Finding "new literacy" in action: An interdisciplinary high school Western Civilization class

Much has been written about broadening our definition of literacy in this technological age. This article describes the results of part of an ongoing study to find and document "new literacy" classrooms.

A group of seven male high school students sits around a table in a dusty classroom of an urban high school in the midwestern United States. (All students' names are pseudonyms.) Gary is talking animatedly about their project with the other students. "The setting is almost supernatural. I want to create that," he says. The others are quiet. Hal speaks up, "I think what we had was a decent idea." A quiet student named Bruce says, "We were going to use those balls—the biggest one goes on top. His own world is way over there." Bruce gestures out into space, high in the air. "So it makes sense, but at the same time...we need a base.... It's not going to hold it up." Tom says, "Color is another thing we have to decide." Now all the students talk over one another:

"Having it on the top shows the importance...."

"We're allowed to fold shapes, too."

"The top one should be neon, hot pink."

"Why is 'love' above 'friendliness'?"

"We can't assume what his emotions were."

"[We can]...from his books."

"The top one could be his love for education."

"It would make a lot of sense then."

"We should label each ball."

This last comment leads to a spirited discussion of whether each ball should be explicitly labeled, or if that goes against the spirit of the assignment.
Now let’s pull back from this scene. What class are we witnessing? Is it an art class? Is it an English class? It’s not exactly either. The name of the class is Art Colloquium, but it is not solely about art. The students were working to design a monument to a person, event, or a phenomenon. This group of students had elected to pay tribute to Dr. Seuss. A challenge of the assignment was that the monument could not be figurative in nature—the students could not, for example, erect a sculpture of Dr. Seuss’s physical likeness, or of one of the characters from his books. The monument had to be designed in a completely abstract fashion, using shapes such as spheres (balls)—hence, the discussion in which students were debating what each of the balls could represent from the life of Dr. Seuss.

What’s the point of such an assignment? What could it have to do with a high school English class, and what will students learn from this endeavor?

Welcome to a “new literacy” classroom. The research reported in this article is part of a long-term, multiple-case research study designed to find and document new literacy classrooms (Kist, 2001). This project seeks to describe new literacy classroom practices (i.e., assignments, assessments) as well as types of learning experienced by students and teachers in such classrooms.

**What is new literacy?**

Throughout the 1990s, much was written about a broader definition of literacy (Eisner, 1994, 1997; Flood & Lapp, 1995; Kress, 1997; New London Group, 1996; Reinking, 1997). Exploring new literacies has been a key editorial theme in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* (JAAL) (Luke & Elkins, 1998).

But what exactly does this broadened literacy mean—a concept that has been given such different names as “new literacy” (Willinsky, 1990) or “literacies” (Luke & Elkins, 1998); “multiliteracies” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996); and “intermediality” (Smolari & Watts Pailliotet, 1999)?

The study reported here uses the term *new literacy* as an overarching concept, and it was inspired by the following definition:

In order to be read, a poem, an equation, a painting, a dance, a novel, or a contract each requires a distinctive form of literacy, when literacy means, as I intend it to mean, a way of conveying meaning through and recovering meaning from the form of representation in which it appears. (Eisner, 1997, p. 353)

**Several perspectives on new literacy**

Adding to the task for the classroom teacher who wants to sort all of this out are the multiple perspectives on new literacy. Writing about new literacy can be found under several different umbrellas.

Voices from Europe and Australia have called for teaching young people to be media literate (Buckingham, 1993; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Lusted, 1991). In this world of many media choices, students need to be able to look at all texts socioculturally (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Lankshear, with Gee, Knobel, & Seear, 1997; C. Luke, 2000; Willinsky, 1990). Students should not only be able to critically construct meaning from all sorts of texts, they should also be able to speak/write/create using a variety of media (Bruce & Hogan, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Gee, 1996, 2000; A. Luke, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Willinsky, 1990). Students will need a large and well-stocked literacy “tool kit” in these “New Times” (Luke & Elkins, 1998).

Researchers in the United States have tended to focus on new literacy in different, yet similar ways. Some have focused on the cognitive benefits of new literacy because of the close ties between human thinking and symbol systems (Czikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1991, 1993; Gardner, 1993; Greene & Hall, 1997; John-Steiner, 1997; Tishman & Perkins, 1997). John-Steiner (1997) has argued for teaching “cognitive pluralism.” If we focus on one main symbol system—print—are we limiting human thought (Eisner, 1992, 1994, 1997)?

