course, the love letters that brought Peggy to Kansas. The love letters aside, Oren talks about each of these practices as distinctive abilities, often associated with classes at Chillicothe and Northwestern University. These skilled literate acts—as performances and challenges to meet—are central to the dramatic logic of his account.

Thinking back over this twilight account as an educator, I saw in it an

interesting touchstone for literacy, not because we could point to its blurring of oral and written discourse or because of the commonplaces and conventions of autobiography, reflection, and argument that give it structure, but because all of these features are being woven into a highly meaningful, but everyday literate act that was functioning in its different ways for the three people at that table. As an educator, it is this action, this constructive process—the radical selecting, organizing, and connecting of ideas and language for personal and social purposes—that I want to keep in the picture as I envision student literacy. Let me be clear that by *constructive process* I mean something a good deal more precise, robust, effortful, and strategic than just personally meaningful recollection. Meaning construction involves at least three active, often time-consuming processes (Spivey, 1990): *selecting* information (the relevant events and details from a working life); *organizing* it at all levels, from making local transitions to imposing a larger, organizing discourse structure, like a reflective autobiography (though note how the principle of organization may in fact anticipate and guide the process of generating and selecting ideas); and *connecting*, which ranges from seeing and verbalizing parallels in events, to drawing inferences that create a pattern of cause and effect, to explicitly locating one’s own ideas in the context of larger issues, other readers, other texts.

This constructive literate act is a social, cognitive, and rhetorical process. And it leads me to ask, Does the literacy we teach and measure support the capacities dramatized here? How well does the development that students *do* undergo, as writers and rhetors in school, fit into their larger history? Does it help them construct meanings that are at once personal, communicable, and useful? Consider another literate act closer to school.

#### Ron: *Constructing a Discourse*

At Northwestern, my father studied the art of writing personal sales letters from a celebrated Mr. Crane. The course that impressed him so is probably no longer in the university catalog, its discourse practice replaced by the telephone. But no matter, for what remains vivid from that experience is not a template for texts, but the social and rhetorical practice of persuasion he encountered there. Fifty years later, Ron, a freshman I am interviewing for the Reading-to-Write research project, sees writing through a similar wide lens, as a practice that extends beyond text features. At six weeks into the semester, Ron is trying to construct a workable image of what literate practice in college entails. He sees his writing assignments in English and history as specialized and mysterious but ultimately as rule-governed kinds of discourse—it is his job to figure out the rules of the game (Flower et al., 1990).

Ron: I try to write it as soon as I can and let them look at it. Even take it right to the teacher, and say, "Look at this. Am I going in the right direction or not?"

Interviewer: That's a kind of expensive way to do it, isn't it?

Ron: You pick up things. You pick up good things. It's expensive in terms of that paper, but it's not expensive in terms of putting that away for future reference for the rest of the course. Really, it's pretty practical if you think about it. Rather than going about it and getting two, three C's on a paper.

Learning to be literate in school, constructing a theory of the discourse at hand, is itself a constructive act that does not end with soliciting feedback. It depends on savvy and critical intelligence, selecting the details and cues that matter, organizing and connecting information or, more accurately, transforming it into a plan for future action. Ron is adept at reading a situation and using his audience to figure out ways to think, goals to set: "It's not really a conscious process that I go through. You just got to listen. I don't know if it sounds weird or what. But I sit there and I watch them during the lecture. I listen to key words that they use. They register."

For Ron, constructing meaning (i.e., both propositions in a text and the meaning or rules of a new discourse) is an intensely rhetorical act. The cognition and the social relations he describes are based on strategic decisions, guided by goals and strategies of which he is highly conscious. Perhaps it is no surprise that Ron is not eighteen, that he has come to college after 10 years rising from stock boy to assistant manager in a large store. The constructive process he describes is the strategic construction of negotiated meaning.

And to be honest with you, I think it has a lot to do with my being . . . I've been out for 10 years, and I came back. And this is more related to real-world experiences. How it goes. I mean, you can go out and you can tell your boss, "Well, I think we could do it this way." And you have a real good idea. And he just says, "Get outta here." Meanwhile, if you really think it's a good idea you can twist it around and maintain the gist of the whole thing and maybe get it pushed through. Mutually beneficial: it's gonna help him and help you.

For Ron, learning to write in college is not upgrading skills; it is learning how to operate within a new discourse. Moreover, to construct a successful text a student must first construct (and test) his or her own theory of that discourse. Ron's ten years of "being out" also taught him that entering and literate practice is a political act; it depends on reading a situation and reading the audience as well as reading texts and having good ideas.

### *Heidi: Constructing a Meaning from Text*

Reading research and most tests measure comprehension by the reader's ability to recall the author's main points and the structure of the text. Heidi, who is thinking aloud as she reads an article by Stephen J. Gould, is a cooperative research subject/student who knows what is expected (Flower, 1987). Throughout her reading, she dutifully rehearses those key points, struggling to construct a representation of the author's main point (i.e., why people have had so much difficulty accepting three claims in Darwin's theory). However, side by side with this process, the transcript reveals another constructive act going on, one that is building a quite different, even more significant political reading in the mind of this reader. "Now what I've done is, I've lost track of the sort of—highest-level—point of this—this article, which is why [there is] the difficulty in accepting Darwin's theory, because I've been trying so hard to remember what the damn theory was. Ok. What I—I can't wait to hear about [is] the radical philosophical content [just alluded to in Gould's text]. . . Good . . . Oh, I'm really—I love this."

In tandem with her repeated attempts to construct and rehearse a main point reading about difficulties with Darwin's theory, Heidi, a dedicated social activist, ended up creating another well-developed "radical reading" with its own hierarchy and set of gists. (She was even more effective at recalling this than the main point construction she labored over.) What stands out in this vignette is a reader who is not simply comprehending a text, but is actively constructing multiple coherent meanings, guided by both her "good reader" strategies and her personal goals for reading.

### *Dawnise: Constructing a Text*

Dawnise is an at-risk teenager from an inner city housing project on Pittsburgh's North Side, but at the Community Literacy Center she is a writer working with a group of other young writers to investigate the story of teen pregnancy from the little-heard side of the teen. The text Dawnise is reading to the group is based directly on her interview with Mary who is 14 and pregnant. It is disappointing: Mary's thoughts about getting pregnant, continuing school, financial planning, and raising a baby, all seemed minimal; the text is offering a flat, two-dimensional portrait of this teenager. However, when Dawnise begins to talk about the silent dialogue that had been in her own mind as she talked with Mary, another meaning begins to form around the text.

I was thinking, did she really know what I was talking about, so I tried to explain a little bit more. . . . Or maybe she was sort of avoiding

it. It was like something you could tell that she wanted to talk about, then when you get more into it she just blanked out. . . .

She really didn't feel [having a baby] would jeopardize her life. And I was thinking, maybe. . . . [pause] I thought she wouldn't make it. Cause it's like she just knew these things would happen and she really didn't sit down and talk to anyone about it. And it was just, like well, it was like a fantasy, because you always wish for the good things to happen. . . .

I felt sort of sad when I was interviewing her. I felt why would a person want to jeopardize their life like this. Why would they really want to want this for themselves. I thought maybe if someone could talk to her a little bit more and tell her about it, you know, try to make her understand then maybe it could work.

In a short conversation afterwards, Dawnise added a final, tentative, but it seemed strongly felt, thought: "And I wondered if maybe she just didn't want some love. I also wondered was it because her mother and father have an alcohol and drug problem. If maybe that had something to do with it."

The compelling meaning of this interview was not on the tape; it was in the interplay between Mary's words and Dawnise's empathetic reading of what they and the situation could mean. The problem this writing group had to face was, How does someone represent such meaning in a text? Should Dawnise use *I*? Should she even bring her own response into the text? And if so, what conventions or strategies let writers integrate multiple voices or weave their interpretation of a scene while still trying to document it and let these teens speak for themselves? Constructing this text was, in part, a matter of knowing some writerly conventions, yet even simple moves in the text, like using *I*, were contingent on larger rhetorical decisions and would send the group back to questions about what they wanted this text to do, for whom.

## II. Competing Images of Literacy

Vignettes of constructive processes like these challenge our public discourse about literacy and urge us to examine what our discourse values and what it has failed to see. Looking at literacy as part of a social action puts text features like grammar, spelling, topic sentences, and transitions in perspective. Correctness and convention, those easy-to-spot text features that stir the blood of the public press, move out of the spotlight. However, when that happens, what moves in? Our popular discussion lacks a vocabulary for going beyond the borders of a text, for naming the basics that support genuine literate action or for judging success (Hull, 1991).

