

# THE LITERATURE WORKSHOP

THE LITERATURE  
WORKSHOP  
Teaching Texts and Their Readers

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*For my mentor, James Gray, founder of the National Writing Project;  
for the teachers of the South Coast Writing Project; and for my students past and present.*

*“Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own, the honor of your colleague  
as the reverence for your teacher, and the reverence for your teacher  
as the fear of heaven.” (Sayings of the Fathers, IV.12)*

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## 2

### *From Telling to Teaching The Literature Workshop in Action*

#### **A Workshop for Developing Autonomous, Disciplined Readers**

My aim here is to demonstrate—as much as I can within the limits of a written discourse—the experience I take my students through in a seminal exercise I regularly conduct for undergraduates in introductory literature courses (an exercise that has been replicated or adapted successfully in a great many middle school and high school classrooms by teachers I have worked with across the country). I regard this exercise as a prototype for a number of analogous exercises that any interested teacher who participates in this workshop will then be able to generate for classroom use in varied educational settings. The goal of such exercises, it must be kept in mind, is to foster the development of a disciplined, autonomous literacy in students while building a culture of learning in the classroom that, unlike the prevailing culture of literary dependence and subservience, promotes the literary and intellectual enfranchisement of student readers.<sup>1</sup> Since my discourse in this chapter is obviously directed to teachers rather than to students, what I'll actually reproduce here demonstrates in its first segment what I do in my classroom, but it provides that demonstration in the context of the workshop I regularly conduct for teachers, where I take them through the exercises I employ with my students.

The text representing my voice in the workshop as well the voices of the participants is drawn from notes and handouts I use in actual workshops as well as from memory and videotapes of numerous workshops I have conducted with students and teachers. But it is a reconstruction of a typical workshop rather than a transcription of any single one, and it is designed to create a new workshop experience for readers

of this text. What I ask of readers, then, is that they participate actively, insofar as possible, in the tasks I assign during the course of this workshop, so that they will be able to think with me through that portion of the workshop where I analyze the activities we have been engaged in and draw from the experience some essential principles or guidelines for teaching and learning literature.

### ***Some Notes on Format***

In presenting this workshop, I'll give instructions and offer explanations exactly as I do in actual workshops with teachers, and I'll address readers as if they were participants in the workshop. When I want to step aside from the dramatization of the workshop in order to comment on how I am conducting it, I'll mark the text as *Commentary* and print the comment in italics. For the sake of simplicity I'll not provide even fictional names for the participants (except when they are addressed directly in conversation) in the dialogue portions of the workshop, but will identify them as S1, S2, and so on, while identifying myself as the teacher or T.

The drama within the drama of this text may cause some confusion for readers who accept my invitation to include themselves in the scene of action. The core of this workshop—an experiment in reading a poem—models quite precisely what I do in my classroom with my students and therefore represents what I usually say to my own students in the course of conducting this workshop. But it also includes discourse directed to participating teachers in their role as teachers, when I comment on how I am conducting the workshop or reflect on what has transpired in it. Yet some portions of my reflective discourse also represent what I say and what needs to be said to students in order to help them reflect on what they have just experienced in the workshop so they can become more aware and in control of their processes as readers and thereby make their reading process more disciplined and productive. I make little attempt, however, to sort out what I would say to students from what I am saying here to teachers, trusting that teachers will sort it out for themselves and distill from this workshop for teachers the ideas and conclusions they want to share with their own students.

For the essential activities of the workshop I have provided time estimates for use in planning. These will vary considerably in different classrooms with different students, though I believe that almost any teacher reading this book will find that the core experiment of this workshop plus some minimal reflection on it can be completed within the scope of a conventional fifty-minute class period, with additional reflection postponed until the next class meeting. When I conduct this workshop for student-teachers or for inservice teachers, however, I need seventy-five minutes to complete the activities and provide the extensive reflection and analysis presented here.

Most of the discussion that takes place in my classroom and in actual workshops occurs as a dialogue. Some of that dialogue is represented here. Sometimes for the

sake of efficiency I forgo the dialogue format temporarily and engage in a monologue that amounts to a mini-essay, the topic of which I usually identify under its own heading. For the last segments of this chapter I abandon the dialogue format entirely and provide a series of discussions on questions raised by the workshop experience and on conclusions that might be drawn from it. My readers, I hope, will provide the monologic portions of this chapter with the missing voices of various participants, including the voices of their own students.

## An Experiment in Reading a Poem<sup>2</sup>

### *Step 1: Three Readings with Notes and Questions (10–12 minutes)*

**T:** Let us begin with an exercise, which I would like to treat as an experiment, in reading a poem. What I'll do is take you through a series of activities in working on a poem, and then we'll reflect on what happened and what the results reveal to us about the reading of poetry.

1. To begin, I'd like you to read a short poem (which I'll show you momentarily) three times. With each reading, please do what Ann Berthoff calls "noticing what you notice," which is to say, notice what you find interesting or troubling or difficult to understand in the poem, what you like about what it says, what you might want to speak against in it, what questions you have about it or any line in it, or anything else you happen to observe or feel as a reader. At the end of each reading, please do two additional things:
  - a. Rate your understanding of the poem on a scale from 0–10, with zero meaning that you don't understand the poem at all, and ten meaning that you understand it perfectly (whatever that might mean).
  - b. Make some notes on what you were noticing.
2. At the end of your third reading, do the routine again as in your first two readings, but also do two more things:
  - a. First, write a brief account of what happened to you as a reader and to your understanding of the poem over the course of your three readings.
  - b. Then, write out any questions that you still have about this poem.

When you finish writing your questions, I'll have other instructions for you. But I want to ask you not to start talking to each other about the poem or your experience of it until we get to the point where I'll ask you to do exactly that. In the meantime, it's important for the sake of our experiment to proceed step-by-step and complete each step as the experiment requires before we move to the next.

The poem that we'll be working on is Pat Mora's "Sonrisas." You'll see it on your handout with no headnote, so I'll tell you what you would learn about the poet if you read the inside cover of any of her books. She is a Mexican American poet, born in 1942 in El Paso, Texas, where she spent her childhood and went to college and graduate school. She has published successful novels, an important autobiography, several volumes of highly regarded poetry, and a long list of books (fiction and nonfiction) for children and young adults. She has taught at the University of Texas and at the University of New Mexico and served for some years as a university administrator. That's what I happen to know about her and to remember from the biographical blurbs I have read. I met her only once, when she was the keynote speaker for the 2001 NCTE Convention in Baltimore, so I can add that she is a thoughtful, intellectually generous, and attractive colleague, a compelling public speaker, and a memorable reader of her own poems. You may later want to question whether it is appropriate, given the nature of this experiment, for me to give you such information about Pat Mora. I'll be happy to talk about that later.

### Sonrisas

I live in a doorway  
between two rooms, I hear  
quiet clicks, cups of black  
coffee, *click, click* like facts  
    budgets, tenure, curriculum,  
from careful women in crisp beige  
suits, quick beige smiles  
that seldom sneak into their eyes.

