Learning “schooled literacy”: The literate life histories of mainstream student readers and writers

Rick Evans

Department of English, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 214 Andrews Hall, Lincoln, NE, 68588-0003

Available online: 11 Nov 2009

To cite this article: Rick Evans (1993): Learning “schooled literacy”: The literate life histories of mainstream student readers and writers, Discourse Processes, 16:3, 317-340

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01638539309544842

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or
damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Learning "Schooled Literacy": The Literate Life Histories of Mainstream Student Readers and Writers

RICK EVANS
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

This study examines the autobiographical literate life histories of mainstream student readers and writers. The research aim is to explore students' own developing understandings of their actual experiences reading and writing. The findings suggest that the school context determines to a significant degree students' understandings of reading and writing as literate activities and of themselves as readers and writers. Specifically, students understand reading and writing as demonstrations of what they know. Their purpose is to give teachers what they want, and their hope is to get an A. More importantly, they begin to believe themselves so incompetent that they no longer enjoy reading and writing; indeed, they read and write as little as possible.

In the last decade, several students of written language (e.g., Heath, 1983; Romaine, 1984; Schieffelin & Gilmore, 1986; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984) have settled upon something of a working definition of literacy. Literacy, they suggest, is a collection of experientially specific, indeed, context-bound communicative, interactive, and creative written-language activities that involve learning the participation structures and the normative, yet oftentimes, variable patterns of written-language use governing those activities. In a sense, they understand literacy as a kind of "communicative competence," an ability to participate fully within a particular community, in this case, a community of readers and writers, as a "communicating member" (Hymes, 1974, p. 75). Perhaps even more important, they suggest an approach to the study of literacy that encourages us to observe the lived experience of actual readers and writers reading and writing, to describe that lived experience and the contexts within which reading and writing activities occur, to identify the participant structures or the various "ways of arranging verbal interaction" (Philips, 1972, p. 377), both spoken and written, and finally, to specify the linguistic regularities that written language users must learn and follow in order to become participating members. Actually, their most significant contribution reaches beyond both this working definition and their ethnographic research program. Through their

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Rick Evans, 214 Andrews Hall, Department of English, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588–0003.

317
work, they have provided us with (and continue to remind us of the importance of) an understanding and an appreciation for the plurality of literacy, or literacies, and their variable and varying nature.

My purpose in this essay is to explore mainstream college students' literate life histories, their own reading and writing autobiographies, in order to understand better the particular kinds of literate activities and the range of those activities these young people see themselves learning and using. I believe that by listening to these histories, by participating through their own stories in their lived experience as readers and writers, we will be better able to map their understandings of reading and writing as they develop. In addition, as we begin to see these students' development more clearly, we can also then begin to identify how the contexts for their reading and writing and the different participant structures within which they read and write—soon, perhaps, even the linguistic rules they follow doing reading and writing—influence those understandings. Eventually, of course, I hope that these students' literate life histories will enable us to appreciate more fully the different kinds and complexities of communicative competence involved in performing these variable and varying literacies. If, as Cook-Gumperz (1986) suggested "we want literacy to be seen as an identifiable, popular and fair goal . . . [then] we need to understand much more of the social process by which literacy is acquired . . . [indeed] constructed" (p. 7).

KELLY'S STORY

In *Tales of the Field*, Van Maanen (1988) wrote:

> Stories, by their ability to condense, exemplify, and evoke a world, are as valid a device for transmitting cultural understanding as any other research-produced concoction. (p. 119)

In what follows, I would like to tell Kelly's story, or rather retell the story that Kelly told me of her literate life history. I hope through retelling her story to condense, exemplify, and evoke the world of literacy activities that not only Kelly, but others like her shared with me. I hope too that we can begin, through Kelly, to appreciate mainstream students' understanding of their own literary activities and of their participation in these activities as developing members in a complex community of readers and writers.

When Kelly told me her literate life history, she was a 1st-year student at a large research institution in the south-central region of the United States. She had graduated in the upper third of her high school class and scored better than average on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Kelly's father and mother are both college-educated professionals earning a combined income of more than $50,000 per year. Kelly is white, has one younger brother, and grew up in a
suburb of a large metropolitan area. When I met Kelly, she had tentatively chosen speech/communication as her major, and expected to be as successful in school and in her future career as her parents have been. Kelly’s background, I suggest, qualifies her as one of Heath’s (1983) “mainstreamers,” someone who has adopted many of the values and norms of the middle class, those “in the main-
stream of things” (pp. 236–237).

