Analyzing the US Illiteracy War: 
It’s Present Status & Significance for the College Classroom

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“We’re in a War!”
There is a terrorist at large that is actively destroying the minds and lives of Americans across this country. It is seen in the juvenile detention centers, prisons, welfare lines, etc., and shockingly, even in America’s public schools. This predator wants to destroy as many as possible, and if we stand back and do nothing but complain about its invasions into our lives and our classrooms, it will succeed in its plan. It doesn’t use bombs, tear gas, biological weapons, or “weapons of mass destruction;” instead, it uses ignorance, erroneous concepts, frustration and embarrassment, as well as overcrowded classrooms, apathy, and ineffective instruction. And with these weapons, the enemy has reduced many within our schools to such a degree that they enter the college classroom already a defeated foe. Who is this horrendous villain of the American people? Illiteracy.

“What’s Going On?”
---among adults in the U.S.

The reports seem to indicate that America is becoming more and more an illiterate nation. This war against illiteracy came to the national fore front in the early 80s with the publication of Why Johnny Can’t Read. Since that time, articles, essays, and numerous national reports have kept us updated on the war effort. However, the war is not going well. In 1989, Lauro Cavazo, the Secretary of Education, testified before a Senate Subcommittee regarding a 1986 assessment of literacy skills of 21-25 year olds that “only a small percentage can adequately perform the more complex and challenging tasks that are critical to our Nation’s continued economic growth” (qtd. in Report on Activities and Accomplishments FY 1993 – FY 2002 10). This report initiated a number of national educational reforms with one of the expressed goals being “[b]y the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (10). How have we done in accomplishing that goal?

Unfortunately, not very well. After this report was made to the subcommittee, the U.S. Dept. of Education requested the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to perform a comprehensive study of adult literacy. In 1992 (6 years later), ETS released the results of the report. Of a random sampling of 26,000 American adults from across the country, ETS scored their literacy abilities on a score from 1 (being the lowest) to 5 (being the highest). The following results were taken from the online article “Literacy Figures” published by The Education requested the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to perform a comprehensive study of adult literacy. In 1992 (6 years later), ETS released the results of the report. Of a random sampling of 26,000 American adults from across the country, ETS scored their literacy abilities on a score from 1 (being the lowest) to 5 (being the highest). The following results were taken from the online article “Literacy Figures” published by The American Literacy Council:

Level 1 – “Between 21% - 23% (or approximately 40-44 million adults) fell into this category from being able to perform tasks involving ‘brief, uncomplicated texts,’ such as totaling the entry on a bank deposit slip or locating information in a short news article,
information in a short news article, but many do so with difficulty. Others are unable to do so at all.”

Level 2 – “Between 25% - 28% (or approximately 50 million adults) have skills that the Department of Education describes as ‘more varied’ than those at level 1 but ‘still quite limited.’ They are able to locate information in a text, locate a particular intersection on a map, or determine the difference in price of two items. However, they have ‘considerable difficulty’ carrying out tasks requiring them to use long texts or do 2-step calculations.” These two levels account for just under half of the adult American population. The other 52% - 54% fell into levels 3-5.

Level 3 – “Approximately 33% of the participants (representing 61 million adults) ‘could integrate information relatively easily from long texts, and perform more complicated tasks where quantities needed to be inferred from the narrative.”

Levels 4, 5 – “Approximately 18% - 21% of the participants (representing 34-40 million adults) could successfully complete the most challenging tasks requiring the use of long and complex texts.”

According to this survey, only about ½ of the adult American population have sufficient literacy skills to even consider coming to college. For the other half of the country, college must remain, at least this time, only a dream.

This study, published in 1992, was the last in-depth study performed by the Department of Education on the literacy skills of American adults. This means that national policies, funding, etc., designed for adult literacy are being made and based upon a study made 14 years ago. Another one has not been performed to see how American adults compare today as opposed to then. So can we argue that the adult literacy rate has improved or decreased? Not without at least another study; any determination at this point without that additional study would be merely speculative.