Advocates for taking an aesthetic stance have also noted that there are “multiple ways of knowing” (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996). The arts (as available symbol systems) can and should be used to teach content and meaning making (Greene, 1997; Leland & Harste, 1994) as well as to teach “multigenre” writing (Romano, 1995,
Such classrooms may be interdisciplinary in nature (Eisner, 1997; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000) and more inquiry-based (Bruce, 2001; Dewey, 1902/1990), with students becoming apprentices to teachers who model their own symbol uses (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

Space does not permit a full comparison between these and other new literacy perspectives and their historical and geographical significances. It is clear, however, that all of these perspectives are in agreement about advocating an acknowledgment and an embracing of multiple forms of representation by classroom teachers and their students. In these new times, our classrooms should not be so "print-centric."

Still, in new times what's a teacher to do on Monday morning? The study partially reported here grew out of the following research questions: "How do teachers teach in a new literacy classroom?" and "What are student and teacher perceptions of the role of a broadened definition of literacy in their thinking processes?" What follows is a brief description of the research design used to get some answers to these questions.

**Research design—case selection**

The first challenge of this project was to determine how to find new literacy classrooms to study. To decide what characteristics would make up a new literacy classroom, a thorough review of the new literacy literature was conducted, leading to the development of new literacy characteristics (Kist, 2000). The characteristics that grew out of this study (see Table) were a starting point for finding classrooms that feature a broader definition of literacy.

Based on these characteristics, I developed a New Literacy Nomination Form. Respondents were asked to think about one or more familiar classrooms that exhibited one or more of these characteristics. To begin the search for new literacy on a small scale, this instrument was submitted to a peer group of 10 educational leaders in my home state of Ohio in the United States in late 1998. This is known as snowball, chain, or network sampling (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). These 10 were active members of the leading language arts professional organization in Ohio; many were published scholars, and I knew they had knowledge of best practice language arts teaching, not only in their home districts but across the state. These 10 respondents nominated 9 primary, intermediate, middle school, and high school classrooms.

To be chosen for inclusion in the study, the classroom ultimately needed to show evidence, during follow-up phone interviews and observations, of at least three of the five characteristics of new literacy classrooms. If a classroom had a majority of the five characteristics, I believed I could designate it as a new literacy classroom. Classrooms also needed to be close enough geographically for study during the 1998–1999 school year.

On the basis of these selection criteria, two classrooms were selected for case studies—

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**Characteristics of "new literacy" classrooms**

New literacy classrooms feature daily work in multiple forms of representation.

In such classrooms, there are explicit discussions of the merits of using certain symbol systems in certain situations with much choice (Eisner, 1994, 1997; Greene & Hall, 1997; New London Group, 1996).

There are metadialogues by the teacher who models working through problems using certain symbol systems (Tishman & Perkins, 1997).

Students take part in a mix of individual and collaborative activities (John-Steiner, 1997).

New literacy classrooms are places of student engagement in which students report achieving Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1991, 1993) "flow" state.
a first-grade classroom and a high school Western Civilization course cotaught by language arts, music, and art teachers. (Because of space considerations and because of the readership of JAAL, this article focuses exclusively on the high school case.)

To further support the validity of the determination of these classrooms as new literacy classrooms, I constructed a survey instrument that asked the selected classroom new literacy teachers to rate themselves on a five-point scale on eight items corresponding to the characteristics of new literacy classrooms. This instrument was administered to the four teachers involved in the 1999 study and to a convenience sample of 22 teachers of varying backgrounds teaching at a variety of levels in two different school systems (different from the districts where the four case study teachers teach). The four teachers scored a mean score that was higher on six of the eight items. This gave support to the assertion that I had identified four new literacy teachers although the N-size is too low to provide for generalization.

**Research design—data collection and analysis**

A complete data set, consisting of observation data, interview data, and artifact data (Merriam, 1998) was collected in the Art Colloquium class with observations taking place on 7 days between February 10, 1999 and April 1, 1999. The observations were scheduled to coincide with key incidents in the development of the Monument project, described in detail later. My data collecting consisted of scripting and rough field notes with more elaboration as soon as possible (Merriam, 1998). I also kept a fieldwork journal, recording my feelings and reactions immediately after observations (Merriam, 1998, Patton, 1990).

As my observations continued, I began to narrow my focus (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990) so as to identify some key student informants for the next phase, which was interviewing. I attempted to see in individual students some of the following evidence related to student learning and cognition: explicit discussions of the advantages or disadvantages of using different symbol systems for different projects (Eisner, 1994, 1997; Greeno & Hall, 1997); metadialogues that highlight the thinking processes featuring multiple forms of representation (Tishman & Perkins, 1997); and a balance of individual and collaborative work (John-Steiner, 1997).