Kelly’s experience as a reader began as a very young child on her mother’s lap with books like Millions and Billions and Trillions of Cats. She “loved” this book and others like it, and would ask her mother to “read them over and over again” to her. In fact, sometimes Kelly would even read them to her mother. After a while, she said that “reading and being read to” seemed the same thing. Gradually, then, she began to read books on her own, usually at night before going to sleep. She could remember going to the library to check books out specifically for those late night reading sessions. She wanted to be a “better reader,” she said, to read the books that “big people” read. Sometimes she even tried to read books that were “too hard.” She claimed that they were “too long” (couldn’t be read in a single reading session). Kelly also remembered the “Dick and Jane” books when she first started school. In the early grades, there wasn’t much difference between what she read at home and at school. She reported that the books she read at school, she would often take home to finish; and the books that she was reading at home, she would take to school to show her teacher. She remembered most just wanting to read as many books as possible.

As she progressed in school, her enthusiasm for reading began to change. Kelly still liked to read, especially adventure and mystery stories like the “Bobbsey Twins” or the Agatha Christie series or the “Meg” books. She always enjoyed trying to figure out what was going on. Eventually however, during late elementary and early junior high, she began to think of school-related reading differently. Most of the reading she did in school now, she said, was to learn “facts.” She remembered that as early as the third grade she knew what textbooks were, and even though she liked reading some of these textbooks, history textbooks, for example, she disliked others, math or science. Textbooks, she said, were meant “to inform,” whereas her adventure and mystery stories were meant “to entertain.” Kelly gradually devised a different way of doing this new kind of reading in school. She said that she would figure out how much she had to read, “how many pages,” “divide up the nights” she had to read them, procrastinate until the last possible minute, and then “just get through it.” The further in school she progressed, the more school-related reading began to push aside reading that she did for her own entertainment. It wasn’t so much that the reading that she had to do for school became overwhelming. According to Kelly, she actually read less (or at least remembered herself as reading less) in junior high than ever before. For instance, her three junior high English classes, she said, were all about “grammar.” In these three classes, she could only remember reading one book with a story. Instead, it was that she just didn’t want to read as much as she
had before. She said that she even tried to find ways to read "as little as possible."

Kelly's experience with reading in high school and her first semester in college only reinforced those perceptions and understandings that had developed earlier. Testing became more and more associated with reading as an activity. Indeed, she even questioned the necessity of reading if a test was not given. Kelly did admit to reading magazines like Seventeen or Teen Beat occasionally, however, she also said that reading "that sort of stuff" was "almost a joke." It had little to do with entertaining her—story reading—and had even less to do with "learning something important": school reading. And even though she did learn from magazines how to do her nails or who the newest hot rock band was, that did not qualify these magazines, she said, as "real reading." For Kelly, real reading, or at least reading that she understood to be important for her future, had been almost completely defined by her school experience.

Reading, for Kelly, was now something very different from what it was for that little girl who had wanted to become a better reader, to read what the big people read. She now simply did not like to read. She said that it was no longer "fun." Her only reason for reading was school and her only reason for reading in school was "getting an A," she said, on some sort of "test." Rather than the experience of reading itself or the experience of a story, the grade had become her primary reward. Reading on her own or for her own enjoyment almost ended completely. Even though school reading was not at all engaging to her personally, she did understand that being a "good reader," she said, was important for her success in school and beyond. Kelly's story of her experience learning to write suggests a very similar outcome.

The first writing experience that Kelly remembered happened in preschool. She had made a plate as a gift for her mother and father, and as part of making this plate, she wrote her name on its face. She remembered being helped by her teacher to make the letters of her name. Her next memory was in the third and fourth grades, practicing printing and, every once in a while, handwriting. Occasionally she had trouble printing. Kelly is left-handed and sometimes printed her letters "backwards," she said. She remembered often being told that her letters slanted the wrong way. At this point, the only writing at home that she said she could remember was the obligatory "letters to grandma." Kelly's early home experiences writing were all project-related. Writing was either a kind of demonstration—practicing printing to show that she could "write the way you were supposed to"—or a lesser activity incorporated as part of a larger collection of project-related activities: making a plate or sending a letter to her grandmother.