I peek  
in the other room señoras  
in faded dresses stir sweet  
milk coffee, laughter whirls  
with steam from fresh *tamales*  
    *sh, sh, mucho ruido,*  
they scold one another,  
press their lips, trap smiles  
in their dark, Mexican eyes.

—Pat Mora

**T:** About nine minutes have passed, and almost all of you appear to be finished reading the poem and writing about your experience and questions. Am I right? I'm always surprised at how quickly teachers do this. For those of you not quite finished, please push yourself to finish now and, if necessary to save time, skip the narrative about your experience (you probably have enough notes to remember and talk about it anyway) and go directly to your questions. Do make sure

you take the time to write out whatever questions you still have about this poem after three readings.

Now that you have all had a chance to write out your questions, please rerate your understanding of the poem one more time. I realize you haven't had a chance to reread it since your last rating. Nevertheless, please write down how you would rate your understanding of the poem again now on the same scale you used before.

Before we move on to the next step in this experiment, let me do a little polling of the group about your most recent rating. How many of you rated your understanding of the poem higher in the fourth rating—the one following the writing of your questions—than you did after your third reading of the poem? Please raise your hands high and, everybody, look around the room to see the results.

Notice that about a third of the readers in the room rated their understanding of the poem higher after not reading the poem again, but writing out their questions about it. What we see here is how—not all the time for every poem, but much of the time—writing about your reading, even or maybe especially if it is only writing about what you don't understand, can be a useful way to assist you in your reading. Our students need to know this, and as teachers we need to remember it as we plan activities for our students. But maybe we need some testimony about what happened. Would any of you be willing to explain why you claimed to have a better understanding after writing your questions?

**S1:** I found that my questions cleared up as I wrote them.

**S2:** Something like that happened to me, but it was more that as I wrote my question, I realized I didn't really have a question, but I wanted to argue with the poet.

**S3:** I just understood the poem better as I explained what I didn't understand.

### **Step 2: Group Work (12–15 minutes)**

**T:** Now please join with two other people (so you have groups of three, but please not two or four and especially not five) and share a little about what happened to you or to your understanding of this poem over the course of your three readings (ideally, if there were time, we would read aloud our accounts of our three readings) and whatever questions you still have about it.

*Commentary: I prefer groups of three because groups of four take too much time and a group of two provides insufficient data on the experience to be significant for the discussants. A two-person group also increases the possibility that a serious misunderstanding won't get corrected. For that reason, when the numbers don't work out exactly, I generally use leftover students to increase some groups to four rather than allow any to stand as pairs. With more difficult poems, I have the groups of three finish their work by identifying their most refractory questions and then merge with another group and work on their collective questions.*

During the group work activity I find it important to circulate around the room eavesdropping on the group work and taking notes on what I notice of interest in how the students are thinking about the text or solving or failing to solve textual problems. I sometimes will help with simple factual questions about word meanings, but in this case I refuse, during group time, to translate any of the Spanish. I do ask most groups whether they have figured out the meaning of *mucho ruido*. And if they tell me they haven't, I urge them to look carefully at the phrase and at its context and try to figure it out. I also acknowledge that if they don't know Spanish, they won't be able to guess at the meaning of *sonrisas*. But I still don't tell them its meaning.

#### RATING THE IMPACT OF GROUP WORK

**T:** It seems to me that all the groups have had an adequate chance to talk about the poem and your individual experiences in reading it. Before we do anything else, please rate your understanding of the poem one more time, now.

#### **Step 3: Completing the Experiment and Noticing What Happened (10 minutes)**

**T:** Now that you have rated your reading again, let us take a moment here to see if any problems remain for you as readers of this poem. And we can start by making sure that every group managed to translate *mucho ruido*. How many knew the Spanish or depended on somebody in your group who knew Spanish? That's about a third of you. And the rest of you figured it out from context?

**S4:** We asked Yolanda, but she was in a different group.

**S3:** We figured from the "shushing" and the physical setting that they were saying something like "too noisy."

**S5:** We thought *ruido* might mean rude.

**T:** Which brought you very close to the literal meaning. Am I correct in assuming that most of you, even if you don't know any Spanish beyond *mucho*, caught the gist of too much noise or made a good guess at it by looking at the Spanish words and at their context? Did some of you never figure it out? In that case, did the absence of a translation get in your way much as readers?

**S6:** We never talked about it and I don't think any of us know Spanish. But we never realized it was a problem. We just skipped over the Spanish phrase, I guess. The poem seemed clear to us anyway.

**T:** That's fascinating. I've heard that before when I've walked around to listen to teachers talk in their groups (I guess I missed yours). I usually ask each group how they are reading *mucho ruido* and, like you, they sometimes say they hadn't noticed the line at all, as if it weren't there. But I've never interrogated them about it. I confess that I've sometimes been suspicious of those groups and wondered if they weren't just careless readers. But you seem to be suggesting that you

don't have to be careless to ignore what isn't obstructing your sense of the whole. We do it all the time with words we don't know, don't we?

So what about *sonrisas*. You couldn't figure that one out, no matter how hard you tried, unless you know Spanish. No, it doesn't mean sunrises. It means smiles. What does that "ahhh" mean that I have just heard from so many of you? Why ahhh?

**S7:** Well, it makes perfect sense and sort of clears things up.

**T:** Do you mean that the poem wasn't clear for you before and now it is?

**S7:** No, it's just that not knowing the title bothered me and now I see it fits with everything in the poem.

**S8:** I think it helps to emphasize the theme of the different kind of smiles, which I saw, but might not have emphasized.

**T:** So for you, the extra knowledge enriches your reading, but doesn't make a significant change in it?

**S9:** It doesn't really change it for me. I don't see any line differently. But it adds to what it all adds up to.

**T:** Did you all feel you understood the poem pretty well before you had an authoritative translation of the Spanish? Sure. Virtually all of you felt you understood the poem quite well, yet many of you still had questions about it (at least about the Spanish) and you knew what your questions were (except for the one group that didn't notice the Spanish that they couldn't translate). For the most part, you knew the difference between what you understood perfectly, as it were, and what you understood vaguely or insecurely (as with *mucho ruido*) and what you really didn't understand (the title, for example); so you had some idea about what your questions were and what priority they might have and yet you felt that you still understood the poem pretty well. I'm pointing out in some detail how you think about and evaluate the state of your own understanding of this poem because I suspect that your students wouldn't think about their understanding in quite the same way.

First of all, I'll bet that many of your students would say immediately that they couldn't read the poem at all, because they don't know Spanish. Right?

**S10:** Yes; even without foreign phrases they say that. With an ordinary English poem, I often ask them about their understanding and they say they understand "nothing." Nothing. But it's not true because they understand a lot. But they don't understand everything.

**T:** That's right. It's precisely the same phenomenon. And I think we see another version of it in what looks like the opposite case. How often have you asked students what questions they have about some piece of reading they have completed and they'll tell you they don't have any questions? But then you quickly realize they don't understand very much of what they have read. Don't you get that in your classes? I sometimes get it in my classes, too.