Although this report regarding adult literacy came out in 1992, the General Accounting Office (in 1995) came out with the publication Adult Education: Measuring Program Results has been Challenging, which proceeded to report “an absence of goals in the adult education system and described the problems associated with evaluating adult education program results when programs lacked clearly defined objectives” (quoted in Report on Activities and Accomplishments FY1993 – FY 2002 10). Since 1995, Adult Education programs have been working on developing “content standards” and “performance assessment frameworks” (15).

The lack of literacy standards among the adult general public should be a concern to all college instructors – regardless of discipline – since increasingly, more and more adults are deciding to pursue a college degree, even after being out of school for many, many years.

---among high school students in the U.S.

In addition to the lack of literacy evident within the general adult population, there is evidence that it is spreading within our schools as well. In the online edition of the September/October 2002 issue of Book magazine, Patrick Clinton argues that a large number of students in American schools (about 75%) are being passed from grade to grade without ever really learning how to read. How, some may ask, is this possible? Because many of these students have learned to play the “reading game.” They are able to put on the appearance of reading without actually comprehending what the text is actually saying. To back this point up, Clinton cites an experience he had within his own classroom:

“I had a girl in my class take the part of Willy Loman in a class reading of Death of a Salesman,” recalls Clinton. “She gave a beautiful performance. She was fluid. She was expressive. I was thinking, ‘She really gets this.’ But after reading, when we were discussing the scene, she didn’t know anything. It’s as if she hadn’t been there.”

This student (along with many others) was able to decode and verbalize the words on the page, but she didn’t comprehend or understand what it was she was reading.

Before teaching at Elizabethtown Community & Technical College, I worked part-time a reading specialist for 8½ years for the ABC Phonetic Reading School, a private corporation based in Phoenix, Arizona, that specializes in reading instruction, as well as GED and SAT preparation. During that time, I’ve had a number of my own experiences working with students where they were able to read the words on the page, but when I
questioned them about the text, I discovered the same “blank stare.” I discovered, that many times, students learn to memorize words, so that when they see them, they know what they are suppose to say, but that doesn’t mean necessarily that they understand the meaning of those words, or even understand how those meanings can change if placed in different contexts.

Students are simply not being led to higher levels of literacy within the school system. Instead, schools have “trusted reading and kids’ families to fill in the gap, and they’ve simply let a lot of kids limp along with poor reading skills.” In addition, the situation has gotten to the point that “Many high school teachers are talking about standing with their finger in the dike.” Am I saying that we need even more school reforms? No, school reforms, according to Clinton, have the opposite effect – they increase the amount of illiteracy within our schools:

Ironically, even today’s rage for school reform has contributed to the decline of reading. In the climate of accountability and big-stakes tests, teachers have received a clear message from schools boards, politicians, and the press: Teach the content. And that they do. Many have become quite ingenious at using lectures, handouts, class projects and activities to convey content about history and science and government without requiring kids to read. In some classrooms, the textbook is an occasional supplement. In many, it isn’t used at all. “As students come in less and less literate, we have gotten better at teaching around the text,” says California teacher Gayle Cribb.

However, it is at this point in the article that Patrick Clinton asks a very interesting and important question: “But if kids are never asked to read complex material, how will they learn to read it?

These experiences reinforce the findings of Paul E. Peterson, director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University, who has published an online article, entitled, “The American Literacy Tragedy.” In this article, Peterson comments, not on the “literacy tragedy” among the general adult population, but at the continuing decline of SAT literacy scores of American high school students since the 1950s:

The United States is living on its past. Among the oldest group in the study (those aged 56-65), U.S. prose skills rose to second place. For those attending school in the 1950s, SAT scores reached an all-time high. As the years go by, the United States slips down the list. Americans educated in the sixties captured a Bronze Medal in literacy, those schooled in the seventies got 5th place in the race. But those schooled in the nineties ranked 14th. (2)

Based on my own experiences, Clinton’s (and other teachers’), as well as Peterson’s description of the steady decline of SAT scores, I believe that the war against American illiteracy is losing ground. Rather than students becoming more literate, it seems the opposite is, in fact, the case. Clinton’s following summary, then, brings us face-to-face with a sad and disheartened characterization of reading instruction within our public educational system:

The typical American high school curriculum assumes that kids are able to take in new knowledge independently by reading. But something like three quarters can’t, at least not at any useful level. As a nation, we’re spending those four crucial years of kids’ lives trying to build an educational house for them, and nobody has a hammer or nails.

