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On Personalized Learning in the Context of Common Core Literacy Standards: A Sociocultural Perspective

Francis J. Sullivan, Jr.

In his article on the potential of personalized learning and the conflicts that need to be negotiated for it to achieve that potential, Redding (2013) reminds us of its long lineage, emerging from the “educational philosophy from the Progressive Era, especially John Dewey’s (1915, 1998) emphasis on experiential, child-centered learning; social learning; expansion of the curriculum; and preparation for a changing world” (p. 121). While ensuing research may have tempered some of its progressive ideals, at least within Anglo-American schooling, Redding shows how its current revitalization as “personalized learning” retains the core concepts that have animated it from the beginning: “Personalization ensues from the relationships among teachers and learners and the teacher’s orchestration of multiple means for enhancing every aspect of each student’s learning and development” (p. 126).

The 2009 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for literacy in the content areas poses fundamental challenges to the continued development of student-centered approaches to learning that Redding calls for. Though the new CCSS do expand literacy instruction into all content areas, not just in English, they narrow the scope of that expansion by emphasizing the role of “informational” texts that analyze, interpret, or evaluate over “narrative” texts that simply tell a story and by the application of a kind of “close reading” based on text-dependent questioning that treats meaning as residing entirely within the written text (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009). These shifts strike at the core of personalized learning, objectifying and depersonalizing readers’ experience of texts. That is, the emphasis on close, supposedly objective, reading creates a false dichotomy between text meaning and the lived experience that students bring to their reading of that text. In doing so, these shifts radically devalue students’ use of affect and emotion in their responses to texts. Further, in calling for teachers to abandon “scaffolding” strategies that prepare students for reading and guide their development of reading strategies in favor of students’ unmediated encounters with texts, these shifts risk undermining students’ developing self-efficacy and their social relationships with their teachers as caring guides.

The keystone of the CCSS for literacy framework is the tripartite concept of complexity. The first two components of complexity focus on features and qualities of texts. The “quantitative” component builds on traditional notions of readability—polysyllabic vocabulary and sentence length—to add in the element of “rarity” of vocabulary built into the Lexile measure. The “qualitative” component is comprised of text qualities—layout, levels of meaning, structure, language conventions, and background knowledge—whose complexity can be determined only through human judgment. The third, and according to the CCSS crucial, component is the “reader/task” relationship. This component combines those elements that a reader brings—in particular, motivation—with the level of cognitive and metacognitive activity required to accomplish the learning task as set by the teacher (Ciardiello, 2012). Schools have allowed standards to fall, the authors of CCSS insist, first, by the inclusion of too many “simple” narrative texts in the curriculum and, second, by the adoption of instructional practices that encourage learners to substitute their personal reactions for close analysis of textual features and qualities key to understanding an author’s intended meaning. It is the announced aim of CCSS to raise this bar, using the concept of complexity to clearly define the rigor of both texts and tasks. It is the aim of the new assessments to evaluate whether students, teachers, and schools are clearing the bar set by CCSS (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, n.d.a, n.d.b).

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This curricular shift in emphasis—away from narrative texts to “informational” genres—is mirrored in a second shift—away from personal response to reading and toward an emphasis on “the text itself,” as the authors make clear in their revised criteria:

The standards and these criteria sharpen the focus on the close connection between comprehension of text and acquisition of knowledge. While the link between comprehension and knowledge in reading science and history texts is clear, the same principle applies to all reading. The criteria make plain that developing students’ prowess at drawing knowledge from the text itself is the point of reading; reading well means gaining the maximum insight or knowledge possible from each source. Student knowledge drawn from the text is demonstrated when the student uses evidence from the text to support a claim about the text. Hence evidence and knowledge link directly to the text. (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 1)

The chief instructional strategy so far identified has been to advocate a kind of decontextualized “close reading” of texts, to be guided by the teacher relying almost entirely on “text dependent” questioning (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012), completely abandoning the kinds of evidence-based, student-centered reading strategies that research has shown to be effective in scaffolding student engagement with texts over the last 30 years (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Hinchman & Sheridan-Thomas, 2008). Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm (2014), who have harshly criticized this text-dependent approach as a kind of “Zombie New Criticism,” note pointedly that there is absolutely no empirical evidence for its effectiveness. If anything, the evidence points to its ineffectiveness—its inability to engage students in attending closely to a text; to develop ways of reading a text deeply that can transfer readily to other texts and genres; to do this reading within contexts that are, in fact, meaningful to learners; and, most significantly, to foster a critical literacy in

which readers learn how to identify and challenge the assumptions and claims of the texts that they are reading (Smith et al., 2014).