So let's notice several things here. First, notice that although you still had questions about the poem, you saw yourself as understanding it. That is, we can understand a text and regard ourselves as competent readers of it even though we still have questions about it. I have been reading *Paradise Lost* for more than forty years and have taught the poem twenty times or more, but I still have lots of questions about it. That there is much that I don't understand in it doesn't mean that I'm not a good reader of the poem or even an expert reader of it. Students, on the other hand, often seem paralyzed by their questions or seem unaware of their questions, which may mean that they haven't arrived at a sufficiently advanced state of understanding to know that they are confused.

My own expertise in reading Milton, for example, is partly demonstrated by my awareness of many of the problematic lines and interpretive difficulties that the poem poses for readers, including me. Unlike our students, we seem to have a fairly sophisticated capacity to recognize and talk about the condition of our understanding. We know the difference between what we do and don't understand and to what degree we do or don't understand. We are, in other words, metacognitively aware. We are able to think about our thinking, and we are therefore skilled at monitoring and being able to describe the state of our own knowledge or understanding. I have heard some experts claim that such an ability is developmental, and that children before the age of seven or eight, for example, aren't able to distinguish at all between what they do and don't understand. Many of our students act as if they are not far away from that condition. The reality may be that the problem isn't one of development, but of experience. We need to give our students at every stage lots of opportunities to talk about their emerging understanding as it falters and progresses, just as we did here.

Also notice (and this may help to explain why some students seem underdeveloped in their metacognitive abilities) that my instructions in this exercise would probably be regarded by many educators (and especially many supervisors) as poor teaching because I didn't translate the foreign terms in advance and didn't set up the lesson in a way that would anticipate and avoid all possible frustrations for students. The conventional idea about reading instruction is that a responsible teacher will preview all unknown words and teach them before asking students to read a literary work, so that the students don't experience any frustration in reading, as if reading is or ought to be a process in which one never experiences frustration and never encounters new words and always understands everything immediately. No wonder, then, that students seem daunted by any problems they encounter in reading difficult texts and seem to have little capacity to reflect on the state of their understanding and seem at a loss for what to do for themselves when they encounter interpretive difficulties. Instruction has systematically taught them to depend entirely on teachers to prevent or remove any textual difficulties they might encounter.

But let's return to the poem. What about our problems here? Did any group encounter any problems that didn't get cleared up in your group discussion and that still trouble you?

**S4:** I didn't think the setting for the poem had to be a school or college. Most of my group read the scene as a faculty lounge or dining area or something. I think it could describe any place where there are executives and white-collar workers and also cleaning ladies and blue-collar workers—two classes of people.

**S7:** Why would they be talking about tenure and curriculum if it isn't a school or college?

**S11:** Well, I still might not have thought about a university setting, if we hadn't been set up to think that way. That's why I thought it wasn't fair that we were told all that unnecessary information about Pat Mora. It felt like the teacher was telling us how to read the poem. And I didn't like reading it that way.

**S12:** I didn't listen to it anyway. I still think it could be any place where rich and poor people work.

**T:** You're entitled to do that, but you're going to have to take into account that the people in the room where they drink black coffee and dress in beige are talking about topics like tenure and curriculum. You could create a scenario, I suppose, for how automobile industry executives might be talking about such topics, but it would be a stretch of a kind you wouldn't have to make if you assume that they are teachers or educators talking, not necessarily in a university or college, but in some kind of educational setting. But let me address the question more directly about whether it was appropriate or not for me to give you the minimal background information on Pat Mora.

### *Reflections on Contextual Knowledge*

It seems to me that it is unfair and generally unrealistic to ask students to read texts about which they don't have the kind of minimal information that any reader who picks up a book outside of school is likely to have. It's unfair in the sense that ignorance of some contextual facts that most readers are likely to know before they read a text can sometimes produce a reading that isn't simply a variant reading but one that the reader himself would count as invalid as soon he became aware of the relevant contextual facts. Such a reader is right to feel tricked into a mistaken reading by a teacher who provides a text without the available and needed context. (See Chapter 9 for a discussion of the experiment conducted by I. A. Richards with decontextualized poems.)

On the other hand, the academic practice of providing background information for students in introductory lectures by teachers introduces two other perils for student readers. First, it invites students to feel dependent on their teachers and to believe that their capacity to understand the text they read derives from their teacher's expertise rather than their own. Second, it often becomes a subtle way of overdetermining what sort of interpretation students will produce, prejudicing them (as I have been accused of doing in the case of the Mora poem) in favor of one particular interpretation, when others might be equally plausible, or—as I have seen in a

number of instances—directing them to what amounts to a misreading of a text. Critics of an earlier generation, the New Critics, warned emphatically against the “biographical heresy” and the “historical fallacy,” at least partly because they had witnessed so many instances in which literary texts were misread and inappropriately judged by critics and scholars on the basis of biographical and historical research.

There is, then, danger and the real possibility for error on either side. Teachers must depend on their own literary and pedagogical judgment to determine when they are approaching the point where they are being overly directive in providing background information for student readers, and when the absence of certain contextual facts could unfairly handicap student readers. My own rule of thumb is to provide the information that any reader would likely obtain from the jacket of a book.

That rule will serve fairly well for most modern mainstream authors, but not for more ancient authors or for works by nonmainstream writers, where the important information most students are missing may have to do with cultural practices or political or religious contexts. In such cases, we are stuck having to exercise our best professional judgment about what will promote a disabling dependence on the part of our students and what will foster their autonomy and confidence as readers. My own experience in experiments I have conducted with my students over the years is that they need far less support in the form of background information and historical contextualizing than we are inclined to provide and to believe they will need. (I take up this problem at much greater length in Chapters 4 and 9).

#### ***Step 4: Collecting the Data from the Experiment (5 minutes)***

**T:** If there are no more interpretive questions to address at this moment, let us process the experience we have just been through. Let’s begin by collecting some additional data. How many of you rated your understanding of the poem higher on the last rating than on the first? All of you. How many rated your understanding higher after the second reading than after the first? All of you. And higher after your third reading? Almost all. And higher after your work in a group? Not quite all, but clearly most of you. Will some of you say why you rated your understanding lower rather than higher after additional readings?

**S12:** I thought I understood the poem on my own, but when I talked to other people, I saw that the poem was more complicated than I had realized. And then I wasn’t so sure I understood it all or could understand the experience of the speaker.

**S3:** Something like that happened to me with my third reading. I thought I understood the poem after my first two readings. But in my third reading, I saw new problems.

**T:** Please remember those testimonies and we’ll come back to them later. In the meantime, let me ask how many of you—no matter how you rated your understanding of the poem—feel that you were helped in your reading by your work

with other readers? That's all of you, though perhaps some of you are just being polite.