By contrast, the image of literacy emerging out of the new social cognitive

conversation starts with an event that is at once public and personal. A literate act, like those in our vignettes, is an attempt to create meaning, and in doing so, it reflects—is itself shaped by—literate, social, and cultural practices that existed long before the writer. At the same time, literacy is also a personal, intentional action, an attempt to understand, express, explore, communicate, or influence. This image of literacy also highlights the real diversity of social practices and cognitive processes carried on under the blanket name of literacy. For example, the person who is an expert or insider in one discourse community is likely to be a novice or outsider in another, whether that community is one that trades business letters, produces rap songs, understands budgets, constructs academic arguments, or engages in community advocacy at city council. Learning these practices and moving among them as a reader and writer calls for strategic knowledge, for understanding the conventions of *that* discourse and how they are used to carry out people's intentions. A conceptual pocket guide to the vocabulary of this new conversation, then, would include partially overlapping notions such as discourse communities, social practices, discourse conventions, and literacy events that would be, in turn, linked to discussions of situated cognition, constructive processes, strategic thinking, and rhetorical awareness.

To draw attention to the "vocabulary" used for literacy may seem like a peculiarly academic exercise in the face of a crisis, but in dealing with the kaleidoscopic nature of literacy, the elements of that process that we talk about are the ones we reify and make real. The features that we make explicit, understandable, and operational are the ones that shape our educational vision (Hull & Rose, 1989). The features we name become the elements that instructors try to teach, that administrators and policymakers support, and that the evaluation industry tries to measure. The politics of literacy are inextricably tied to how we define and measure it. But both definitions and measurement have a troubled history.

Let us consider for a moment how competing images of literacy figure in three important sites of conflict: in the ways we measure and define literacy, in decisions about what to teach, and in the ways we theorize about a discourse.

### Measuring and Defining Literacy: Problems with a History

The ground for conflict begins with the troubling fact that our methods of measurement cannot always tell us who is literate and who is not. In current public discussions of the rise (and/or decline) of literacy, being literate usually means the ability to decode and comprehend written language at a rudimentary level. But even with this definition, there is an uncertain

relationship between what the standard tests measure and what people do. For periods before the 1850s, literacy rates were measured by evidence such as signatures on marriage registers, army rolls, wills, and other public records; for later periods by multiple choice tests like the SAT and the Armed Forces Qualifying Tests. Although "most historians of the subject have this crude literacy skill in mind when they estimate literacy rates," recent studies have shifted attention from "nominal possession of literacy" to "the uses of literacy among those who are literate and how those uses change over time" (Kaestle, 1988, pp. 96-97). This may be an overdue move (1) if Graff is right that "qualitative abilities cannot be deduced *simply* or *directly* from the quantitative levels of literacy's diffusion" and (2) if there is indeed a "significant disparity between high levels of the possession of literacy [as measured by some limited means] and the usefulness of those skills (1985, p. 81). In other words, the aspects we can measure may not capture performances that matter.

The argument about literacy goes deeper than problems of measurement; it is over what this social construct, this historical chameleon, literacy, means. Tracing the history of these definitions, Resnick and Resnick conclude that our current national literacy crisis was not brought on by a decline in skills but by a dramatic rise in our expectations since the mid-nineteenth century. In 1820, signing one's name would have identified a person as literate (unlike the majority of people even in the developed countries of Europe). A dramatic escalation of literacy (and its definition) had occurred earlier in Sweden when the Lutheran church made reading (to answer questions) and memorizing portions of the catechism and prayer book a requirement for marriage. But both of these skills represent a limited literacy if people want or need to read unfamiliar texts to glean new information, including information that is not directly stated and must be inferred. And what if that knowledge needs to be related sensibly to other texts (1988, p. 191)? Or what if people need to communicate the fruits of their thinking to others?

In our technological society, the demand for literacy goes beyond the receptive capacities of reading to the productive literacies of writing. The National Assessment of Educational Progress view of the workplace calls for a written literacy that does not simply reproduce information but that transforms it: "Skills in reducing data, interpreting it, packaging it effectively, documenting decisions, explaining complex matter in simple terms, and persuading are highly prized in business, education, and the military and will become more so as the information explosion continues (1981, p. 5). And in a competitive, pluralistic society struggling to be democratic, written literacy is a critical way for voices to be heard—even if those voices do not speak in a prestige dialect or do not use the patterns of discourse

taught in school. In both the technology and democracy scenarios, the literacy in question appears to be a purposeful and constructive performance with text.

### Teaching a Limited Literacy

In contrast to these demands for strategic literate acts, much of our public discourse talks about literacy as if it were a single, generalizable ability and tells schools to make students attain it by teaching grammatical correctness and one or two privileged literate practices. For instance, Hull's "critical assessment of popular views on literacy and work," reviews the popular images of workplace illiteracy that chalk up economic loss to skill deficits while ignoring the more powerful disincentives for literate or productive action that surround these supposedly "illiterate" workers (1991). The equation of literacy with correctness has a long and tenacious history in American schools. As Rose notes, under the influence of Edward Thorndike and turn-of-the-century behaviorist educational theory, correctness (i.e., the particulars of usage, grammar, and mechanics) became the era's "most significant measure of accomplished prose" (1985, p. 343). That focus continues in both remedial and freshman composition programs despite attacks from progressive, liberal, and now process-centered theory. "It is somewhat curious, then, that a behaviorist approach to writing, one that took fullest shape in the 1930's and has been variously and severely challenged by the movements that followed it, remains with us as vigorously as it does. It is atomistic, focusing on isolated bits of discourse, error centered, and linguistically reductive" (p. 343). The legacy of this approach is apparent in the writing currently done in high schools: in Applebee's (1981) study only 3% of high school writing assignments elicited more than a paragraph of text.

The pedagogy of correctness has another quality that may contribute to its staying power. Its drills and exercises, workbooks, texts, and potential for nationwide testing are efficient ways to manage, market, and deliver education. Correctness is big business. Despite 50 years of research demonstrating that teaching grammar does not improve writing (Baron, 1982), teachers at even progressive public schools are still accountable to tests like the California Achievement Test that measure students' writing ability with 55 multiple-choice questions that ask them to distinguish correct words, correct grammatical constructions, and correct sentences from incorrect ones. Middle-class Standard English speakers can even find it fun to play this game with artificial language and test logic: "I am \_\_\_\_\_ preparing to accept responsibility for the project." Choose among: quick, quicker, quickly, or quickest. But the literacy of conventions and rules is a disempowering game for many who are forced to play it.



Educators make another simplifying move when they identify literacy instruction with instruction in a given privileged practice, such as the essay. Like good grammar, essay writing has many virtues. The problem is letting the part stand for the whole. Essayistic definitions of literacy do indeed have a long history in education, based on the comfortable association between belles lettres, the transmission of culture, and the development of a cultivated mind (deCastell & Luke, 1988). Even in its homely schoolroom incarnation (e.g., the five-paragraph theme), essayistic literacy is venerated as the way young minds acquire skills such as logic, analysis, development, and generalization. Patterns of development in a text are not only equated with patterns of thought, they are the way to teach such intellectual skills—or so the assumption goes (DeAngelo, 1975). Teaching a given textual convention is justified by equating that convention with literate thinking. One radical version of this association is found in the Great Divide theories that see the move from orality to literacy as not only a great watershed in human culture but “claim that mastery of a written language affects not only the content of thought but also the processes of thinking—*how* we classify, reason, remember” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 5).

Some devastating challenges to these assumptions have come, however, from cross cultural, cognitive, and linguistic research. Abstract, rational, and critical thought regularly appears in “unlettered” societies in the absence of both formal education and literacy, although Western intelligence tests have an embarrassing record of unreliable, ethnocentric attempts to measure it (Goodnow, 1976). As Scribner and Cole (1981) showed with their comparisons of Vai, Arabic, and English literacies in a single Liberian society, people do indeed differ in the specialized thinking skills they develop, such as the tendency to use functional versus categorical methods of classification. But these differences are not the result of literacy per se, but a function of urban life, Western schooling, and the specific discourse practices used in one’s community. Practice in writing “themes,” this work suggests, will enable you to write themes; it will not make you a literate thinker for all occasions. Closer to home, the “myth that middle-class language [i.e., Standard English] is in itself better suited to dealing with abstract, logically complex, or hypothetical questions” has been forcefully undercut by Labov’s linguistic research. It shows such thinking where it was least predicted—in the definitely nonstandard, decidedly anti-academic street talk of adolescent members of a Harlem gang (1972, p. 220).