Notable in these shifts is that, while the pendulum may have swung from subjective stories to objective informational texts and from personal response to impersonal close reading, the shifts retain the same dichotomies about literacy and learning that can be traced back at least as far as Dewey's work in the 1920s. Objective is pitted against subjective, personal against impersonal. What we need is a literacy and learning framework that actually incorporates these tensions as resources we can use. Though less well known within education, sociocultural frameworks for discourse analysis offer a far more robust perspective to support the kind of careful, thoughtful engagement with texts that the CCSS claim to want from students but do little to promote. Proponents of sociocultural frameworks, with roots deep in anthropology, linguistics, and sociology, have developed remarkably effective methods for explaining how people actually use literacy in real-world contexts, methods that have been adapted for use in classroom contexts in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and the Far East. I have found these frameworks to be quite powerful in my own research on teaching and learning as well as in curriculum development in schools, college, and the workplace (Sullivan, 1995, 1997a, 1997b; Sullivan & Baren, 1997; Sullivan, Lyon, Lebofsky, Wells, & Goldblatt, 1997). For the last five years, I have been reshaping my own courses—and my teaching as well—so that they embody the pedagogical principles that I have distilled from my scholarly work in and with these frameworks. In what follows, I first explain the framework, contrasting it with that implicit in the CCSS notion of “complexity,” and then outline those principles at the core of my curriculum development work, in particular with preservice secondary teachers in the secondary education content areas, illustrating how those principles function in the courses that I teach.

Studying Literacy “in the Wild”

Though sociocultural perspectives on literacy do not use the term “complexity” explicitly, they nevertheless redefine it radically by refocusing our attention on the dynamics of the situation in which literate activity takes place. Such perspectives always connect language use to the social contexts in which it is being used and to the multiple—sometimes conflicting—ways of making sense of reality that those contexts may demand. Gee (1999) puts it this way:

Language, in fact, serves a great many functions, and “giving and getting information,” yes, even in our new “Information Age,” is but one, and by no means the only one. If I had to single out a primary function of language, it would be, not one, but the following two: to scaffold the performance of social activities (whether play or work or both), and to scaffold social affiliations within cultures and social groups and institutions. (p. 1)

From a sociocultural perspective, the meanings of text and context are co-created. In “the real world,” our use of language doesn't distinguish between the ideas that we are explaining and the way that our phrasing of those ideas represents our social identities—our “affiliations,” as Gee (1999) puts it. Rather, we use language to accomplish goals, but always as a particular kind of person within a particular social context.

How does this occur? Briefly, elements of the social context name the “rules of the game.” They constrain both the kinds of social activity in which we are supposed to engage *and* whom we are supposed to represent, or be affiliated with, in the activity. They

may even constrain the goals themselves. At the same time, the ways that we respond to those constraints in order to achieve our goals and represent our affiliations make use of these rules, which may even include violating or ignoring the rules. It is in that sense that we talk about language use as being a cooperative activity.

For example, suppose that a local news show is doing “people in the street” interviews on the topic of whether people prefer city or country living. The interviewer walks up to someone, asks, “Which do you prefer, city or country?” and puts the microphone out for the person to speak. Speaker A replies, “*I prefer the city.*” Speaker B says, “*My preference is the city.*” What difference does the way each answered make to the social meaning of what each of them said? At one level, it would seem to make no difference. Both have “said” that they want to live in the same kind of surroundings. That information is the same. But a closer look, the kind that a sociocultural perspective allows, reveals important differences about each speaker’s relationship to that information and the kind of person represented in that way of speaking.