In any event, the first conclusion we can draw from this experience, which won't be surprising to us but might be exactly what our students need to discover, has to do with the power of rereading as possibly the best method we can employ in helping ourselves read difficult texts. I would also point to at least a tentative conclusion that I think many of our colleagues need to discover: it is about the importance of group work and the contribution that conversation with your colleagues makes to your understanding of the text, even if such conversation doesn't so much confirm your own reading as show you possibilities for alternative readings. But I'll return to that topic later and to the topic of how it happened that a few of you, especially after your conversation with colleagues, rated your understanding of the poem lower than you had on your previous reading. First, let me indulge in an extended reflection on what we have seen about the phenomenon and practice of rereading.

### *Rereading as a Strategy and Style of Thinking*

The first observation I want to make based on our experiment will come as no news to teachers, but I believe it would come as news—at least at the experiential level—to many of our students. It's the fact that one of the most powerful strategies available to us for reading difficult texts is the obvious strategy of rereading, which, it happens, is neither obvious nor frequently employed by many readers, and is especially underemployed by those who think of themselves as (and generally appear to be) not very strong, or minimally competent, or unmotivated or reluctant readers. That many students—including college students with good grades from high school—don't recognize the value of rereading has been demonstrated to me more than once when I have monitored the conversations of my students about their processes in dealing with difficult texts.

A few years ago as I walked around my classroom, listening to my students talk in small groups about poems they had individually selected as potential additions to our class syllabus, I overheard a sophomore telling his partners that he had found a poem that he loved, even though when he first read it, he could hardly make any sense of it at all. He was initially intrigued by the poem, he said, because, though it mainly puzzled him, he could manage to discern that it was about drinking beer. Given his interest in the subject, he decided to keep working on the poem in an effort to make sense of it. So he reread it many more times and now, he said, he thought he understood it quite well and wanted to recommend it to his classmates as a poem they might all want to read. Then he added, as if still surprised by the fact, "You know, I never realized before that if you can't understand a poem, you can read it over and over until you get to understand it."

I won't claim that this one student is typical of most university sophomores, but he is surely representative of many. One would be mistaken, however, to rush from

this case to the premature conclusion that many high school teachers (or even the teachers of this one student) do not regularly tell their students about the importance of rereading. If my beer-loving student hadn't heard about rereading, he might not have known what to do when he decided he really cared to understand a puzzling poem. So he hadn't entirely forgotten the advice of his teachers. It's just that it appears to have taken his compelling interest in a particular poem to finally entice him to act on that advice and discover its value to him as a reader. What students seem to need, then, on top of our exhortations about rereading, is the sort of direct and dramatic experience of rereading that my student provided for himself by struggling with a poem whose subject happened to entice him or that an exercise like the one I have just demonstrated is designed to provide.

If we need more evidence that students frequently behave as if they have never learned the value of rereading, we can look to the practice of the most popular and expensive tutoring programs that prepare students for college entrance exams and graduate and professional school aptitude exams, where (I have been told) instructors emphasize over and over (presumably because students don't appear to already know) the critical importance of judicious rereading. And if we are inclined to look for an instance of how much the role of rereading can be undervalued or misunderstood as a reading strategy for high school and college students, let me cite the case of a new handbook on strategies for helping high school students become more powerful readers, issued by the state department of education of one of our most populous and prosperous states. In this volume, which many high schools are buying for all subject matter teachers, the strategy of rereading is included, of course, but relegated to the last page or nearly the last page of the book and then described as a strategy to be taught only to the weakest readers, and specifically to those whose reading difficulties are at the level of decoding. Try telling that to the students taking the Law School Aptitude Test, to lawyers reading the law, or to anyone who actually cares about making sense of complex concepts inscribed in textually dense discourse.

### ***Can Rereading Lead to an Impoverished Reading?***

Let me now turn to the more paradoxical question of how it happened that for some readers some subsequent readings of Pat Mora's poem yielded an understanding of the poem that they rated lower than the understanding they had achieved previously with an earlier reading. Is it possible that rereading can be counterproductive?

In every instance where I have received reports of downgraded rereadings, the readers have indicated, as we have seen here, that they lowered their rating from one reading to the next because the later reading revealed to them confusions they had previously not been aware of or because (and it amounts to the same thing) they thought that they understood the poem, but discovered in their next reading that they didn't understand it nearly as well as they had imagined. My question for such readers in my classroom and here is the same: if you are at a point where you realize that

your previous reading was inadequate and confused and you didn't recognize your confusion earlier, should you declare yourself one who now understands less than you did before or one who understands more?

Surely your present recognition of your previous delusion, while it means that you now have questions where you formerly had answers, is an advance beyond your previous knowledge, which, though unconfused, was mistaken knowledge, masking a confusion of which it wasn't aware. In other words, your new confusion compared with your previous unconfused false knowing represents an advance, not a decline, in your knowledge. To move ahead in the wrong direction is not progress. But to move backward in order to correct your course is.

But for purposes of the experiment I have just conducted and the requirement to rate one's understanding after a series of readings, how is a participant to treat a reading that yielded confusion where before there had been clarity, even if a mistaken clarity? To rate one's present confused reading higher than a previously overrated and more mistaken reading would seem dishonest. To rate it lower, when it actually represents an advance in understanding, also feels like a misrepresentation of the facts. The only logical solution to the problem, of course, is to change (downward) one's previous rating.

The problem of how to rate a changing understanding is, of course, a trivial one, useful only in the context of the exercise or game I conduct with my students. But it is a highly instructive and useful game to play with students precisely for what it can reveal about how the advancement of learning is often not marked by an accretion of answers and growth in certitude, but by the lessening of certitude and the addition of questions where there had formerly been answers. It is their fear of relinquishing the security of their false knowledge that often prevents students (and sometimes their teachers or any of us) from proceeding beyond an easy and readily available reading of a text to one that acknowledges problematic lines and interpretive inconsistencies, which is to say, to readings that disrupt coherence and subvert certainty. But it is precisely their willingness to surrender the security of their knowledge and to launch themselves into the abyss of uncertainty—a disposition that pragmatist philosophers embrace as “fallibilism” (Berthoff 1981, 43; Gunn 2001, 86)—that allows learners to advance in their learning, just as it is an unwillingness to risk their certainty that characterizes those most incapable of learning and most likely to value a scorable answer over a more intellectually thoughtful but less easily measured question.

### *Continuing the Data Collection: Questions of Reading, Interpretation, and Criticism*

**T:** I want to continue our processing of the experiment we have just completed by asking a few questions to which the answers may seem so obvious as to make the questions hardly worth asking. First, how many of you in reading the poem found that you gave considerable effort at some stage in your reading (probably in your first reading) to the task of simply figuring out what the poem was saying

at the most literal level? Virtually everybody, of course. Next, how many found that at some point you were able to see what the poem appeared to be saying, but had a problem with what it meant, or found yourself having to assume some meaning beyond what the poem literally said? In this case, the problem was probably located in the phrase about living in a doorway. What did you make of that phrase the first time you read it? Anybody?