The decision about what to teach in the name of literacy has also depended, in the public discussion, on the assumption that literacy is a unified, stable entity, a generalized ability a person can acquire in one setting and transfer to all others. This monolithic concept, too, is being redefined by

richly documented analyses of “literacy transactions” (Resnick & Resnick, 1989), “literacy events” (Heath, 1983), and “literate situations” (Anderson & Stokes, 1984). In these ethnographic, historical, and rhetorical studies, the literacies people practice range from reading sacred texts in expected ways, to “sounding” to gain prestige, to keeping agricultural and family records, to collaborative reading, writing, and problem solving in response to newspapers, official documents, and academic assignments. The literate acts uncovered here are not limited to schoolwork or a schooled elite. They are performed by preschoolers, school dropouts, parents, workers, and they show literacies that are woven into the lives of Americans regardless of age, class, ethnic background, education, or job. Literacy becomes “a complex of actions that take place inside a web of social relationships and social assumptions. . . . If we want to know how literate we are, therefore, we must ask how much and how well people use the printed word, to carry out each kind of social transaction we consider important. . . . Instruments such as the NAEP literacy examination, although they go farther than most standard tests . . . are not geared to this situational analysis” (Resnick & Resnick, 1989, p. 193).

The public discourse of literacy and its assumptions about how to define, measure, and teach literacy are coming under fire (Hull, 1991; Lunsford, Moglen, & Slevin, 1990), but the problem is not a simple one. On the one hand, who would deny the practical and social significance of being able to use Standard English or dismiss the rich history and value of essayistic and academic conventions (on which the present text, for instance, depends). Even the maligned five-paragraph theme is a useful simplification for teaching key skills. True, we are beginning to discover “hidden literacies” in high school dropouts and “print awareness” in preschoolers, but is this any reason to sit back, celebrate, and let natural development replace teaching? If anything, these challenges to the meaning of literacy problematize the question of what is “basic,” which practices to privilege, and how to teach genuine literate acts.

On the other hand, it is becoming clear that we need a new conceptual vocabulary for talking about being literate that does not shrink our image down to a limited Literacy defined solely by text features. Popular references to Literacy are, I would argue, often references not to the sweep of literate performance but to a particular and far more convenient construct I am calling a limited Literacy. This construct does two things. First, it identifies literacy with some privileged set of text features or conventions (whether it is a comparison/contrast theme or an error-free paragraph) that are indeed significant in some settings, but not in all. (Such literacy is rather like the fluency in Pig Latin that was admired by many, but possessed by few, in

my grade school—a practice with local prestige and limited transfer.) These prized literate practices are often the familiar genres, text conventions, or patterns of development taught in school, or they are identified with knowledge (e.g., of spelling or grammar) that can be reliably measured by tests. By this definition, any given practice would qualify as a limited instance of literacy. However, limited literacies aspire to the status of a generic term. Not satisfied with promoting their chosen set of conventions or text-based skills as a valuable tool or a desirable ability, they begin to masquerade in public discourse as the essential, necessary, or defining elements of literacy. They claim the status of a *synecdoche* as when essayistic literacy comes to stand for the whole. And even more problematic, limited literacies, like the pedagogy of correctness, solidify their position by posing as a necessary foundation, the basic skills, which must be in place before other literacies can develop. They pass themselves off as the entry point to literacy when they are merely a part; they pose as a defining practice and aggressive standard for the whole when they are neither.

The ritual public discourse of literacy, a discourse that habitually links correctness and essayistic expectations with student failure, has failed to put these limited literacies in perspective. In confusing parts with the whole, it has dictated ways to teach literacy that routinely fail to develop the genuine literate capacities students already possess (Dyson, 1986; Heath, 1983). Perhaps even more ironically, it has also failed to teach the limited literacies it set up as the goal and the yardstick for instruction. A cultural critique of this situation might not even find this failure unexpected, since these limited literacies often function as powerful social gatekeepers. They call for a special performance that minority and poor students are not likely to have acquired.

#### Theorizing about a Literate Practice

Different images of literacy can lead us literally to see different parts of this process: to construct different stories about what happened and to see different parts as the essential features. The debate over the scientific essay is a case in point. The rise of the analytic and scientific essay is a milestone in the history of Western literacy. But is it the success story of a textual convention or the outcome of a strategic and ongoing social/intellectual event? And what difference would either view make?

Olson uses this genre to make a strong case for an exclusively textual conception of literacy; he sees the history of the essay as a slow climb out of situated, oral utterances—statements that depend on their context to make sense—moving towards what he calls autonomous text. Such texts,

loosed from the mooring of context and speaker/listener relations, create knowledge through “the repeated application in a single coherent text of the technique of examining an assertion to determine all of its implications” (1988, p. 182). This process “of formulating statements, deriving their implications, testing the truth of those implications, and using the results to revise or generalize from the original statement characterized not only empiricist philosophy,” but the practice of science mirrored in the developing Royal Society (p. 183). The result of this textual practice, Olson goes on to argue, was “the formulation of a small set of connected statements of great generality that may occur as topic sentences of paragraphs or as premises of extended scientific or philosophical treatise . . . notable not only in their novelty and abstractness but also [in their] . . . mode of using language—the deduction of counterintuitive models of reality” (p. 183). When literacy is conceptualized as the production of such texts—abstract, logical, internally consistent performances aspiring to the sanctity of the syllogism—“the criterion for the success of a statement in explicit prose text is its formal structure” (p. 188). When formal features are elevated to the essence of literacy, there is little need to measure or, it appears, even to worry about a successful transaction between reader and writer: “If the text is formally adequate and the reader fails to understand, that is the reader’s problem. The meaning is in the text” (p. 188).

Given this concentration on the formal features of discourse, it follows that the goal of schooling would be to transform “children’s language from utterance to text” (Olson, 1988, p. 189). In textualizing knowledge, Brandt (1990) argues, Olson’s view decontextualizes literacy and provides a strong rationale for the current practice of equating literate practice with certain text features. In fact, the argument with Olson’s account is not with its picture of certain textual features and their usefulness, but with its theoretical and practical implications for what it means to be literate. One could even cheer this apotheosis of the essay and acknowledge it as a formidable literary and intellectual feat but still remain suspicious of the current educational practice that reduces the essence of this textual performance to a narrow set of text features. Unlike Olson’s idealized essay, the textbook essay is typically defined as the presence of a thesis statement, paragraphs following standard patterns of logical development (comparison/contrast, cause/effect, etc.), transitions, and a conclusion. Reduced to teachable textual features, the textbook essay that dominates instruction is often no more than a hollow, formal shell (cf. Crowley, 1990).

But what if we aimed higher than a “limited literacy” and targeted the conventions of Olson’s robust, intellectually demanding essay as basic? An even more compelling criticism of textually defined literacy lies in Brandt’s

(1990) next observation: teaching textual literacy may misrepresent what expert readers and writers actually do and reinforce novice performance. In numerous cognitive studies of writers at work, she argues, the inexperienced writers are preoccupied with formal text features (as their schooling would support), while the experts subordinate such matters to a more global consideration of purposes, goals, and possible reader responses. The mental representation experienced writers appear to build is not an autonomous text but a purposeful rhetorical move. In fact, experienced readers may even work to interpret a supposedly autonomous text by transforming it into a meaningful social transaction. While inexperienced readers appear to focus on the content and textual features of a difficult text, experienced readers carry out “rhetorical” (Haas & Flower, 1988) and “point-driven” (Hunt & Vipond, 1986) reading, drawing inferences about who was saying what to whom, in what context, and why. As Brandt argues, the textbook habit of equating literacy with textuality is also challenged by ethnographic studies of literate events: here the meaning of even “explicit” texts resides not in the text alone but in its interaction with habits of problem solving, child rearing, or the storytelling a cultural group may bring to these reading and writing events. Moreover, Olson’s broadbrush history of literacy as the neat march toward autonomous text seems oddly out of touch with detailed historical research that documents how literate practices and the meanings they create are constantly in flux, reflecting changing cultural, ethnic, and economic patterns. In sum, defining and teaching literacy in terms of its textual artifacts alone seems to be missing some basic features of what literate people do.