Speaker A’s phrasing would be considered “direct,” meaning that the grammatical structure of the statement is congruent with the idea being stated. The verb states the “action,” the subject identifies the “agent” of the action, the object the “goal.” This sentence represents a speaker who “says what he means and means what he says,” one who values definite, concrete statements and opinions. The phrasing of this reply is like a miniature narrative, telling the story of the speaker’s experience.

Speaker B’s phrasing contrasts with the above in significant ways. It would be considered “indirect”; its grammatical structure is incongruent with the ideas being presented. In this version, the action is no longer stated by the verb; that action is now the grammatical subject, transformed through the process of “nominalization.” This transformation “objectifies” (Kuipers & Viechnicki, 2008) the action as a kind of conceptual object, making it available for discussion as if it were an actual thing. In short, objectification distances the speaker from both the experience being discussed and also from the speaker’s audience. Rather than narrating an experience, this way of speaking is a reflection on experience; note how the verb states, not an action, but an equivalence between “my preference” and “the city,” which itself is now defined as the speaker’s “preference.” In contrast to Speaker A’s phrasing, this phrasing represents the speaker as a kind of person who values reflection as a means to come to considered conclusions.

These may seem small changes, in an imagined example, but they have dramatic consequences for schooling. The psychologized, “reflective” style above has been shown to characterize the responses of high-performing adolescents (Gee, 2000). In fact, the distinction between “direct” and “indirect” ways of making meaning is a well-established phenomenon, with research extending over the last 50 years (Bernstein, 2000). Often referred to as “codes” (Delpit, 1986; Halliday & Webster, 2009), these ways of making meaning are not intrinsically unequal; rather, they draw upon different “cultural models” used to construct meaning out of one’s experience of the world, models that Gee (2005) labels “everyday” and “specialized” (pp. 42–43). Direct codes rely on “common sense” reasoning and concrete experience to construct explanations of reality. Specialized codes rely on the kinds of counterintuitive reasoning developed in academic and professional fields. Not surprisingly, these correspond roughly to ways of making meaning valued in schools and those less valued ways used in out-of-school activities, and they correspond with the distinction between “narrative” and “informational” texts in the CCSS.

One implication of this distinction for understanding the dynamics of teaching and learning is that, too often, student responses to teacher questions are evaluated simply as correct or incorrect when, in reality, students are using codes (i.e., cultural models) other than the one that the teacher wants them to use in the classroom situation. For instance, in a science class, when children are asked, “How far does light from a candle travel?” many, including adolescents, respond in terms of how much space a light illuminates. Obviously, this is not an acceptable answer from the perspective or cultural model used in physics. Yet, anyone operating from the cultural model that we use in our everyday lives might give the same answer as these youth, not because we are ignorant of physics, but because the situated

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meaning of light typically concerns illumination, “the range through which an observer can see visible effects of light” (Gee, 1999, pp. 44–45). If we want to know what size lightbulb we need to use in a large room, that’s exactly the problem we need to pose. Students responding in unacceptable ways need to learn that there are other cultural models for understanding light, frameworks that distinguish between such things as illumination and light itself. Doing otherwise is like calling Newton ignorant for saying that the shortest route between two points is a straight line because that definition doesn’t take into account the principle of relativity.

Using literacy to evaluate the competence of individuals this way is not just an element of schooling. It occurs also in the workplace. In my work developing a literacy curriculum for entry-level IRS tax examiners, this element was at its heart. Top management insisted that the examiners, who possessed only a high-school degree or GED, were functionally illiterate, unable to read or write simple messages. Though errors were not uncommon among these examiners, it remained the case that most of their work was completed accurately. Still, management ordered that all memos inviting examiners to apply for our program must contain the word “deficiencies” to label the focus of the program. It also demanded that we develop a proficiency examination, which anyone enrolled in our program must pass or be fired.¹

The problem, as my interviews with tax examiners revealed, was not that they needed support for making decisions about the vast majority of cases that came across their desks, which were straightforward and thus easy for them to process. Rather, they needed to be able to distinguish reliably between those cases and others that were complex or problematic, to determine the nature of the problem, and to use the relevant procedures to make the appropriate response. To accomplish this, they needed to be able to interpret and apply the official manual, called an IRM. This manual outlines the precise procedures examiners should follow for each regulation in the tax code, defining all its concepts and specifying the exact steps to take and the specific contingencies that would require alternatives to resolve the issue. In other words, it represented the work of examiners as reasoning one’s way through a potentially complex tax situation that might arise with any new case an examiner was assigned. Examiners avoided these manuals whenever possible. In the words of one, referring to the IRM, “I know what it says; I just don’t know what it means.”