**S13:** I imagined it was about a homeless person, the kind who would sleep in a doorway in the city.

**T:** Sure, why not? Why did you give up on that idea?

**S13:** It didn't work as the poem went on. It had nothing to do with the rest of what was happening in the poem.

**T:** Did anybody have another idea about the first lines?

**S14:** I thought it might be about a mouse. You know, it starts out like a Disney film, where some cute animal narrates the story. And you said Pat Mora wrote children's stories. But before I got to the end of the poem, I realized this isn't a kids' story.

**S15:** I thought about Disney stories, too, and I figured that it was a kind of insect living in a doorway. Like Jiminy Cricket.

**T:** That's terrific. I've often heard the insect reading, but I've never had him named before. Others of you, I assume, were simply puzzled for a while, not sure of what to make of this person who says she (or he?) lives in a doorway, and you remained puzzled until you decided to think of the doorway metaphorically. That is, whatever we envision in our initial reading of the line, we are likely to find as we read on that we can't interpret the statement about living in a doorway literally. The context for the line, the entire rest of the poem, forces us, if we are to make some coherent sense of the whole, to take the idea of living in a doorway metaphorically, and to recognize the idea of the speaker "living" in it as a statement not about shelter or housing, but about psychological or cultural space.

Finally, let me ask some questions about what you thought of this poem after reading and interpreting it. Before you answer, either look at your notes or try to remember how you were thinking. Is it the case that all of you made some sort of judgment about the poem either as you were reading it or at the end? Did anybody not engage in something like an evaluation of it?

**S5:** I don't think I evaluated it. I read it and figured it out and enjoyed it, but I didn't compare it with any other poem and say it's better or worse. I didn't make a judgment of it. And I'm still not ready to do that.

**T:** So you didn't think about how you found it moving or enlightening or aesthetically pleasing? Or how you found it philosophically or psychologically penetrating or superficial? You didn't find that it spoke for you or that you wanted to speak against it or some line in it?

**S5:** No. I was more ambivalent about it. I wasn't sure what to think about how the woman sat in one room and only peeked into the other, like she couldn't go into the other room. And I wondered if she was also a little ashamed of her background or maybe ashamed of herself for leaving her own people. And I'm still not sure what I think about this poem.

**T:** It sounds like you have done a good deal of reflective and evaluative thinking about this poem and are still doing it.

**S5:** Maybe, yes, I suppose so.

**S16:** Well, I liked it a lot. As a Mexican American woman, I felt it spoke for me and told my story very well.

**S17:** I loved it! You don't have to be Hispanic to connect with the experience.

**T:** Didn't anyone object to anything in this poem? Ah, I see one reluctant hand barely raised.

**S15:** Well, am I the only one who is offended by the stereotyping of the Anglo women? Do we all really wear beige and flash false smiles?

**S18:** But she's stereotyping the Mexican women even more.

**S7:** Yes, but she's Mexican herself.

**S3:** Is stereotyping OK if applies to a group where you're a member, but not to some other group?

**S4:** It's not stereotyping; it's talking about groups of people and characterizing them realistically.

**S18:** That's stereotyping. It implies that all Mexican women are cleaning ladies or cafeteria workers.

**S7:** No it doesn't. It implies that they are more real and know better how to live a genuine life.

**S15:** And that all Anglo women wear colorless clothing and drink black coffee (because they're watching their weight), and they don't know how to enjoy themselves.

**S3:** Who says they're Anglo women?

**S4:** It says that the other women flash their dark Mexican eyes.

**T:** Well, if the women in the first room are teachers, aren't they likely to be Anglo?

**S18:** Come on! How can you say that?

**T:** I once said it in a workshop in Hawaii, when we were dealing with the same issue in this poem. I asked, Aren't all teachers Anglo? And they laughed, of course, because in a room with about one hundred teachers, maybe twenty-five of them were Anglo. Most of them were Japanese and some were Hawaiian or Filipino or Korean or Pacific Islanders and so on. But what evidence do we have

that at least one of the women among the people talking about tenure is herself Mexican?

**S3:** The speaker is Mexican; she says she lives between the two rooms. She identifies with both groups.

**S1:** Does that mean she has to be Mexican? Can't she just come from a working-class background?

**S3:** That's possible, but we know that the writer is Mexican American, so that's what we assume about the speaker.

**T:** Well, without resolving the exact ethnicity of the speaker, let me get something clear here about the descriptions of the women. How many of you would object to my speaking of how the poem stereotypes Anglo women? A lot of you would! But would anybody object to someone saying that the poem stereotypes the "professional" women or the "academic" women?

**S4:** I might, because I'm not sure that it's stereotyping.

**T:** OK. So how many of you are objecting to the charge that the poem is stereotyping anybody? That is, you are prepared to defend it against the charge of stereotyping. That's a third of you. And how many of you are objecting to my speaking of the women in beige as Anglo rather than professional or academic women? That's almost all of you. There's a big difference, isn't there? Don't we have two different kinds of objections here representing two different levels of thinking in our discussion of the poem?

That is, you might want to argue with each other about whether the descriptions in the poem constitute stereotyping, but no matter what side you take, you can also recognize the other side of the argument as a legitimate one, even if you think it is wrong. And that's because both positions are based on pretty much the same understanding of what the poem means. Any discussion of whether to call the characterization stereotyping will proceed, in other words, from what first amounts to substantial agreement about how to interpret the descriptive accounts of the women involved. So the question of whether the poem indulges in stereotyping depends on your attitude toward the characterizations of the two groups of women and not upon your understanding of how they are characterized or who they are. Right?

But when you object to my reference to the professional women as Anglo, it's a different kind of objection at a different level of meaning. Our disagreement now is not based on our attitudes toward some idea or meaning that we both construe the poem to represent or signify. The contested issue is rather one that has to be adjudicated by referring to the text of the poem itself and the meaning we may plausibly claim for it. Verification for either position constitutes a determination of what the poem says and what that means, not how we subsequently think about or want to characterize that meaning. Do you see the difference? For most of us, the question of whether the women in the first room can be referred

to as distinctively Anglo is answerable in the negative, by virtue of the fact that the speaker who peers out from that room is one who identifies herself with the Mexican women in faded dresses and one who by implication is therefore Mexican herself. Thus it becomes inaccurate—not merely evidence of a different response or attitude—to refer to the women in the first room as Anglo, while it is consistent with the other facts of the poem to refer to them as professional or academic women.

### ***Reflecting on the Data: Literary Reading and Critical Thinking***

Let us now reflect on the kinds of thinking that we have identified as marking our engagement with Pat Mora's poem at various stages in our reading and thinking about it. We have all acknowledged trying at some points simply to make plain sense of the poem. And we all claim to have given some attention to finding a more abstract or metaphoric meaning for parts of the poem where the plain sense seemed more evocative than literal. Virtually all of us also claim to have reflected evaluatively on the poem, generally appreciating it as true to our own experience or as valuable for its accurate representation of a more widely experienced human dilemma. A few readers also found it intellectually or ethically compromised for its reductive characterization or stereotyping of groups of people. Other readers want to argue with that judgment and some aren't sure one way or the other.