On the other hand, textual conventions are central to literacy—they embody the history of a discourse, and they shape the making of new meanings by writers and the process of interpretation by readers. The difference is that a social cognitive conception of literacy embeds texts within contexts and purposes; texts and text features are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Moreover, they turn out to be mutable, adaptive features that reflect rhetorical and intellectual responses to social exigencies. For example, when Bazerman’s richly researched history of the rise of the scientific article tracks it through the *Transactions* of the Royal Society, we see key features of the genre emerge over time as a rhetorical response to the context of that rapidly developing, individualistic, and often contentious community. The early volumes starting in 1665 are taken up with reports of natural phenomena or cookbook recipes for producing fascinating effects with vacuums and chemicals. But as writers begin reporting actual experiments and readers of this epistolary journal begin to respond with conflicting opinions and reports, the conventions for reporting methods begin to emerge

as a response to misunderstanding and as a defense against attack. “As disputes arise over reported results, writers become more careful about reporting what they see and measurement takes a greater role” (1988, p. 72). Although new ways of reporting eventually become conventionalized, they begin as a direct response to the social situation of writing: “Debate and conflict push results to greater detail and precision in exactly the same articles with more detailed accounts of methods” (p. 72). The convention of an introduction that sets up a general problem also begins to emerge under the same conditions: “As experiments begin to respond to conflicts, their reports focus on the issue in contention . . . with a statement of the phenomenon in dispute and then a discussion of the opponent’s work or position” (p. 76). Over this period, the genre that emerges “is a social construct that regularizes communication, interaction, and relations. Thus, the formal features . . . by which we usually recognize a text’s inclusion in a genre, are the linguistic/symbolic solution to a problem in social interaction” (p. 62).

Although Bazerman and Olson are both talking about the Royal Society *Transactions*, in Bazerman’s richly specified account, the features of precision, abstraction, general proposition, and evidence that Olson identified with an autonomous text turn out to be highly rhetorical, pragmatic moves that evolved within a complex social negotiation and that continue to serve a practical function in scientific discourse. In foregrounding the formal and logical features of the essay, an exclusively textual literacy ends up obliterating the human logic that produces conventions—and continues to change them.

What’s in Focus: A Text, a Literate Practice, or a Literate Act?

The last few pages have illustrated how competing images of literacy can shape the ways we measure, teach, and theorize about literacy. But let us return for a moment to the question that launched this chapter: Can any of these images alone do justice to the individual literate performances of an Oren, Ron, Heidi, and Dawnise? Textual literacy and the public discourse about literacy rates, skills, knowledge deficits, and proficiency would zero in on Heidi as the model student but probably would find Ron’s attempt to construct a theory of task mildly irrelevant and ask to see his freshman paper. Oren didn’t even write anything. Dawnise, however, would have a well-defined spot in this literacy picture—as the problem. Her SAT scores and nonstandard expressions would quickly identify her as a remedial, developmental, or underprepared student. Her text shows deficiencies in grammar, usage, and development. She does not control the conventions of

literate commentary at the level of a John McPhee or even of a mainstream student from a good suburban school. And yet, should we just ignore her personal history of using journal writing to think her way through life crises and to share her life with us (acts that have little place in the public story)? Is there any evidence of literacy in the interpretive insight and the problem-solving Dawnsie demonstrated in the face of new and conflicting conventions? Should her own silencing assumptions about public text be a part of the picture?

An image of literacy as a social cognitive event, on the other hand, would draw attention to the literate practices behind these performances and to the converging purposes and social interactions that created them. It would focus on the shared, conventional patterns that achieve canonical force because they are understood by other players as meaningful moves within the game (whether the game is a scientific essay or the five-paragraph theme). Some would argue that the clearly defined discourse communities to which Gee alludes are at best a convenient fiction. However, the concepts of community and practice would draw our attention to the generic, socially constructed, and discourse-specific features of literate performance. Our focus would shift from text *per se* to social practices ranging from the broad conventions of life history to the local conventions of thematization apparent in Oren. On the other hand, merely to catalog Oren's array of literate practices—to categorize his performance as an oral life history or depression fable—would somehow miss the point of this personally meaningful, individually constructed literate act. A social cognitive image, then, allows another part of literacy to come into focus: it shifts our attention not only from text features to discourse practices, but from social practices to personal literate acts.

A *literate act*, as I am using the term, is an individual constructive act that does not merely invoke or participate in a literate practice but embeds such practices and conventions within a personally meaningful, goal-directed use of literacy.<sup>1</sup> In trying to account for a literate act like Dawnsie's, we begin to ask not only what the writer did but why he or she did it. Literate acts can call for the orchestration of diverse, seemingly incompatible practices; they lead writers like Ron to cross boundaries and bring his stockboy savvy with oral negotiation to constructing not just another freshman paper but to developing a theory of writing papers in this course. Literate acts also reflect the complex, even contradictory, goals and purposes that often drive meaning making. As Heidi switches from her dutiful, well-honed strategies for constructing a reading of the author's main points to her energetic construction of a social critique, she has set out on a collision course between practices. Each prioritizes different information, each demands attention,

constructive inferences, and rehearsal, and each is supported by Heidi's own divergent but coexistent personal values and assumptions about what is important to learn. So when her personal curiosity dictates one reading strategy and her desire to cooperate with a presumed request for an intelligent reading dictates another, the attempt to orchestrate these practices becomes a strategic act.

Literate acts are sites of construction, tension, divergence, and conflict. They happen at the intersection of diverse goals, values, and assumptions, where social roles interact with personal images of one's self and one's situation, where individual rhetorical agendas mix with highly conventional practices. These metaphors—"intersect," "interact," "mix"—are by design inconclusive, refusing to privilege one force over the other. That is because literate acts are often sites of negotiation where the meaning that emerges may reflect resolution, abiding contradiction, or perhaps just a temporary stay against uncertainty.

### III. Literacy as Action: Some Emerging Claims

I have used these comparative sketches to argue that a social cognitive alternative to the public story of literacy is emerging among educators in rhetoric and composition, educational psychology, sociology, and cultural theory. It is not that these theorists, teachers, and researchers see eye to eye or necessarily all read each other, but a new discourse about literacy is being formed nonetheless. In this discussion, for instance, literacy rates are rarely discussed because the performance they measure has little credibility. Correctness and control of privileged conventions have lost some of their status as definers of literacy or as ends in themselves. They are instead recognized as valuable tools and skills that let writers function in certain contexts (like school), even as they serve to bar the door of entry to students who are less prepared. Such skills are important, sometimes dramatically, critically important, but not because of their inherent value as a necessary building block or tool for thinking. They are important in part because certain groups of people, like teachers, administrators, employers, and readers make them so. In this discussion, students are no longer defined in terms of intellectual, cultural, or informational deficits. Expert/novice differences are useful, task specific measures of what people can do/could learn. However, novices are not blank slates, but learners who bring a great deal of cultural capital and literate experience with them (that may both help and hinder learning in school).

Perhaps the most fundamental shift in this social cognitive conversation is that it is not about literacy as a monolithic, magical entity that some

acquire and others lack. It is, instead, about action, about the literate acts people perform every day, and about the different literacies people use to present a theory of optics, get a job, read the Bible, file reports, learn a discipline, make political statements, and write requests and proposals. It is also about failure and barriers, about people who cannot carry out the literate practice a specific situation demands, who cannot fill out IRS forms, write a five-paragraph theme in school, write effective technical explanations or instructions, or argue on paper with an institution or employer.

Let me articulate some strong claims that I see emerging within this conversation, at least from where I stand in it. However, please be forewarned. To call this emerging conversation a social cognitive “view” of literacy serves to sharpen its conceptual contrast to other views, but does so at the risk of masking its own internal complexity. In fact, this new perspective is itself a site of substantial conflict and it is to the rowdy, competing voices within this discussion I want to turn at the end of the chapter. But first the claims.

1. *Literacy is an action.* The starting point for literacy is a *literate act* or *practice* that is performed as part of a rhetorical, social, and cultural situation. Literacy is not a generalized ability a person possesses (or does not possess) nor a set of technical skills for decoding language. Literacy is a set of actions and transactions in which people use reading and writing for personal and social purposes.

2. *Literacy is a move within a discourse practice.* When people engage in literate action, they are doing more than decoding or producing text. They are engaging in a *discourse practice*, that is, in a transaction with text that is guided (more or less) by a flexible social script for how such things are normally done (whether it is the intensely private diary of a teenager or scientific case building). Like any social practice, it has a history with a set of expectations and conventions (including ones for text features), and it is a response to peoples’ purposes, needs, and desires. A discourse practice cannot be reduced to a genre nor to a kind of text; it is a social and rhetorical situation in which texts play a specialized role.

