Literacy Unbound—A Response to Graff

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My article and Graff's response form an interesting set of working boundaries on where studies on literacy should set up camp and what then they might set out to explore. The locus of my concern was a high school English program as a grand defender of literacy; I had inquired into what the students were taking from this important, though by no means sole, source of meaning. A single academic subject sets a narrow range and, as well, plays a surprisingly small part—certainly from a teacher's point of view—in what concerns students. Yet, for all of that, schools are held responsible for the state of literacy in this society. The boundary line between what English programs demand from literacy and what students take is the territory I began to cover in this project. The scope is limited; the argument is bound.

But if these limitations are justified, or at least well-intentioned, then Graff is rightly curious about the exact nature of the school's part in the development of this literacy and about my ability to bring it into focus. The question is a methodological one. In pinning down the school's contribution to the students' approach to literacy, we have but what the students say and do. The difficulty is specifying—unearthing and documenting—not what is taught but what is taken, that is, the exact nature of the school's contribution. It may seem safe to assume, for example, that the school had taught Edward and Chris how to read and write, yet such skills are acquired on occasion without the help of the school, or even, some have suggested, in spite of it (Smith, 1971). The interviews and sentence completion tests which I conducted were intended to probe the students' private and individual understandings of literacy. I hoped this might lead back to the lessons I had witnessed in class. But, as the nature of literacy remains clouded in students' minds (though less so in the two instances I presented), tracing the bounds of the school's hegemony and power moves ahead slowly, tentatively. One is always looking for that cross-checking substantiation, if only in similar attitudes between otherwise dissimilar students.

Still, after that defence of the binding and limited nature of my argument, I would not deny the soundness of Graff's advice to examine more thoroughly not only the context outside of the English program but also the impact of literacy outside of the school and, in the life to come, after graduation. In analyzing the data, it had become clear to me that the students were taking a good deal of their understanding about the nature of language from lessons out of class on the issue of language differences—both in social class and gender terms. (Teachers were letting these lessons slip by as outside their domain.) With a more definite sense of the family's and community's contribution to
student attitudes, the school’s role would have been easier to identify, if not actually locate, in classroom practices. Perhaps then, too, the teacher’s responsibility in language education would have become more readily apparent, as Shirley Brice Heath’s work demonstrates. I certainly realize that the two cases I reported on would have been enriched if I had spoken to the students’ families and that this might have contributed to a stronger social class model, though one still at risk of abstracting the students’ individuality and of drawing attention away from their personal struggle along literacy’s boundary line. Though I did not lose sight of the influence of social class in treating the question of Edward’s and Chris’s literacy, I hesitated to pursue it further for reasons that I will return to again in the course of this response.

Another wrinkle in the matter of boundaries is the definition of literacy. Graff takes me to task for confusing language with literacy on the one hand and for reducing language attitudes and practices to literacy on the other. But I did not begin with a specific definition of literacy because my project was to uncover the current definitions in the school setting. Nor did I intend for my eventual concentration on language attitudes and practices to constitute a final and definitive notion of the term. Literacy, like so many key words, has no single or fixed meaning, only changing areas of sensible use. My question was which activities could, but did not, count as literacy in the school setting. I was attending, as Wittgenstein advised, to the viable limits, or the boundaries, in the use of the word. Further, I take the exploration of the meaning of literacy across historical periods and cultures to be the most interesting aspect of the work of Graff and of Scribner and Cole. In pointing out that their studies tend to limit the claims of literacy, I was not taking the precision of their work to task; rather I felt the need to supplement their more exact measurements—historical, economic, or cognitive—with the individual’s perception of reading and writing.

A personal sense of literacy is very much part of the English curriculum’s approach to fostering literacy: the curriculum guides are filled with eloquent expressions urging teachers to improve student regard, awareness, and appreciation for language and literature. Thus, the conflation of language and literacy, which Graff notes as infusing my notion of literacy, has its roots in the curriculum. Still, I attempted to deal with language attitudes only as they fell within the bounds of literacy. Certain attitudes toward language have little to do with literacy, but within the school context, literacy has very much to do with attitudes toward language.

To reiterate, I became interested in Edward and Chris because they manifested a nearly ideal attitude to language in terms of the high school English program, which revered the creative possibilities of writing and the importance of literature. Let me be bolder here and claim with less hesitancy that pop music, with its blend of oral and literate traditions, existed for Chris as a literary enterprise: he talked about writing songs; he looked up information for them, or took from the sci-fi he was reading; he attended to the lyrics on the record sleeves of other bands. However we want to classify this enterprise, or whatever blend of oral, popular, or literate culture we concoct, Chris saw it in literate terms. And more than that, his English teachers might have too, had Chris been a student who cared a good deal more about his