I followed a general interview guide (Patton, 1990) that allows for research questions to guide the interview data collection process but not limit it. On March 29, 1999, seven students were interviewed. In addition, two lengthy interviews with the involved teachers were conducted in January 1999 and March 1999. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. In addition, I conducted some brief, informal interviews with the teachers before and after observations. Finally, to preserve the "artifacts" produced during the project, I photographed the finished Monuments.

Inductive analysis took place throughout and after the data collection process to identify data congruent with the research goals and to uncover and refine categories via the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Student and teacher perceptions were grouped into categories relating to cognition, affect, and characteristics of the classroom itself. I refined the categories in order to reflect the purpose of the research and to be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998). Two peer raters coded 20% of the data and each met the standard of at least 80% agreement with my coding. I also kept a chain of evidence during data collection to serve as a “member check” (Merriam, 1998). Finally, the participants read my resulting narrative, serving as a further member check.

Because this study was concerned with obtaining descriptions of new literacy classrooms, analysis stopped at the “open coding” stage in which “concepts are identified,” “data are broken down into discrete parts,” and concepts are grouped under categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). As this long-term study continues, analysis will go beyond the open coding and lead to theoretical model-building of what is accomplished in a new literacy classroom and how it is accomplished. This article reports the results of the case study of the Art Colloquium class at one high school.

**Creating a new literacy classroom**

Venice High School (the names of the school and participants have been changed) is situated in a large, sprawling building in a middle-class suburb
of a major midwestern U.S. city. Art Colloquium is a class that has been offered at Venice for at least 30 years, according to Burt, one of the teachers. Art Colloquium is team-taught by Burt, an art teacher; John, a music teacher; and Ralph, a language arts teacher. The class is usually offered one period a day with over 50 students in the class. During the 1998–1999 school year, there were 75 students in the class.

Art Colloquium has traditionally been viewed as a course for college prep juniors and seniors. The purpose of the course has been to give an overview of Western civilization from the perspective of great writers, artists, and musicians. In the past, each teacher took turns lecturing to the whole group for 2 weeks as the other two would sit in the back, take attendance, and watch.

In the mid 1990s, the teachers of Art Colloquium received a mandate from administrators in the school district that the course should be taught differently. The administrators were upset that there was too much “down time” with two of the three teachers sitting in the back while one teacher lectured. As Ralph explained it, this coincided with the advent of a new principal in their building who wanted to make some changes and who provided some staff development opportunities. About this time Venice became a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and teachers were provided with several 1-day workshops on “authentic assessment” and “curriculum mapping.” Ralph attended a presentation by Theodore Sizer. These inservices got the teachers thinking about trying more of a project based Art Colloquium. During this time, the new principal also arranged for Ralph, Burt, and John to have a common planning period. Gradually, the new curriculum began to evolve. Although the teachers talked about assigning students to work in different media, there was no knowledge of the new literacy movement behind the redesign of the course.

The class became organized around collaborative projects that lasted anywhere from 2 to 6 weeks, culminating in a multimedia project presented to the entire class. All projects began with a question such as “What is a masterpiece?” or “Why do we create?” Ralph, Burt, and John developed these projects and questions themselves. Ralph explained that they start with the end in mind: “What we start with is what do we want them to learn? What do we hope they will learn? And that discussion, that generates for us the standards that we use to evaluate the product.” Students were graded on individual and collaborative elements of each project.

Teaching in a new literacy classroom

I observed the complete cycle of one Art Colloquium assignment—the Monument Project—from the presentation of the concept to the exhibition of the final products. For the collaborative portion of the Monument Project, students were to create a three-dimensional abstract model of a monument to a person, event, or phenomenon. Students were given a sheet of paper with several abstract shapes on them, such as circles or triangles, and they were to use those shapes to design an abstract monument.

First, students researched other known monuments and kept a record of the research. The questions asked were these: Who or what is the inspiration for the monument? Who designed it? Where is it located? Why does it look the way it does? Each student was to develop a philosophy about the shapes, colors, materials, arrangement, and size of monuments. Also at the beginning of the project, the concept of “abstract communication” was discussed. Students were asked to draw abstract shapes that expressed different human emotions (Edwards, 1987, 1989). Students were then placed into groups to create a model of a monument for one person, event, or phenomenon. They were to propose three possible designs for their subject, once a subject was determined. Groups were to make a three-dimensional model of the best design in each group and present that model to the entire class.