The vignettes sketched earlier employed or referred to a variety of discourse practices: personal reflections (both written and oral), problem analyses written for a college course, sales letters (a practice that spills over into job applications). Practices themselves entertain multiple goals, just as critical reading and writing about science can be used to explain a concept (a practice often expected in college) or to develop one’s own argument (as both Gould and Heidi were doing). And in the example of interpretive, documentary journalism, we saw how a developing writer like Dawnwise can

join in the literate practice of a John McPhee and Studs Terkel despite vast differences in literary technique. Recognizing that we are teaching not literacy but selected discourse practices opens the door to diversity. It also suggests that to be literate is to control a repertoire of literate practices that matter in one’s life, to be able to switch among them, and to do so with awareness.

What does a discourse practice look like if someone wanted to teach or learn one? Some accounts focus on the typical features that help differentiate one practice from another. Bazerman, for example, sketches four overlapping stages in the development of the experimental article starting with uncontested reports of events (1665), which gave way to arguments over results (c. 1700), followed by discovery accounts exploring unusual events (c. 1770), and still later by experimental articles offering claims and experimental proofs (1790) (1988, p. 78). Although each stage has some distinctive text features (one could do a taxonomy), Bazerman’s discourse analysis is after bigger game. The logic that defines these literate acts (and pushed the experimental article from one stage to another) is the logic of the social practices, personal goals, and forums that shaped this discourse. To talk about the critical features of this evolving discourse, then, we cannot rest once we have noted its methods section or conventions of measurement. Our portrait of the practice must include the ways a clubby Royal Society dealt with growing competition and the ways its ethos of sharing information dealt with a sudden need to test, replicate, and dispute the evidence of the senses.

It should be said that precise accounts of discourse practices are likely to be difficult; we are dealing with social, rhetorical transactions, not a set of canonized texts. Moreover, the boundaries that separate one practice from another will frustrate textual taxonomies, as they are both imprecise and in flux. And for good reason. The web of human purposes that motivates discourse seems happy to sanction invention, transformation, and the flagrant adaptation of literate conventions. The practice of discourse is also an individual, constructive process.

Bazerman’s account of social dynamics and textual features can tell us a lot about a discourse practice, but it will take a cognitive account to fill out more of the picture and turn practice into a verb, an action individual readers and writers take. Brandt’s discussion of literacy as “involvement” uses the think-aloud protocols of experienced and novice students to show how the practice of argument depends on an interaction between reader and writer, what she calls an “intersubjective experience.” Her account shows how a writer imagines a reader into being in order to monitor the current state of shared understanding (created by the text so far) and to

plan his next move. My elliptical paraphrase of the writer (whom she quotes in full) highlights this strategic way of rereading one's own text: "So what we've done so far is to analyze xxx to determine its significance. I think I've shown xxx and now I'm trying to talk about the general characteristics of xxx. Yes, I think we've more or less condensed what we've said before except that we haven't talked about xxx yet. Are we undercutting ourselves? Now xxx depends on assumptions . . . and we've shown that those assumptions are wrong. In fact, I claim . . ." (1990, p. 45).

In scanning his text so far, Brandt argues, this writer is "really testing the intersubjective atmosphere, sizing up the extent to which the public grounds will allow the next move he wants to make and the extent to which a reader might already be sharing the key perspective that his argument hinges on" (1990, p. 45)—the claim he now wants to make. The wonderful irony that runs throughout Brandt's argument is that novice writers do appear to operate as if they were producing autonomous, decontextualized text, but experienced writers like this student are engaged in the purposeful practice of discourse as rhetorical action. Even the "logical accomplishments [which Olson would attribute to the conventions of argument] occur within the pressure of intersubjective awareness" (p. 44). In short, although literate practices are often described in terms of text features, what educators need is an account of the social and cognitive moves by which writers actively practice a discourse.

3. *Becoming literate depends on knowledge of social conventions and on individual problem solving.* Success in carrying out a literate act appears to depend on two things: knowing enough of the conventions and expectations built into the practice to at least enter the conversation and having a repertoire of problem-solving strategies for comprehending and composing that can deal with the task itself and with difficulties.

As I noted before, the conventions of a literate practice that one needs to learn include, but go well beyond, formal text features (such as topic sentences, transitions, or methods sections). They include conventions about what ideas matter, how to frame an argument, and what readers expect and need. This has some important implications for education. To be literate in one practice, such as writing a personal essay for a composition course, calls for special knowledge that might include using the conventions of voice and style that signal "authentic" and "genuine" personal writing. But this success does not guarantee or even predict the writer's ability to carry out other literate practices, such as writing a placement essay based on readings or a history paper. Even the writing instructor who teaches the personal essay might appear quite "illiterate" if asked to critique a Wall Street report

or might feel painfully underprepared if invited to cross town and construct an extemporaneous Sunday night prayer (the kind that weaves conventional phrases, personal thoughts, and sociable "amens" into a shared public statement). Although the grammar of standard written English and the conventions of a five-paragraph theme might be desirable in some of these rhetorical contexts, they are certainly not at the heart of the practice. Skill in one practice does not insure literacy in others.

Learning to carry off a literate practice or participate in a discourse community often depends on learning distinctive ways of thinking grounded in the social purposes of the practice—one must understand how a prayer, a placement essay, or an economic analysis functions in its community. Discourse practices, according to this new perspective, exist as tools of a *discourse community*—as functional, often historically, socially constructed ways of writing and talking that serve the purposes of some community like the developing Royal Society. By their very nature, these communities also create insiders and outsiders, and to be literate in a community like school is to acquire certain insider knowledge that comes with participation—knowledge that insiders may come to see as merely natural, a sign of innate intelligence.

But if such knowledge is often translated into conventions of practice, sometimes even text features, why do literate acts involve so much active problem solving on the part of individual writers? On simple tasks, like writing a grocery list or a genteel thank you note, the conventions of the discourse seem almost to dictate text—convention can do the lion's share of the work. Even on complex tasks, like a news story, text can emerge as a swift, sure response to discourse expectations—if, that is, one's experience as a journalist has led to the automaticity that comes with expertise. But in between these extremes lies a great deal of ordinary writing for which neither students nor experienced writers can rely on the automatic pilot of imitation or familiarity.

Problem solving is a response to the uncertainty and inherent indeterminacy of most rhetorical situations. Writers participate in the social context of writing, but my response to that situation is mediated by my strategies for reading that context and the representation I build of it—which may be radically different from yours. Writers acquire problem-solving strategies from social interaction with peers, teachers, readers, and texts, but the repertoire I have built for academic writing (which may differ dramatically from yours) is still only a set of heuristic moves, not an algorithm or formula. Moreover, the conventions and strategies we both rely on to write texts like this are not action plans—they are not even internally coherent templates for text. The practice of academic writing is a bundle of alternative moves,

optional features, and contradictory expectations, united by a family resemblance. Participating in such social acts is also a personal cognitive achievement.

Problem solving is not just the mark of the elite literacies like academic writing. The "community literacy" Peck describes "values written discourse from the margins of society" (1991, p. vi) looking at the way writing lets members of an inner city neighborhood literally compose themselves for action. When mainstream college students in his study are introduced to community advocacy, they encounter a literate practice that "grows out of the dilemmas in the lives of neighborhood people, depends on a conversational, collaborative process seeking action" (p. 1). Problem-solving takes precedence over canonical forms in these literate practices: "Happening in neighborhoods, on doorsteps and in alleys, on street corners and in union halls, in food banks and in shelters for the homeless, community literate practices are utilized wherever people collaborate and use literate means to construct shared purposes and to take action" (p. 8).

To tell the whole story of a literate act, then, we also need to tell the story of individual problem solving within social contexts. By problem solving, I mean the intellectual moves that allow people to construct meaning—to interpret the situation; to organize, select, and connect information; to draw inferences, set goals, get the gist, respond to prior texts, draw on past experience, imagine options, and carry out intentions. Constructive acts are not taught by skills and drills; they go beyond imitation. Moreover, as Ron illustrates, literate performances are also *strategic actions*. The moves a writer makes are not only the product of school, culture, or convention, they are guided by the writer's goals and awareness; they are an individual writer's response to a rhetorical situation (as they interpret it). And this rhetorical situation is itself a representation writers build when they "read the situation" and call into being their image of its expectations and options.