There is surely nothing surprising about such reports from readers, nor in the fact that, despite some disagreements about meaning or value, virtually all of us appear to have engaged in similar mental operations. Yet the fact that such mental operations appear almost natural or inevitable for readers (at least for well-educated readers like ourselves) and define a repertoire of reading behaviors shared by so many readers suggests that the particular set of mental operations we have documented may represent a set of literate practices that are widely taught in schools (or somewhere else in our culture), either explicitly or perhaps tacitly in the way that many social behaviors are taught and learned through participation in a culture. That this particular set of mental operations is not natural or somehow physiologically or psychologically constitutive of literate behavior becomes evident when we look at what defines literate practice in other cultures and has defined it in various communities and periods of American cultural history. In various places and at various times, students or adults who are literate would, upon being presented with a literary text, proceed to commit it to memory or prepare to recite it aloud, or expect to be asked to recall facts about what the text describes or the events it narrates, never thinking that they might presume to uncover its broader meanings, question its truth, or reflect independently on its intellectual or ethical value (see Myers 1996 and Blau 2001).

Robert Scholes (1985), in attempting to build a model of instruction and literary competence on principles drawn from modern critical theory, identifies the same set of mental operations we have practiced and reported here as the fundamental skills that underlie all the literary practices that are underwritten by modern literary theory

and all the classroom practices that theory might authorize. He speaks of these operations, in fact, as if they were the molecular units or building blocks for what he calls “textual competence,” and he distinguishes them under three headings, which we can (without much distortion of Scholes’ theoretical framework) encapsulate as follows: (1) *reading*, addressing the question, What does it say? (2) *interpretation*, addressing the question, What does it mean? and (3) *criticism*, addressing the question, What is its value? or So what? (21–24). He further notes that each of these mental operations of a reader also entails the production of text either in writing or in the mind of the reader. Thus in Scholes’ memorable formulation, reading produces *text within text*; interpretation produces *text upon text*; and criticism produces *text against text* (24).

While Scholes’ framework for thinking about textual competence may appear largely commonsensical and hardly different from the way many teachers intuitively think about their own instruction, it nevertheless offers us a useful paradigm for describing transactions with texts and for analyzing virtually all of our teaching practices and plans. Just as importantly, we can use Scholes’ model of literary discourse to launch us on a more comprehensive inquiry into the kinds of thinking and intellectual processes that we are teaching by virtue of our instruction in literature and how these thinking processes link literary study to what may be even more fundamental educational goals and to all other academic disciplines.

Let us begin our more comprehensive inquiry by looking at the activities of reading, interpretation, and criticism as they connect to one another and are actually employed by readers in the course of interrogating and discussing literary texts in classrooms or in other contexts. Although it is not the case that readers necessarily engage in all three activities with every literary encounter or engage in all three modes of thinking in a strictly linear process (readers will sometimes register an immediate critical judgment or presume an interpretation before all the facts that might produce it are collected), it does appear to be the case (as our discussion of the Pat Mora poem demonstrated) that reading, interpretation, and criticism represent a hierarchy of nested intellectual activities, and that they bear a particular kind of logical relationship one to the other. That is to say, the way one interprets a text depends to a very large degree upon what the text says—what the textual facts are—and the way one criticizes or evaluates it depends to a very large degree upon how one interprets it.

More specifically, the relationship between reading, interpretation, and criticism is usually and to a very significant degree (if not entirely) a relationship based on evidentiary reasoning. The critical claim of some readers that Pat Mora’s poem was intellectually reductive and guilty of ethnic stereotyping in its representation of the Anglo women was found to be a partially invalid critical statement not because readers disagreed with it, but because it was contradicted by compelling interpretive evidence that the “careful women in crisp beige suits” are not necessarily Anglo women and, in fact, almost certainly include at least one woman among them who is Hispanic.

And that interpretative claim about the women is in turn based on a careful reading of the first lines of the poem, where the speaker says she lives in a doorway between two rooms, a statement that makes sense in the context of the poem only when it is subjected both to a metaphoric interpretation and to a plain-sense reading. That is, the statement derives its meaning in its poetic context by being interpreted as a metaphoric statement about cultural or psychological space rather than physical space. Yet the plain-sense language representing the organization of space discloses the relationship of the speaker to the two cultures that define her identity.

Our interpretations of texts, then, as we have seen, can be sustained only if they are supported by evidence located in the words of the text or in the world from which the text emerges. And our criticism of the text, which may be linked to our values and to other forms of extratextual knowledge (Scholes refers to the discourse of criticism as “text against text,” meaning that every critical perspective is informed by values, expectations, and ideological perspectives that themselves constitute a text that is juxtaposed against the text under scrutiny), still depends for its plausibility on an interpretation that is itself plausible in its reasoning from evidence. It is no accident, then, that the most fine-grained ethnographic study available of an exemplary advanced placement literature class in a high school found that the most important cultural practice and key to full membership in the intellectual community of that classroom was the practice identified in the study and in that classroom as “making a case” (Rex 1997; Rex and McEachen 1999).

Let us now look again at Scholes’ triad of literary skills or ways of thinking in the reading of literature and ask if there are counterparts to the cognitive operations that define reading, interpretation, and criticism in the mental operations that are essential in other academic disciplines or intellectual enterprises aside from literary study. What such an inquiry reveals is that the teaching of literature does, in fact, teach students a pattern or discipline for thinking that is applicable to every field of study and probably every complex human endeavor, and that can serve as a description of critical thinking in virtually every context. Thus, if we translate reading, interpretation, and criticism into their counterparts in every other field, we’ll see that the question defining reading, “What does it say?” translates in all other fields into the question, “What are the facts?” The question defining interpretation, “What does it mean?” translates to the question, “What inferences can be drawn from the facts?” And the question of criticism or value, the question of “So what?” translates into such questions as, “What applications does it suggest?” and “What theory does it generate or challenge?”

Consider a scientist in the laboratory or field. She begins with making observations, collecting data, and recording facts. From those facts she derives some principles or conclusions in the form of generalizations about how a phenomenon works. From such conclusions or generalizations come practical applications or new or revised theories.

Or consider a detective at a crime scene. He first collects the facts, the raw data that might or might not become clues. Then he examines the data to see what leads

will serve as clues, and he makes inferences about the identity of the perpetrator of the crime. On the basis of these inferences he will then have to determine what applications or actions are appropriate—whether to make an arrest or seek an indictment, for example.

What we can fairly conclude, in other words, is that in teaching the operations of mind that are fundamental to the study of literature, we are also teaching and providing students with regular practice in a process of evidentiary reasoning that is the basis for effective intellectual work in any academic field or profession they might enter, and that also defines critical thinking in every enterprise of business, civic, or private life.