And, of course, it is these same 75% that will be attending our classes at the community college. Paradoxically, in the July 10, 2003, issue of CNN online, in an article entitled, “Most writing scores up,” the writer begins it with the statement: “Most students in the three benchmark grades [4th, 8th, and 12th] still can’t provide coherent answers with clear language, supporting details, accurate punctuation, and creative thinking.” The writer then proceeds to report that the number of 4th and 8th grade students who earned “proficient” on the state writing tests have risen from 23-27% to 28-31%, but the number of 12th graders has actually fallen from 78 to 74%. “This means about a quarter of seniors, within a 25-minute time limit, could not provide an organized answer that showed they understood their task and their audience.” In addition, the article notes, “The declining performance among seniors has become a trend across topics, as 12th-grade scores have also dropped in reading, math and science in recent years.”

In summary, the war against illiteracy both within the larger adult population and within the school system seems to be losing ground. Many teachers are being told to teach to the tests, exams, etc., so that schools can maintain a good appearance and reputation;
however, the sad truth is that many students will graduate unprepared to meet the demands of reading that one comes across every day in college, or even in their day-to-day lives. Although some may validly argue that some strides have been made, these unfortunately are isolated cases and are not enough in and of themselves to turn the tide we’re facing.

**Substandard Reading – Its Connection**

Illiteracy or Substandard reading skills are the basis for many of the problems that we as instructors are facing in the college classroom. In Composition, for example, my students can’t write at the sophisticated level one would expect of a college student if they haven’t spent their earlier years reading and internalizing the basic rhythm, flow, and structure of the English language. In addition, by reading various types of prose, they would’ve developed a strong vocabulary repertoire, as well as widened their understanding of the various “realities” that exist within today’s society. Unfortunately, the number of non-reading students who are (or will be) inhabiting our college composition classrooms are increasing, and there is no evident sign of any sudden change in the future.

In other courses, such as History, Psychology, Sociology, etc., students may seem to have a surface level grasp of the material, but how much of it do they really understand? How many times do we stop and question the students (particularly those who try to hide in the back of the room) regarding the reading assignment that they were to do? National statistics indicate that more times than not, the words on the page are being decoded, but the meaning is not being grasped.

This would likewise be true in Carpentry, Plumbing, Electrical Wiring, where the possible future lives of individuals may depend upon the quality of work done by students in these areas of study. If statistics ring true here, many of us in some future time could find ourselves at risk.

**“What now?”**

In consideration then of what the research and literacy reports show, what should be our next course of action? Personally, I believe that if we are going to properly prepare students for the increasing technical environment of the workplace and overall society, then we need to have some type of comprehensive reading program available. In addition, I’d like to see College Reading required of every in-coming freshman. Although these solutions would not in themselves “fix” the problem (since it is a national problem), I do believe it would be a step in the right direction. Unfortunately with the present financial crunch, such a solution is unrealistic.

Consequently, I am aware that there is a problem; however, I’m not sure what we should do about it. However, I do know that we cannot lower college standards merely to accommodate students who are coming in with substandard skills. This would not help students, and it would only “water down” the value of the college degree. The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges in April 2003 released their report in which they recommend that writing be made a priority in every American school, college, and university, and that it be taught by every faculty member, regardless of the faculty member’s discipline. And how are non-English faculty members to receive training in writing instruction? Their recommendation –

1. Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines through in-service workshops designed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves.

2. Universities should advance common expectations by requiring all prospective teachers to take courses in how to teach writing.

3. Faculty in all disciplines should have access to professional development opportunities to help them improve student writing. (The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution 5)

Of course, again, the question is time, funding, resources, etc. Where’s it coming from? But will this “fix” the problem? Personally, I don’t think so, because it ignores the rudimentary foundation of writing, which is reading.

However, a good point that might develop from such an approach would be that students would come to realize that writing is not just an “English” thing -- but an “education” thing.

**Works Cited**

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