Discussion of symbol systems. Several days into the assignment, I observed groups working on their models. Burt, Ralph, and John were circulating among them. Burt said this to one of the groups:

It's going to take you about 5 days [to make the model]. You have to translate what you've drawn into a three-dimensional form. In a drawing, we often get one view. In a three-dimensional sculpture, people can approach it from any number of directions. It should be interesting from each direction.
Several groups seemed to struggle with expressing ideas abstractly and designing a monument that was figurative—such as a top hat design for a monument to Fred Astaire. The group working on a monument to Dr. Seuss (as described earlier) had originally wanted a design that featured a figurative depiction of the Cat in the Hat. In a later interview, Burt described what he said to the group to try to get them back on track: "I said...if you use these shapes...to symbolize that kind of offbeat quality, then you achieve that sense of abstraction, and it represents essentially what Seuss is about [more than a figurative drawing might]."

The group was convinced to shift from their original figurative idea. The discussion that ensued was the one that begins this article with students animatedly debating how best to represent the essence of Dr. Seuss in an abstract manner. Let's cut back to that scene. Now the students are spreading the cut-out abstract shapes on the table. The discussion continues.

"We could do love for children...and education," one student remarks. Another chimed in, "When he started out, he couldn't get published." One student is writing labels in very small writing in pencil on the back of the abstract cut-outs. After a moment, one student suggests that they put the shape (a ball) that represents "money" off to the side. "What if we have more balls, so it's branching off, so it's even bigger?" Gary asks. Bruce answers, "So there are three—love, 'education,' and 'dedication.'" Gary adds, "For his 'imagination,' we could just have a bunch of balloons. How do we put all these balls together? I'm saying the geometry part of it." The students pull out more paper and start cutting out more shapes.

A few days later, at the final presentations of the monuments, it was clear that some groups still had difficulty with the concept of abstraction. Several models were still figurative in nature. In a later interview, Burt suggested that perhaps the teachers shouldn't have allowed the class to build monuments to individuals, that the monuments should have been to abstract concepts. He explained that "The project is not about a monument. It's about abstraction. And we thought that having them create a monument form would give them a matrix on which to hang an abstract concept."

While the teachers expressed frustration that too many of the monuments had figurative elements (rather than being totally abstract), it was clear that this new literacy classroom featured at the very least explicit discussions between students and teachers about the merits and disadvantages of alternative modes of communication.

Perceptions of student learning in the new literacy classroom

There were many references to thinking and learning in the interview transcripts from Burt, Ralph, John, and their students and in the field notes from my observations of the class. What follows are the themes that emerged from the data.

Students understand content. Several students focused their comments about what they learned from the monument project less on the principles of abstraction and more on what they learned about the person they were memorializing. However, students often made distinctions between "fact" learning and other types of learning.

Colin, a member of the Dr. Seuss group, mentioned that while there wasn't a whole lot of "informational learning" from the monument project, there was a lot of learning about process—how to work with others. (Colin contradicted himself later in the interview, however, when he said that he did learn informational "stuff" in the course. He cited the project base of the course as one of the main reasons he learned content.) Colin came the closest to articulating the teachers' intent of the assignment:

I think I actually do have a better appreciation of art. Because, when I go to the museum, some things I can really sense... I think that if I went now, that I would have a better sense of looking at it, realizing what the artist meant and did during [the creation of that].

Gary said that he learned a lot about Picasso and the Cubist painters. Debbie said she was glad that she signed up for the course because it was an "easy A" and because she needed the credit. But when I asked her to describe a class in her high school experience where she really learned something, she mentioned Art Colloquium because "all the other classes stick to basics, and this
is like a more... widespread, like a broad thing.” When I asked Angie how she learned differently about Fred Astaire in such a class, she responded, “You learn more about him, like, just not the person, all the facts. You learn who he really is.”

Gary still wished they could have designed their Dr. Seuss monument in a figurative way, because he was afraid that people on the street passing by wouldn’t know what it is, if it were ever built. When I asked Gary why he thinks the assignment was designed this way, he said, “I think they wanted us to get into the depths of his mind. In retrospect, it’s kind of a good idea.” Fran said she believed that students were given the abstract format so that all groups could be equal.