¹ Because our contract did not include such a test, we were able to refuse this demand.

The literacy activity in which these examiners engaged, then, was more like that of biologists or botanists, sorting phenomena into the correct categories even as they searched for one case that did not fit easily into any of the established categories. The curriculum I developed began by introducing examiners to the problem through a simulation in which they had to define a common animal, in this case a bird, in such a way that the definition would distinguish all birds from non-birds. Examiners then had to apply their definitions to a set of images of increasing complexity, ending with one of an apteryx—a wingless bird with hairy feathers that lays its eggs in the sand. Calling this animal a bird is about as counterintuitive as it gets, unless you are an ornithologist, for whom it makes perfect sense. As a result, examiners began to see their work and themselves in a new context, one in which they were engaged in a complex endeavor that required an equally complex manual to address. Subsequent lessons immersed examiners in examinations of actual cases of increasing complexity while interpreting and applying procedures from the manuals correctly and appropriately. Examiners who completed the program improved substantively in their work as measured by our assessments and, more importantly, as judged by their supervisors.

Thinking of literacy as a sociocultural phenomenon thus enables us to take learners' cultural models seriously, as a resource rather than a deficit. It reminds us that all cultural models are limited to the situational contexts out of which they emerged and to the purposes that motivated them. Broadly speaking, this work allows us to identify not only the patterns underlying adolescents' speaking, writing, and reading, but also the logic of their responses to texts. Instead of simply attributing differences in learners' speech or writing to ignorance or misunderstanding of the rules of "Standard" English, we can instead make use of the knowledge and skills learners bring to using language to achieve their goals and establish their social identities. In fact, work on the use of various vernaculars in the speech and writing of working-class and racial minority youth have been used as a basis for student inquiry into those patterns, the contrasts between those patterns and those of "Standard" English, and the situations in which each pattern is—and is not—effective (Baker, 2002; Baugh, 1987; Brown, 2009). Other studies on out-of-school literacies, such as "tagging" and online social media, have been used to scaffold student engagement with in-school, academic literacies (Alvermann, 2010; Finders, 1996; Lee, 2004; Moje, 2000).

Discourse Analysis as Pedagogical Tool: Principles and Practices

From a sociocultural perspective, then, "complexity" is best understood, not as a feature of texts or of reader/task relationships, but as a product of the entire activity in which we are engaged, whether in or out of the classroom. The more authentic the activity, the deeper the understanding that results. Moreover, a sociocultural perspective demands that we treat development not as a linear progression nor even as a spiral, but as dialectic. Learners develop through struggle with multiple and conflicting perspectives and—even more important—situated identities. It is their reshaping of these perspectives and identities that constitutes development. Finally, it requires teachers to see themselves and their work differently, to consider the cultural models that support work in their field in the light of students' everyday practices through which they construct meaning, so that those differences can be used to scaffold student learning in the relevant discipline. In the remainder of my discussion, I want to elaborate how each of these principles has enabled

me to design innovative classroom practices that can support students' development of discipline-specific literacies.