***Step 5: Drawing Conclusions from the Experiment—Essential Principles to Guide and Sustain the Teaching and Learning of Literature (15–20 minutes)***

The experiment I have conducted here as a model for instruction in literature can be interpreted to yield three principles or propositions about the teaching and learning of literature that I want to propose for their pedagogical and political value to classroom teachers. They are principles to be kept in mind in planning and conducting literary instruction and in defending the discipline of literary study itself in a political and educational culture that often threatens to minimize or dismiss its importance.

1. Reading is a process of constructing meaning or composing a text, exactly like writing. The reading of any difficult text will entail drafting and revision (largely in the reader's head) and will frequently begin with what amounts to a zero draft. Just as writing may be defined as rewriting, so is any reading worth doing essentially a process of rereading.

Scholes (1985) and a number of reading theorists (see Tierney and Pearson 1983 and the summary of research and theory in Chapter 1 of Olson 2003), along with more radical postmodern theorists like Barthes (1975), have together made what by now amounts to an unassailable case for looking at reading and writing not so much as reciprocal activities but as parallel ones, both entailing the construction of a meaning. What a reader sees on a written page are black marks, to which he gives a meaning as he constructs in his head some idea or set of ideas, which then can be said to represent or reconstitute what had been written.

I want to push this idea further by noting that the meanings constructed through reading are also composed exactly as written work is composed and through a process that entails rough drafts and revisions as much as any task of difficult writing would. In fact, for its heuristic value, I would offer the paradoxical proposition that reading is more like writing than writing is. Consider how often we have seen our students in composition revise their papers and make them worse. But in reading, revision never fails to be productive in yielding additional insight or the recognition of new problems—the confusion that represents an advance in understanding.

Experienced readers know that their first vision of a text may be entirely misdirected or so minimal as to appear worthless (consider the way most readers initially apprehend the Thoreau passage introduced in the previous chapter). But they also know that such a reading is merely a zero draft, a starting place for a series of rereadings that will gradually yield an increasingly more adequate and illuminating sense of a meaning that they are constructing to reconstitute the text in front of them. Inexperienced readers may regard all encounters with difficult texts to be worthless, because they have never progressed beyond the inchoate and apparently pointless zero draft represented by their first reading. Thus, based on their experience, they will declare quite accurately that for them the reading of poetry (or most other challenging texts) is an utterly worthless enterprise.

2. Reading is, and needs to be in classrooms, a social process, completed in conversation. Students will learn literature best and find many of their best opportunities for learning to become more competent, more intellectually productive, and more autonomous readers of literature through frequent work in groups with peers.

This principle, whose validity became at least partially self-evident in our workshop, is supported by a long history of classroom experience and by a sizeable body of research and theory (see for example, Nystrand and Gamaron 1991; Smith 1994; Pradl 1996; Schoenbach et al. 1999). Conversation following reading is, of course, almost a natural event or as natural as any ordinary civilized custom feels. Whenever we are witnesses to aesthetic or natural phenomena that take our breath away or that move us or touch us powerfully, we tend to want to share the experience with others, partly to confirm our own experience, partly to relive it by recounting it and hearing it recounted by others, and partly to gain the broader perspective that comes from such sharing. Most people I know would prefer to go the movies or the theater or an art gallery with someone else rather than alone, not just to have somebody to hold hands with, but to have a partner for a dialogue about the experience that is shared and that may be different for each of the parties. So it is with books, which is why so many readers belong to book clubs and love to encounter someone else who has just read the same book they have.

Wayne Booth, in *The Company We Keep* (1988, 70–77), has demonstrated that this process of talking with others about our literary experiences and making literary judgments is essential to the making of literary knowledge, and he has further dignified the process by identifying it as a socially constructed form of reasoning that he calls “coduction.” Coduction differs from the more rigid and interior processes of induction and deduction in two principal ways: first, in the way in which it derives from conversation or a kind of collaborative discourse or negotiation conducted with other readers, and second, in the way it yields knowledge that is always provisional, insofar as literary opinions and judgments are always rooted in comparisons with previous

literary experiences and change as our experience grows richer and more varied over time.

The importance of conversation to the making of literary knowledge through coduction would alone make a powerful argument for providing students with frequent conversational opportunities among themselves, preferably in small groups, where participation can be more frequent and intensive and where the kind of conversation needed for genuine negotiation about meaning and value will not be suppressed by the derivative and nonprovisional kinds of literary opinions that are characteristically delivered through large lectures and the official curriculum. An equally important and persuasive reason to have students talk to each other about their reading, however, has to do with the nature of texts and the limited attention of readers. Literary texts are filled with data. Novels contain whole worlds. Good poems have more going on in them than any single reader is likely to notice without years of attention to the same few lines.<sup>3</sup> The virtue of having students (or any readers) talk to each other in groups is that they can help each other notice what is worthy of notice and thereby apprehend works of literature more fully (as well as from multiple perspectives) than they might otherwise.

Two additional purposes—purposes that seem to me most important of all and that go far to address the problem that is the focus of this workshop—are also served by having students work in groups and talk about their reading experience. One has to do with the fact that most teachers of literature will acknowledge that they did not become truly skilled and powerful readers of difficult literary works until they found themselves faced with the task of teaching such texts, including many that they had not been taught in college. Having to teach a text forces an interpretively dependent English major to become an interpretively autonomous English teacher.

In my introduction to this volume I tell of a moment early in my teaching career when I experienced what for me was a shocking recognition that the roles and responsibilities falling to teachers and students in conventional literature classrooms provided most of the opportunities for learning to the teachers rather than to their students. I realized in the midst of my own teaching one day that as long as I was the one who had the responsibility of preparing for my teaching prior to each class by solving the most difficult interpretive and conceptual problems that might trouble my students as readers of the texts I had assigned, then I was the one who was doing most of the learning in my English class. My role seemed to be to present my students with the fruit of my intellectual labor so that they would then know it and record it in their notebooks. The role undertaken by my students, then, was largely not to be persons who performed acts of learning themselves, but to serve as witnesses and recorders of my learning.

I was struck at that moment in class by what I came to think of as the ironic paradox of teaching: the fact that the intellectual work undertaken by teachers in the teaching-learning relationship presented richer opportunities for learning to the teacher than anything the teacher might do in the course of teaching his students.

And a few years later I presented a lecture focused on that irony under the title “On the Advancement of Learning Through the Abolition of Teaching.” The problem, insofar as I understood it at that time, appeared to me to have its only solution in the resolution of teachers who cared about their students’ learning to refuse to teach or to find ways whereby the conventional roles of teachers and students could be somehow reversed.

Having students work in groups helping each other solve the textual and conceptual problems that difficult texts pose for them turns out to be the most practical way available to put students into something like one of the roles that teachers usually occupy, a role where much of the task of figuring out the problems that teachers are expected to solve now reverts to the students to solve for one another and in collaboration with one another. Insofar as the work that takes place in groups represents more of a collaboration than it does a reversal of the roles of teacher and student, so much the better. It is, in fact, a better model of teaching than the traditional model. That is because in such collaborative relationships, everybody gets to be the teacher and everybody gets to be the learner, according to her needs and strengths moment to moment. Students get to work with one another, in other words, in what Vygotsky (1962, 1978) calls the “zone of proximal development,” where they are able to do together more than any of them can do by themselves, and through that process grow toward greater autonomy and independence (also see Lave and Wenger 1991).