**Students understand different symbol systems and creative forms of expression.** Art Colloquium students formed understandings of alternative methods of expression, some claiming that the course made them more “well-rounded.” Erin described the experience of being in the class this way: “I’ve learned... what colors mean and... abstract meanings of things... Now I see so much more than what I saw before.” The experience has informed Erin’s writing by influencing her to use the “pictures you see in your head.” Erin and the students have gotten a sense that there are multiple forms of representation and that these are more available to them than before they took Art Colloquium.

**Students understand how to evaluate information from different media.** Ralph, Burt, and John feel strongly that students’ abilities to be good consumers of information have risen since the transformation of Art Colloquium. Ralph feels that, in the old Art Colloquium, students didn’t make judgments about validity of information—they just copied anything down that had to do with the topic that was being researched. Ralph said that they attempted to get students to draw conclusions from the material they found. The teachers wanted to see “evidence of actual thought.” While I did not see evidence of strong research skills demonstrated by students during the time I was at Venice, Burt, John, and Ralph feel that their new Art Colloquium has made a difference in their students’ ability to cope with the rising tide of information.

**Students find fluency.** In Art Colloquium, teachers perceived that some students found a level of fluency they had never attained before. The three teachers described one student from a previous year who was extremely shy and had great difficulty communicating until he sat down at the piano. Ralph described a playwriting assignment that revealed a heightened fluency in another student. “When I read [his original play], I saw an entirely different Joe than I would have ever known... had we been in a traditional mode,” explained Ralph. John noted that certain students gained accolades from their peers when their previously undiscovered fluency was made known. Ralph believes that sometimes students get the message from school that “if you’re not verbal, then you’re not intelligent.”

**Student attributions of learning in a new literacy classroom**

Students and teachers of Art Colloquium gave several reasons why the new literacy activities of the class influenced their thinking.

**Projects.** The most often mentioned contributor to learning was the collaborative, applied nature of the class. Colin stated, “I think I learn a lot more because of the groups and the projects we do. I think it’s because you’re putting all the information in your own hands and you’re doing something with it.” Colin felt they learned about abstraction from actually making an abstract object—students stepped inside the shoes of the artist and saw his or her point of view. “You realize all the time and the work and the effort that the artist put into something like that,” Colin said. “So you get a better conception of what they mean.”

Hal was concerned, however, that the project base of the course meant that students only learned the content of the information surrounding the project on which they worked. Nevertheless, Hal felt he did learn more due to the nontraditional setup of the class.

(If you have tests) it means you have to memorize things; you don’t learn things then. You memorize them for a test and after that you may forget ‘em, but with this style, you may learn it more and absorb more of it.
Hal also understood the principles of abstraction more now, after actually designing an abstract project: "I think [previously] I understood it to a degree of someone looking at it, not of someone who was thinking about it and designing it." Barry summarized the active, involving nature of the class:

Here, it's more an interactive kind of learning.... If [the teacher is] teaching about something, you can get up and get the books or you go out and find the music or you play the music rhythm... it gets us more involved.

Ralph, Burt, and John feel that students' thinking about music, art, and literature has been influenced more by the pedagogic benefits of having students work on projects than by having them listen to lectures. Ralph said, "Within the space of 15 minutes, you can hear them discussing the basic principles of abstraction. Without us ever having articulated for them what they were."

**Shared responsibility.** Students and teachers also perceived that their thinking was influenced because the teachers allowed for sense of ownership over the projects. Erin said, "I think it's kind of like a higher level of learning, because you have to think of things yourself.... We had to come up with everything ourselves."

In fact, Fran believes they are so empowered that it's a good thing the class is designed for college prep students: "They expect more out of you because it's not a classroom setting.... I think our class is very mature about it, for the most part." Angie reported, "It kind of looks like a college.... You have to do your work, and nobody's checking up on you. If you don't do it, you don't do it.... You expect to learn it because you're doing everything yourself."

**Interdisciplinary curriculum.** Students cited the interdisciplinary nature of the course as another influence on their thinking. Fran said, "Instead of focusing on one topic alone, you're seeing a broader view of it. And all the arts. I mean art isn't just art alone—it's art, music, and literature." "Everything has a connection," Gary noted. "Like Beethoven was trying to illustrate something through his music. It was written down, which illustrates writing, which is English. Some of the great tapestries probably were painted [to] his music." Burt lamented that students get to high school and haven't had many of these interdisciplinary experiences: "You know, that kind of information should be communicated to them from day one—that ideas and that learning and expression and modes of expression are very important to look at all together."