Constructive processes can, of course, be intuitive, well-learned, fluid operations that go on below the threshold of awareness. However, at times, this process can burst into the foreground of thought and demand the conscious attention we call problem solving. Creating meaning amidst a welter of expectations and constraints, writers and readers have to deal with contradictory information, conflicting goals, and other people, with assignments by teachers, advice by friends, and their own needs and desires. Literate acts push writers to construct *negotiated meanings* that juggle constraints, goals, and expectations. Such literate acts depend on strategic thinking to read the rhetorical situation, to set goals, and to construct and negotiate meaning. Meaning making in the face of conflict is not reserved for elite literacies; problem solving and awareness are critical for everyone.

4. *The new "basics" should start with expressive and rhetorical practices.* If literacy is reconceived as a social and cognitive action, how shall we rewrite our impassioned but impoverished definitions of what is basic? How shall we answer the question: Where should education begin? Because people learn to be literate when they are able to/asked to engage in meaningful literate acts, the foundation is formed by giving learners, adult and child alike, occasions for genuine literate action. Instruction then builds on that foundation by helping students to enter into a discourse practice, helping them to understand the logic of the practice—who is doing what with whom and why.

If going back to the basics means finding a way for students to join in the action, then skills, drills, and rules are clearly not a very broad foundation for literacy (unless the action in question is taking tests). But what kinds of literate action will provide that foundation? In particular, what sort of literate practices should students learn; what sort of discourse community should they be invited to join? In the healthy controversy that surrounds this question, one answer comes out of our strong literary tradition with its roots in romantic theories of creativity and self-expression. A second, somewhat different, answer emerges from the equally strong traditions of rhetoric with its emphasis on transactions between readers and writers. Although my own ties are to the latter, together these complementary traditions offer a strong alternative to the message of limited literacies.

In a book called *The New Literacy*, Willinsky describes a strong grass roots movement in teaching, built on the expressive tradition, which has created a workable alternative to teaching limited literacies. The essential features of this "new literacy" education are an emphasis on writing as a social activity, a way of working on something, in a collaborative workshop setting with other writers, and in classrooms that "attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the student" (1990, p. 8). Like the rhetorical approach, it "stands against a literacy which is defined as the ability to perform at a certain level on a standardized test" and "declares that purpose and intent are foremost concerns with literacy" by setting up the classroom as a "workshop for furthering the students' intentions and meanings with a world that extends beyond the reaches of the textbook" (pp. 8–9). What distinguishes the rhetorical and the romantic approaches is what one does to achieve this. In the cluster of teaching practices and ideals Willinsky describes, "the dream is of students working as young artists" crafting artful and literate texts (p. 147). The ideology of the movement is dominated by Britton's contention that expressive writing is not only the place to start, but is at the heart of making meaning. The typical texts are personal narratives, expressive essays, and other poetic forms pub-

lished in chapbooks that make everyone an "author." Associated most strongly with elementary and middle school teaching where classrooms become a small community of student writers supported by a trusted adult, this expressive tradition reflects the influence of James Britton and the London School, Donald Graves and the Whole Language movement, Peter Elbow and the practice of freewriting, and the process orientation of the National Writing Project. With this grass roots movement comes a veneration of the "craft of practice and experience, rather than direct instruction" (p. 56), coupled at times with a suspicion of theory, of research, and of explicit or strategic teaching.

As Willinsky goes on to note, however, the individualistic emphasis of the expressive tradition and its faith in simply "letting them write" seems to produce little impetus to critical thinking and critique (in spite of the emphasis Elbow, for instance, has long given to the dialectic of doubt and belief). The early assumptions that personal journal writing would increase content learning in writing across the curriculum have not been well supported. And the indirectness of the natural process approach appears to limit its effectiveness in teaching composition (Hillocks, 1986). Moreover, as Elbow (1991) has argued, descriptive, expressive writing need not be an end in itself but can serve the goals of academic inquiry when it is taught as a distinctive rhetorical practice among other practices. However, some of the apparent limitations of this tradition as it is widely practiced may also have contributed to its clear success in promoting a coherent community for literate action.

The rhetorical tradition shapes a different community that is at once a complement and a challenge to the expressive route. The rhetorical stance to literacy tends to take public discourse, rather than private expression and its artful texts, as examples of literate action. The learner is more often imagined as a young adult who is looking outside the writing classroom to the discourse practices of academic inquiry, a discipline, profession, or worldly community where the success of a literate action is not based on the satisfying artfulness of the text but on building convincing arguments, effective explanations, and insightful analyses. Such practices are difficult to master by practice alone. Direct instruction and straight talk about not only the conventions of a discourse but about ways of thinking one's way through writing all work to demystify the action and make a difference in learning.

This rhetorical tradition, then, contributes a second answer to the puzzle of, what is basic? Here the act of writing is not only an act of discovery but of communication and persuasion. Literate action is an action between writers and their readers, motivated by a sense of exigency, a shared problem, a mutual need (cf. Bruffee, 1984; Nystrand, 1986; Young, Becker, & Pike,

1979). The foundation for literacy, in this view, is having a stake, taking a stance, and having a voice in a rhetorical situation. On this foundation, readers and writers develop a repertoire of literate, problem-solving strategies. Some of these are relatively general and transferable, such as strategies for planning, organizing, reviewing, collaborating, and imagining readers and for exploring, adapting, and transforming one's own knowledge (cf. Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987; Elbow, 1981; Flower, 1993b). Other strategies are closely tied to particular contexts and tasks, to the ways of thinking and patterns of argument in a given discourse (cf. Bazerman, 1981; Hillocks, 1986; Kiniry & Rose, 1990). This how-to knowledge goes by various names—heuristics, process plans, rhetorical or problem-solving strategies, critical thinking skills—but in essence, they are action plans for carrying out a literate act. In this rhetorical tradition, the basic, foundational skills in learning to be literate are the skills one needs to read a situation; to plan, organize, and revise; to build and negotiate meaning; to use and adapt conventions; and to figure out what new discourses expect and how to enter them.

This rhetorical version of the basics, like the expressive one, has its own built-in problems. One is the difficulty with which people transfer strategies learned in one context to another. The more abstract the strategy, the more likely it is to be generalized across tasks; however, people learn strategies best when they are grounded in a specific discourse. Transfer is, perhaps, most likely when it becomes a problem-solving task itself, when students become sufficiently aware of their own thinking to monitor and adapt old strategies to new problems.

5. *Literate action opens the door to metacognitive and social awareness.* In other words, literacy as a social cognitive act creates some opportunities for strategic thinking and reflective learning that are absent in the pedagogy of textual conventions and correctness.

First, seeing literacy as action lets us focus instruction on the points of conflict that make writing problematic—on those moments when a student's personal goals, available strategies, or history as a writer come in conflict with the expectations of a reader or teacher, the practices of a discourse, or social and cultural conventions. Some conflicts are public and social; others go on within the mind and goals of the meaning maker in the inevitable play of competing possibilities. By making such points of tension a subject of inquiry, we might better help students understand and negotiate the circle of possibilities, constraints, and expectations they face.

Secondly, this view of literacy asks students to step back from their own decisions as writers and develop greater *metacognitive awareness* of the



discourse practices they are entering, of how those practices differ, of how they as writers switch among them, and the strategies they use. Texts and their conventions are no longer rules and formulas, but tools writers use and options they can take. Metacognition allows writers to reflect on the choices they made.

Third, we can encourage writers to step back even further and see how their rhetorical actions are themselves situated in the larger circle of social and cultural assumptions, some of which can empower a writer and some of which, as unexamined language and unquestioned premises, exercise tyranny. Reflecting on one's own thinking and actions within this broader context is, in part, an ethical act. It is a way to recognize the structures of authority that shape our meaning making and to resist the patterns of racism, sexism, and prejudice that are shot through those structures. Such reflection is also a means to empower writers who feel excluded; it opens a search for alternative ways of constructing one's world and for seeing the authority of one's own voice.

Since this opportunity is probably the most controversial, let us briefly consider some of the issues at stake. The social cognitive view of literacy sketched here (that is, my stance within that view) has a complex relation to current radical pedagogy. On the one hand, it parts company with many social critiques of education in that it seeks ways to help students control some of the literate practices associated with the dominant culture and its ways of invention and argument. On the other hand, it shares a position with Giroux, one of the most vocal leftist thinkers, when he charges that "radical educators have abandoned the language of possibility for the language of critique. . . . Instead of viewing schools as sites of contestation, negotiation, and conflict, radical educators tend to articulate an oversimplified version of domination [in which schools are] primarily reproductive sites . . . ideologically and politically overburdened by the dominant society" (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p. 130).