Principle I: Authenticity

Real means real. The course that I teach, Literacy and Differentiation in the Content Areas, Grades 7–12, relies heavily on the curriculum development work of Wiggins and McTighe and on Tomlinson's work on differentiation (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). There is not, strictly speaking, a sociocultural approach, but it does offer a flexible platform on which I can scaffold student learning. The advantage that this sociocultural perspective provides is to guide my development of activities and assessments that address actual problems that learners will face as student teachers and in the profession. To that end, the course is organized around the essential questions, "What is complexity?" and "How can I design curriculum and instruction that enables all my students to develop deep understandings of big ideas in my field in the context of high-stakes testing?" In the authentic performance assessment that is the culminating course task, learners must address these questions in the context of a presentation to the principal, teachers, and students at The LINC, a new public high school in Philadelphia. This is, in fact, an actual school, which requires teacher applicants to construct a unit of instruction using the Understanding by Design framework. The school also represents a "bet" by the School District of Philadelphia that a comprehensive high school based on project-based and inquiry-oriented learning principles can meet the new demands of CCSS.

Developing control of a professional discourse is about learning to affiliate oneself with the knowledge, beliefs, values, and commitments central to it. It is about learning to construct "who I am" in this situation. The situational context of this assessment thus immerses learners in a very real situation, one in which there are serious consequences, in which professional expertise is necessary, yet one in which no one has the final answer. In a very real sense, my students must successfully affiliate themselves with that professional community even as they argue for the efficacy—and the limits—of this approach to teaching and learning.

Principle II: Social Identity and Development

Development is dialectical, not linear. We tend to think of development as additive. Using existing schema, we add new knowledge to it, and thus progress to the next level. The more I have worked from a sociocultural perspective, the better I have come to understand development as the product of conflicts and contradictions with which we are struggling, conflicts that are more associated with our attempts to come to terms with the situated identity we are in the process of acquiring versus the situated identity we have now. This conflict is very real with those that I teach. The very phrase "preservice teachers" captures the conflict. Having almost completed their preparation, increasingly involved in classrooms working with students and teachers, and soon to be given responsibility for an entire roster of classes for a whole semester, they nevertheless still identify themselves as students, with the knowledge, beliefs, values, and commitments of a discourse that they have mastered over their 16 years of schooling.

The questions and assessments described above thus challenge students to reframe themselves as professionals with real expertise that they can use with authority. At the beginning of the semester, class discussion on curriculum and instruction has a quite conflicted nature. As my students wrestle with the implications of committing themselves

to the kind of curriculum design and instructional practice that I have outlined here, they become increasingly concerned about the responsibilities that they are placing on themselves. Not yet able to speak authoritatively as teachers, they begin to question and even reject these instructional practices which they now call “idealized” and “impractical” in “the real world” or with “those students.” This, however, is a necessary step in their development. My role at this point is to encourage their questioning and to guide them in examining these concerns. I do this chiefly by acknowledging their anxieties about what might happen, while reminding them that the authors whom they are reading are or have been teachers themselves, that the practices we are considering have been used with all kinds of students in all kinds of schools, and, finally, by inviting them to think of this as something they will put into practice over multiple years, not in a single marking period.

Principle III: Teaching and Assessing

The teacher leads from behind. I have been quite surprised as I have come to realize how much this sociocultural perspective demands of me as the teacher. It is much more labor intensive than my former courses were. It is one thing to design curriculum along sociocultural lines. It is essentially a conceptual project. However, it is quite different to actually put this perspective into practice, especially in the ways that I respond to my students’ writing throughout the semester and how I evaluate their final performance assessment. Modules in the course immerse students in increasingly complex activities in which they must adapt and apply the big ideas taught. Each module leads up to a report on implementing that big idea in an instructional routine, together with an explanation of their reasoning in constructing the routine as they did. Each report receives extensive marginal responses from me in addition to a grade. The reports may be revised, but all the reports must be included—and discussed as evidence—in the final performance assessment.

From a sociocultural perspective, my formative assessment of their reports focuses on their changing social identities. Who is speaking in the piece? Whom does he represent? By what authority does she ground her reasoning? Even though the final performance task is mainly summative, I can still use similar questions to guide my evaluation of it. How successfully has the writer affiliated him- or herself with the professional expertise of the education community? Overall, this strategy seems quite effective, if I judge by students’ actual revisions to their work and the quality of their final task. Many of them even thank me for the depth of the responses they receive, even though much of it critiques the substance of their explanations. I believe that they appreciate the fact that a professor is taking them seriously, treating them more like colleagues than like students.

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