**Collaboration.** In the interviews, many students quickly noted the collaborative nature of the class as being what made the class different from other classes at the school. Most students were positive about the collaborative nature of many of the activities and how they got better ideas out of it. Barry almost apologized for liking the collaborative nature of the class, saying that it isn't that he's "shammin" (lazy). He spoke of gaining from the perspectives of other people in his group (they worked on the monument to Mother Goose):

I was thinking of a park, with the other thing, like, the lake, and it's just, like, a place for the kids. And they (other members of his group) came in with the clock and the lights, gese feet around, so I never would have thought of it.

"Everybody is better at something than somebody," Angie stated, "so you may be better at one aspect of something, but somebody else can give you another idea." Angie also thought it better to not always work in the same group; she enjoyed working with a variety of people in the class. Debbie felt that she learned to depend on others. The amount of collaboration also teaches social skills, she said. Erin admitted, "I think it takes more to work in this kind of setting than to just sit there and listen to a teacher preach."

**Team teaching.** Several of the students also mentioned benefiting from the collaboration of the three teachers of Art Colloquium. They spoke of getting different perspectives from each of them. Barry said, "You get more ideas.... One teacher may say something the other teacher didn't say. It makes it easier to comprehend what they're trying to teach us."

Overall, students and teachers perceived that Art Colloquium influenced their thinking, because it centered on projects that required some application of knowledge; it was empowering and gave them a sense of ownership; it was interdisciplinary; and it was collaborative, both for students and teachers. Students also mentioned the course.
being fun and engaging as a reason for better learning. Space prohibits further description of perceptions of affect.

**Art Colloquium pioneers a new literacy**

Art Colloquium was clearly a class that lived up to the ideals of multiliteracies pedagogy described by C. Luke (2000)—depending “on viewing knowledge (and teaching) as integrated, thematic, multimodal, and interdisciplinary” (p. 435). The Art Colloquium teachers were going some steps beyond a “focus on whole language, process writing, and personal growth” (A. Luke, 2000, p. 451), with a “shift in educational focus from the ‘self’ to how texts work in contexts” (p. 455).

Indeed, during the interviews with the students, I began to note the range of “txt” creators who were mentioned from a variety of media—Jackson Pollock, Alfred Hitchcock, Dr. Seuss, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Fred Astaire, Steven Spielberg, Emily Dickinson, Jim Henson, Walt Disney, Grand Master Flash, Steven Sondheim, Rembrandt van Rijn, Sir Francis Bacon, Michel de Montaigne, Andrew Marvell, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Pablo Picasso. The following “content” items were also mentioned: the periods of Absolutism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism; and fairy tales. And students were not just name-dropping. Those names and concepts were used in the context of meaningful conversation. It appeared that the students had learned the significance of these individuals and ideas. As Ralph suggested, they learned more about these people and eras because they worked directly with them. They now had a context for them. But, apparently some students didn’t think of the class in terms of real learning or feel that it was hard enough.

And yet the Art Colloquium teachers taught their students a whole new “grammar” (The New London Group, 1996)—that of abstraction. This was not a simple endeavor. It was significant that both teachers and students struggled with the understandings they were coming to as they worked with this new grammar. It could be argued that the instruction might have been more effective if the description of this alternative grammar had been more explicit as to its advantages and disadvantages (Eisner, 1994; 1997; Greeno & Hall, 1997). Some of the Art Colloquium students might have been less frustrated by the assignment if the goals of the project had been more explicitly discussed. On the other hand, student frustration might have been a result of the nontraditional qualities of the assignment in a school where students were not accustomed to such qualities.

It is clear that we should find and study more new literacy classrooms. First, we need to continue to develop ways of identifying them. Once we identify these classrooms, we need to spend more time in them. This brief snapshot of the assignments, struggles, and outcomes in one new literacy classroom is part of an ongoing research project to document such classrooms. Descriptions of them will inform our ongoing reconceptualization of literacy and of language arts teachers. As Art Colloquium demonstrates, this research may also change our concept of content. Above all, this line of research holds much promise not only for enabling students to truly reach “the full growth of all the individuals” (Dewey, 1902/1990, p. 7) but also for lending support to teachers.

The three teachers portrayed here demonstrated courage—during their interviews, they described being somewhat isolated in their school. Some might criticize the new design of Art Colloquium for sacrificing “content” (in this case an overview of Western Civilization) for “process.” But what is “content” in a “new literacy” classroom?

If we are to continue to reassess our literacy education practice in light of our past and our future, we must continue to uncover, describe, and celebrate the pioneer teachers and students among us.

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