The norm for a critical pedagogy, Giroux suggests, has been limited to "creating classroom knowledge . . . through individual oppositional readings of a text" (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p. 148). This reduction of literate action to critique tends, I would argue, to produce yet another limited literacy that is in opposition to, yet ironically, parallel to the current literacy of recitation in which students "spit back" summary writing in research papers, book reviews, and essay exams. Summary plus opinion is always in danger of becoming summary plus canonical critique.

Giroux's alternative takes a double stance to the problem of how teachers should deal with what students know or bring.

It suggests taking seriously . . . the knowledge and experiences . . . by which students identify and give meaning to themselves and others. It is crucial to reemphasize that such a pedagogy is not meant to imply that student experience should be romantically celebrated; on the contrary, . . . it means developing a critically affirmative language that works both with and on the experiences that students bring to the classroom. Although this approach valorizes the language forms, modes of reasoning, dispositions, and histories that students use, . . . it also subjects such experiences and ideologies to the discourse of suspicion and skepticism, to forms of analysis that attempt to understand how they are structured by cultural and symbolic codes inscribed within particular configurations of history and power.

And at this point, Giroux's agenda takes its step beyond critique:

Similarly, this means teaching students how to identify, unravel, and *critically appropriate the codes, vocabularies, and deep grammar* [italics added] of different cultural, social, historical, and collective traditions. The pedagogical goal here is not to have students exercise rigorous analytical skills in order to arrive at the right answer, but to better exercise reasoned choice through a critical understanding of what the codes are that organize different meanings and interests into particular configurations of knowledge and power. (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, pp. 149-150)

Giroux's argument envisions a constructive, socially situated literacy. Where his agenda diverges from the present one is in its relative emphasis on the receptive literacy of reading (including the critique of texts) in place of the production/action-oriented literacy of writing. In the constructive, social cognitive pedagogy sketched here, students engage in a range of discourse practices (including finding and defining problems, arguing and proposing, explaining, and applying reading in an attempt to solve problems or take action). Composing a critique is merely one practice, generally limited to the academy). From this range of experiences students develop awareness of not just the rhetorical, but the social, political, and cultural contexts of their own literate acts. The issue on which this difference turns, then, is partly what to foreground—the *critique* of practices or the *use* of multiple practices—not on whether each has a place. In choosing to emphasize practice, I would also argue that it is impossible to *critically appropriate* the codes of a discourse (as Giroux suggests) without learning how to carry out the practice itself—one has to understand how to write a genuine proposal, personal essay, or a project report to understand how they function in the world. Students do indeed need to learn how to uncover the assumptions of racism, sexism, and authority that are shot through our language and that structure much of our discourse. But

the art of critique is itself always in danger of becoming yet another form of literary criticism, like the "Freudian" and genre readings English majors learned to do to literary texts a generation ago.

The argument of a constructive literacy is that people will best understand Giroux's "deep grammar" of literate practices when, in addition to making critiques, they themselves learn to construct and negotiate meaning within a variety of discourses and in so doing have the opportunity to reflect on their own assumptions, their own cognition, and their own texts. A second contention of this perspective is that to achieve the ideals of a democratic society that radical pedagogy calls for, it seems critical for students—especially marginalized students—to begin to control, not just critique, the kinds of discourse that affect all our lives. The issue we face is how to shape a literacy pedagogy that fosters some strategic control of meaning making *within* powerful discourse practices, as well as awareness of the context those practices invoke and the options for change.

#### IV. Forces in Tension Within a Social Cognitive View

The virtue of this new social cognitive view of literacy is its ability to explain more of the diversity and complexity of literate action and its willingness to tolerate, even embrace, internal tension. But that virtue comes at a price. The very terms, cognitive and social (though other terms would do) stand as poles around which different aspects of literacy cluster and conflicting fields of force seem to form. It is that tension—within literate acts and within social cognitive theory—that I want to explore.

In using this social cognitive polarity to uncover revealing tensions, I want, first, to acknowledge that there is a problem with even making the distinction. Some compositionists have built foundational arguments that would dismiss cognition (e.g., "Writing is not fundamentally a cognitive process. . . . Writing is located in the social world and, thus, is fundamentally structured by the shape of the environment" [Cooper & Holzman, 1989]). Another, more sophisticated argument (to my mind) comes from research on conversational analysis. It tries to avoid a distinction on the grounds that the very term *interaction* presupposes two essentially independent entities when the reality is an interdependent system (cf. Brandt, 1992; Rogoff, 1990). Philosophically, this move to avoid a simplistic categorization seems reasonable when we notice how hard it is to define either cognitive or social processes without recognition of the other. It avoids a sticky problem of definition by simply identifying cognition with a more observable phenomenon of social response (i.e., by simply collapsing the distinction between thinking and speaking as conversational analysis often does). But avoiding

this problematic distinction gives up the opportunity for a more fine-grained (essentially cognitive) understanding of how meaning is represented and cuts off a more open-ended inquiry into the multiple (internal) forces that enter into meaning making.

A third stance, which I will take here, is to acknowledge the logical fallibility of these familiar polarities and other abstract categories that are part of this discussion. Although it is useful to talk about a cultural, social, or a rhetorical context, for instance, they interpenetrate one another in the same way the self is inseparable from society. The relationship between social forces and cognition or between different versions of context is a situated relationship—it depends on the event or activity one wants to describe. And yet these terms still have great heuristic power. If we look at the problem semiotically, they function as complex signs, ultimately interesting for the more situated clusters of experience and attitude they can help us track (Witte, 1992). This third approach to literate action, then, uses these categories as tools of inquiry but seeks knowledge in specificity rather than abstraction and looks for the points of tension and conflict that reveal more about the playing field of literacy and about who is in the game.

Consider some of the elements that cluster around the poles of this cognitive social continuum. In talking about cognition I refer to acts of thinking (e.g., interpreting, problem solving, reflecting) that go on, in real time, in the minds of individual readers and writers. I refer to what people are thinking as they read and write (insofar as we can infer it from our inevitably limited methods). Such thinking is typically far more elaborated, contradictory, and surprising than the texts they read or produce. Inquiry into cognition leads us into the irreducible complexity of individual minds and meanings caught "in the act." Although some aspects of cognition (e.g., memory search, pattern matching) are studied as basic cognitive processes, "hardwired" into the architecture of the brain, the cognitive processes and strategies we discuss here are acts of taking thought, acts of conscious attention. Such cognition, however, does not exist in a vacuum: the strategies we observe a Ron or Heidi using were learned from and are now elicited by social interactions with parents, teachers, and peers. The interpretations and the knowledge they construct is their own, but it is built out of and in response to other voices, prior texts, social expectations, and ideological alternatives. However, there is no way to isolate a social process from the minds that carry it out. Although we can treat public statements, social conventions, or interpersonal events as independent objects, if we look closer, they are the collaborative creation of individual minds over time. They only exist as meaning in the interpretations individual readers and writers give to them.

A social cognitive view of literacy is a site of controversy because the truth of the matter is so complicated. Moreover, our methods of studying and describing these events have difficulty doing justice to the interaction we know to be there. The simplifying distinctions we make are, in part, an artifact of our own methods of observation: I choose to study Heidi interpreting text by Stephen Gould as a strategic act, and someone else chooses to study Gould's claims as a piece of the intertextual puzzle of Western thought. I talk about cognitive construction, they about social; we both contribute to understanding the reality that will always elude our grasp. On theoretical grounds, then, this social cognitive distinction is a qualified one that still points to powerful distinctions in our experience.

The tensions foregrounded by this social cognitive view can be credited to competing fields of force we call by other names. Consider, for instance, the personal and cognitive elements of literacy associated with notions of expressiveness, self-discovery, personal knowledge, or with critical thinking, self-awareness, rhetorical intentions, and craft. These elements not only jostle with one another but often exist in uneasy tension with social and cultural forces identified with the givens imposed by language, by discourse, by race or gender, or with the influence of collaborators and readers, or with the shaping role of literate conventions and cultural expectations. Witte argues for how the deep "self/other" distinction and the need to continually negotiate that relationship infuses the nature of meaning making (1992). Through an unpredictable dialectic, these forces somehow converge and cooperate in the making of meaning. In socially situated acts of cognition, public and personal meanings, convention and originality are always pushing, shaping, tugging at one another.