Group work on problem texts is also crucial to the learning that needs to take place in literature classes because of what it contributes to the construction of a particular kind of classroom community and classroom culture and for the sort of ethos it fosters for intellectual work within such a culture. Working in groups on interpretive problems helps to build a classroom culture that honors the process of noticing and acknowledging difficulties in understanding texts. It dismantles the intellectually counterproductive culture of most classrooms where answers are valued and confusion avoided. In a classroom where intellectual problems and confusion are honored as rich occasions for learning, students and teachers will be more inclined to confront and even seek rather than avoid the textual and conceptual problems that offer the richest opportunities for learning.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, in a classroom that cultivates a disposition to uncover and examine problems in learning and understanding, students learn to look more honestly and critically at the state of their own understanding, to make distinctions between what they do and don’t understand, and to note qualitative differences in the kinds of understandings they themselves possess. Every experienced teacher of students in secondary schools or of undergraduate students early in their college years knows that if you ask students who have completed their reading of a difficult literary work what questions they have about it, there will often be no response. All teachers know how the drill goes. “What questions do you have? Seeing none, may I assume that you understand everything? No? Well, do you understand anything? No? Is there no word or phrase you understand? Are you saying that

in reading this entire short story, you understood not one sentence about what was happening in it?”

From that point, perhaps, some dialogue may begin. But getting students to tell you about the state of their knowledge appears to be a major obstacle to getting them started in the direction of solving any of the problems that may be obstructing their understanding of what they have read. The less competent the students, the more likely they are to have no questions, as if, paradoxically, only the strongest readers don't understand what they have read, while the weakest readers have the fewest problems. The reality, of course, is that one of the principal characteristics of weak readers that accounts for their weakness is their disinclination and lack of experience with, and therefore their apparent incapacity to monitor their understanding as they read or talk about the ways in which they do and don't understand what they have read. Reading specialists and learning theorists use the term *metacognition*, thinking about one's thinking, to talk about such monitoring and such discourse (see Kirby and Kuykendall 1991, 40–41; Schoenbach et al. 1999; and Olson 2003, Chapter 14).

No characteristic seems to me to better differentiate the strongest readers from the weakest among students in late adolescence than this capacity for metacognition, for paying attention to the state of one's understanding while reading so one can catch problems and solve them as they arise, and for being able to describe the state of one's understanding so that problems can be identified and explored for solutions. All of the stories I recounted in the previous chapter about the culture of school as it is conventionally conducted demonstrate how such a culture conspires against the development of such metacognitive skills. Introducing regular group work on difficult texts in a classroom that foregrounds and honors difficulties, confusion, and intellectual problems is the best way I know to change the conventional culture of instruction.

3. Literary reading and literary study, as they are ordinarily sponsored in rigorously conducted English classes, teach students an intellectual discipline that defines critical thinking in every field and fosters academic success in every subject of study.

I am here repeating a conclusion I offered only a moment ago, but I want to offer it again now as a proposition that English teachers need to keep in mind as the best defense available against the various sorts of educational “reforms” that would substitute practical or utilitarian reading for literary texts in the required English curriculum. If there is any doubt about the need to defend literary study against those who would replace it with more “practical” disciplines, consider the case of a major state university and a statewide community college system a few years ago that jointly recommended that all community colleges in the state teach critical thinking as an essential component of the freshman-level English courses required for transfer from the community college system to campuses of the university. The result of this

recommendation was that (with a few exceptions) community colleges throughout the state removed literature from the freshman English curriculum and replaced it with various forms of instruction in critical thinking. Such instruction was doomed to failure, of course, as long as it was not linked to the actual study of some discipline where critical thinking is authentically employed. Ironically, of course, critical thinking is almost always authentically employed, as we have seen, in the teaching of literature, which was being systematically abandoned.

Threats to literature instruction are nevertheless relatively rare in higher education, except in composition programs that sometimes remove literary study for fear that it will overtake and marginalize the study of rhetoric, or in the interest of asserting the value of composition across all disciplines. Otherwise the privileged status of literature is generally protected, in spite of the movement in many English departments to transform literary study to cultural studies or textual studies, which mainly entails a sort of colonial expansion of the sphere of literary study rather than its demise. But in the world of K–12 education a number of recent movements and proposals have emerged to constitute clear and present dangers for the future of literary study.

In the highly politicized arena of public elementary and secondary education the opposition to literature has emerged largely from two quarters and in two forms. First, it has emerged from some precincts of the school-to-work movement and from other practical-minded reformers who want secondary schools to educate students primarily for employment. Their argument has been that literature is a curricular frill of merely aesthetic interest to an elite group of academics and should therefore not be entirely removed from the secondary school curriculum, but relegated to the status of an academic elective. Required English courses should in the meantime direct their attention to the marketable and survival skills of reading such informational texts as warranties, instructions, textbooks, and newspapers.

Opposition to literature has also emerged as a minor theme in the politics of reading, where some zealots of the basic skills movement have found literary texts unsuitable to the systematic teaching of skills and a distracting temptation for teachers and students who would rather enjoy a story aesthetically than use it for a reading lesson. Their argument amounts to a perverse sort of Gresham's Law argument that literature—since it has the power to interest and engage students emotionally and intellectually—will always chase the more needed instruction in basic reading skills out of the curriculum. Literature should therefore be banned. A related argument, whose presuppositions are just as unwarranted as its conclusions, holds that non-literary texts, unlike literature, can't mean whatever you want them to mean and are therefore more suitable to a skills-based method of reading instruction (rather like typing instruction) focused on accuracy, speed, and correctness.

The chapters that follow will include experiments in literary reading and interpretation that will dismantle and correct most of the mistaken assumptions held by the critics of literary study about what literary study entails and about how meaning in literature is construed and validated. Unfortunately, no one except teachers of literature is likely to attend to such evidence. In the meantime, we can probably make

our best case for the utilitarian importance of literary study by demonstrating how the processes of reading, interpreting, and criticizing literary texts teach and call for the exercise of evidentiary reasoning and the practice of critical thinking skills that are required for successful intellectual work in every field of study and academic discipline.

## Notes

1. I hesitate to speak of literary independence, because I don't want to promote what Valentine Cunningham (2002, Chapter 2) calls the "myth of the independent reader," the idea that there can be a truly solo reader whose reading practices are untainted by theory, tradition, instruction, and a wider literary community.
2. The exercise I describe here and a number of variations on it that I use in my teaching and workshops originated in earlier activities I had been experimenting with for some years in my classes, but it also owes crucial elements of its present structure to a lesson Tom Newkirk (1984) describes in his now classic essay "Looking for Trouble: A Way to Unmask Our Readings."
3. I am indebted to Professor Gerald Graff of the University of Illinois, Chicago, for offering this observation as a participant in one of my workshops.