

# Literacy: Social Uses and Pedagogical Obligations

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During the **Conference** to follow our **Workshop**, we are to hear experts discuss uses and abuses of written English in their several corners of the world surrounding us and our students. None of us doubts that our teaching of literacy is related somehow to its uses in society. The nature of those relationships raises complex social, political, and pedagogical questions, some of which I hope to discuss with participants in my seminar.

Narrowly conceived and generally described, our academic expertise is in the conventions of written English; and our effort is to guide students toward mastery of those conventions. In all of our teaching we behave, however, in keeping with social, ethical, and other extra-literary assumptions. Concerned as we are to know the social uses of literacy, our teaching is not simply directed to the uncritical perpetuation of such uses.

Our socio-political assumptions vary, yet most of us believe that literacy is close to the center of learning; that with literacy our students acquire not merely a certain knowledge but a way of knowing; that in being literate they are free to practice or to modify the uses of literacy that society may demand of them.

With such belief in common, most of us would be daunted but undeterred to hear from **Conference** speakers — or to read on the bottom lines of computer surveys — that writing had fallen out of fashion in all but a few exotic corners of society. We would be challenged rather than undone by reports that society's chief demand was for writing of just one manipulative or servile kind — for the gleaning and retrieval of data manipulated in Orwell's own 1984 by punctilious scribes, their heads teeming with nothing but basic skills.

Anticipating complexity and variety in our **Conference** speakers' messages about society's demands, I hope to address in the **Workshop** such pedagogical questions as these:

**How do our perspectives on students' literacy — its values and its uses — compare with their own?**

*Behind this question is my impression that students bring to our courses in writing a demoralized sense of their potential as writers and a skeptical view of their eventual participation in the social uses of literacy. It is as though our students feel personally implicated by the sweeping verdict of the public media — the verdict that American Education in general, and the teaching of literacy in particular, have failed. Newsweek, Edwin Newman, Johnny Carson's guests, William Safire, Time, John Simon — the media prophets are of one monotonously apocalyptic mind.*

In the **Workshop** we will discuss the conceivable effects of alarmist media on students' expectations — of us, and of themselves as writers in our courses. Such expectations figure in their confidence and competence as writers, in ways more complex than *Time* will ever tell.

**How do we characterize what it is that our students have done when they have written well?**

*This question emerges from experimental evaluation of students' writing by teachers in scores of schools and colleges. Such experiments lead to these two conclusions: (a) In both schools and colleges, we are remarkably agreed in our more or less intuitive evaluations of given pieces of writing; and (b) in discussing our agreement, we invoke specific and identifiable criteria for the evaluation of written pieces.*

In the **Workshop** we will evaluate samples of students' writing; and we will consider how our criteria do or should relate to our intuitive evaluations.

**Among participants in the Workshop, what are the favored approaches to the teaching of writing? Does one approach reflect more concern than another for the uses of literacy beyond the classroom?**

*Having articulated our conceptions of high-school and college students, and having clarified our responses to students' written work, we will weigh the relative merits of our several ways of engaging students in the practice of writing. Heuristic grids and problem-facing strategies, the imitation of models, the combining of sentences, the simulation of real-world tasks — is one obliged to choose one or another of these activities? Or is there a theoretically valid case for orderly eclecticism — for engaging students in some or all of these and still other activities? Will anyone argue for sequence in the assignment of such activities? On what grounds? Having characterized and contemplated our pedagogical approaches, we will design and evaluate assignments compatible with each.*

I hope that work of the **Workshop** will prepare us for critical attention to the speakers of the **Conference** — and that we will profit from both events.