The social cognitive view of literacy that is emerging in current discussions is a stimulating, expansive vision, trying to embrace complexity and accept the serendipitous work of dialectic. This is not to say that the educational establishment will be quick to embrace this multidimensional image of literacy and its willingness to tolerate a fruitful, disturbing dialectic. Under the pressures of outside evaluation and the exigencies of instruction, many administrators and teachers may opt for limited literacies, designating some feature (whether it be correctness, self-expression, or a disciplinary practice like literary analysis) as basic and turning it into the signifier and test of literacy. Complexity and dialectic are hard to sell.<sup>2</sup>

### Conflict in Theory

The problem of building social cognitive theory goes deeper than embracing complexity; it is also a problem of intellectual politics. Born in a storm,

this perspective attempts to reconcile strongly independent research traditions and methods that bring with them histories of attending to different phenomena, of creating different kinds of knowledge, and the habit, still with us, of gaining steam for an argument from the heat of a social cognitive, social/individual opposition. Nevertheless, this move to integration is made on the assumption that neither social nor cognitive theory makes genuine sense without the other. I would go a step further. As educators, we need to develop more responsible social cognitive accounts of how individual students—as thinking personal agents operating within and shaped by a social and cultural fabric—learn. And why they do not learn. What makes literate action possible for some, unlikely for others? Educators—and this includes not just teachers but researchers, textbook writers, curriculum developers, and the assessment industry—need to work out of an image of literacy and learning that tries to integrate, rather than deny or dichotomize, these perspectives. This is not to devalue basic cognitive research and broad social, macrostructural theory, each of which give little thought to integration, but I would argue that for educators of this generation, there is even more to be learned at the sites of interaction.

And when we stand at our chosen site of interaction, how shall we do justice to it? Let me state the strong case. A vision of literacy as a social and cognitive act starts with literate actions and events as its unit of analysis (cf. Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981). This vision must be anchored in observation-based, grounded theories of literate action that help explain how social structures and cognitive processes do indeed interact at critical moments in reading, writing, or learning (Flower, 1989a). We cannot, for instance, build a new vision of literacy education on the notion of a vaguely specified dialectic. An observation-based theory of literate acts needs to track the twisting paths of this dialectic in diverse situations and settings; it needs to subject our intuitions and rational speculations to the tests of observation, to see what forces, what social influences, what ideological beliefs (including those implied by absence), what processes, strategies, and assumptions come onto the stage as active players, not just potential ones. We need more richly grounded but rigorously skeptical accounts of those players that are actively shaping diverse literate acts—especially the players that literacy education can influence.

### Conflict in the Act of Construction

In this book, I hope to show that one revealing site for inquiry is the very process of constructing meaning. The forces that are in tension in the construction of educational theory are at work in the constructive processes

dealing with conflict. The limited meanings they construct as writers, for instance, reflect an alternative path in this negotiation. Resistance, whether it is conscious or not, is indeed a choice to fail, but it is a move that also asserts values other than the school's and repudiates the categories, such as remedial or unintelligent, that the dominant culture is imposing on them (Erickson, 1988).

For basic writers in the City University of New York's open admissions programs, drill and practice on grammar was having little effect on errors, because the attitudes and anxieties that dictated the students' composing processes favored strategies of rapid oral composing and no revision. The grammatical knowledge they did learn had no place to operate within this process. Shaughnessy's insight was to help students to renegotiate the way they dealt with grammar, errors, and anxiety, to develop a writing and revising process that let them deal with the threat of error in a different way.

This sort of conflict faced in meaning making is not reserved for at-risk students in Alaska, Washington, or New York. After talking with Ron, the student quoted at the beginning of this chapter, we learned that the critical, analytical, and reflective meaning making heard on the tape was a literate act reserved for talks with interviewers—not academic writing. His own thinking appeared in papers only after receiving repeated encouragement from his frustrated instructor and after such drafts were brought for approval in the hall. In the logic that guided Ron's learning and writing, assigned papers were high risk occasions; the goal of his negotiations was to construct expected meanings.

Looking at literacy as a social and cognitive act brings with it a newly explicit, unsettling awareness of meaning making as a site of alternatives, options, and conflict among powerful shaping forces. This book is motivated by the desire to trace that constructive process in students across different academic contexts and by the belief that doing so could give us a powerful new insight into the logic of their literate negotiations.

of students as well, with both creative and devastating consequences. Meaning making does not always take place in a peaceful valley of the mind. The very forces that challenge theorists' efforts at reconciliation and the unpredictable, inexplicable dialectic we see in theory get acted out in real time as writers try to shape meaning. The forces clustered around the poles of self and society, public and private, convention and invention, social and cognitive, are all forces that can give structure to a writer's meaning, guide composing, or set criteria, but they often do so in alternative, even opposing ways. Constructive acts are a stage for conflict.

These tensions seem to be at the heart of education; they do not get resolved or go away but coexist like molecules in an energized field. However, the productive conflict we hope for can sometimes go awry, especially for novice writers, by which I mean any of us attempting to perform a new practice or enter a new community. Demands such as the expectations of a reader, a fear of exposing one's tentative thoughts, or a concern for correctness over content—any one force that should be held in a delicate balance by others may gain the upper hand and rewrite the script in its image. A student learning to carry out a new literate act may be standing in the eye of the hurricane.

Looking closely at an individual's thinking within a rhetorical, social, and cultural context can reveal an underlying logic to students' performance—a logic that is often in direct response to tensions writers are trying to negotiate. Moreover, some of the most problematic conflicts appear to face students who are most at risk. Consider some dramatic examples. As Erickson reports, for Alaskan native teenagers "to become literate in school terms would be to disaffiliate symbolically from their parents and other members of the Alaskan native village. . . . Caught in ambivalence between multiple cultural worlds, [they] resist adopting the complete system of school-defined literacy, and then suffer the consequences of marginal acquisition. They do not belong fully to the old ways or to the new" (1988, p. 221). Fordham's (1988) study of African-American high achievers in Washington, D.C., spells out the logic of negotiation in even clearer terms: the cultural imperative to affirm an African heritage gives these teenagers a sense of symbolic identity (kinship) and strong peer ties. "Acting white," which can generate enormous peer pressure and rejection, is, unfortunately, associated with school achievement, including specifics like using Standard English, speaking in class, doing work on time. Students who enter high school as high achievers sometimes negotiate this dilemma by keeping a low profile and what Fordham calls a strategy of "racelessness"—a behavior that entails genuine costs and that becomes increasingly difficult for males to maintain. For low-achieving students, their very failure and active resistance to instruction is a strategy for

# Notes

## 1. Literate Acts

1. At some level, of course, all discourse is personally meaningful. My aim is not to create a categorical distinction between practices and acts where in fact the reality is a continuum. My aim is to draw attention to acts that spill over the boundaries of conventions, in which an account based on the features of a practice would be inadequate and in which looking at the writer's own intentions, transformations of knowledge, and adaptations of conventions could offer us a more satisfying explanatory account.

2. DeCastell and Luke argue that the undoing of the progressive movement in American education was, in fact, its reliance on a vague and ambiguous notion of dialectic as a way to deal with "the apparent contradictions and conflicts in social practice." Its failure to "resolve contradictions (between self and society, individual and institution, science and art, education and socialization)" allowed its progressive ideals to be pared down into the limited goals of social, workplace utility (1988, p. 168).

## 2. Constructing Negotiated Meaning

1. I do not want to ignore the valid point made by Bloome and Bailey and others that "the meaning or significance of any utterance is not located solely in a person's intent, but rather in the event, in the concerted action of people with each other" (1992, p. 187). However, because I am concerned with how writers construct meaning, my focus is on the representations of meaning that are created and held—not in the eye of a camera or ethnographer recording an event—but in the minds of meaning makers who participate in that event. Acknowledging the reality of both events and individual representations, I intend to study representations as they are embedded within and shaped by events.

2. This discussion, written in a spirit of celebration, has a sad afterword that is important to recognize. On December 1991, Joseph Shabalala was murdered in South Africa under disputed circumstances by a white man who was not charged with the murder. Genuine problems rarely go away. The dilemma-driven but constructive negotiations of individual writers have a parallel in the social process of argument and rhetoric itself as an alternative to violence. The conclusion of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric* states it best for me: "Only the existence of an argumentation that is neither compelling nor arbitrary can give meaning to human freedom. . . . It is because of the possibility of argumentation which provides reasons, but not compelling reasons, that it is possible to escape the dilemma: adherence to an objectively and universally valid truth, or recourse to suggestion and violence to secure acceptance for our opinions and decisions" (1969, p. 514).

3. If such negotiation is a reality for students—and I will argue that it is—some contemporary images of meaning making may be blocking this recognition. We are, for instance, unlikely to see this process if students are characterized (thus perceived) with deficit metaphors—as learners lacking certain basic thinking skills, as mere

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