In Kelly's case, it wasn't until late junior high and early high school that writing became something more. In junior high, she began to write a journal. This journal writing continued into high school, although not for long. Her entries in the journal were occasional, each was written in response to what she called her emotional "highs" and "lows." Kelly claimed that the journal helped
“keep me sane sometimes.” She also said that while she had been actively keeping the journal, reading back through the entries or seeing her experience written down somehow helped her to “make sense of what happened.” “If I see it,” she said, “something clicks.” Of course, the entries were “private.” So private, in fact, that she brought her entire journal with her to college when she left home. She had never shared the contents of her journal with anyone and wanted to make sure it stayed unshared. Although at the time of the interview, she no longer wrote in the journal—she didn’t “need” the journal now, she said—sometimes she reads back through those past entries. She enjoys recognizing how much she says she has “grown up.” Clearly, Kelly’s journal was, and still is, an intensely personal collection of texts.

Another kind of writing that Kelly began to experience at the same time was related to those earlier experiences of writing as a scribal demonstration or part of a larger project. Also in junior high and high school, Kelly said she first began to write “papers.” “I write in a different way when I have to turn in papers to English teachers,” she said, “I don’t write what I really write if I was just writing to me.” These papers or school-related writing tasks were different from her journal entries. The occasion for writing was an assignment, and there were no therapeutic gains or self-analytic insights to be had. Kelly wrote papers only because they were required, and a “good paper,” according to Kelly, like a successful school reading experience, was determined by the grade she received. When Kelly did receive an A, she said that she was happy “because it was an A, not because it was a good paper.” Indeed, she seemed to have little or no confidence in her own ability to respond evaluatively to her own writing. She stated: “I’m afraid of what I say when I write for my teachers . . . [I get] A’s one year and D’s and F’s the next year.” For Kelly, receiving poor grades simply meant that she had not given the teacher what he or she wanted. As a result, as Kelly progressed through high school and into college, writing became more and more of a teacher-directed demonstration. Of course, with each teacher wanting her to demonstrate something different, Kelly fully expected that her papers would continue to get “A’s one year and D’s and F’s the next year.” Just when she understood what one teacher wanted, the class would end and, as she said, the “things that she [or he] stressed” as important for a “good paper” would change. That’s why, Kelly said, “I don’t like writing papers for my teachers.” Instead, she claimed that now, in college, she only wrote when she had to for school, and that when she did write, she would do “one-time writing,” or attempt to complete whatever paper she had been assigned in a single writing session.

In an article entitled “Learning to Write/Learning to Do School,” Dyson (1984) explored the relationship that young children experience between “learning to write and learning to perform school writing tasks” (p. 233). Dyson found:

Young children entering school note the recurring activities of this new environment, observe the ways activities are done, and, as best as they are able, try to play
by the rules. They are not simply learning to read and write; they are learning when one uses a pencil as opposed to a crayon, when one draws as opposed to writes, copies from the board as opposed to freely invents . . . and so on. These mundane particulars of school functioning are influenced by and influence children’s understanding of what written language is and how it is used in school. (p. 262)

Kelly, much like Dyson’s young children, has experienced more than simply learning to read and write. She has learned, especially in junior high and high school, those mundane particulars of school functioning that have both established the primary or the most important context within which reading and writing are done, and defined what real reading and writing are, to a significant degree excluding other and alternative nonschool experiences. She has also learned something of the way literate interaction occurs, the peculiar participant structure appropriate for doing reading and writing in a school situation.

Indeed, Kelly has learned all this so well that by the time that she entered the university, the only kind of reading that counted for much was school-related, and school-related reading was always required, involved learning facts, and was inevitably associated with some form of testing and evaluation. These characteristics then determined the interactive frame, that participant structure, within which she understood herself doing school reading. As a result, Kelly only begins reading when she has been given a reading assignment (and she procrastinates even then, suggesting that school reading is not engaging). When she is given a reading assignment, she attempts to devise reading strategies that she believes will cull out the important information, the information that she hopes will appear on a test. And finally, only when she has been tested will she know if her reading activity has been successful. That school context, then, and that interactive frame within which school-related reading is done have largely determined Kelly’s understanding of reading. Likewise, the only kind of writing that counts is school-related, and school-related writing is also required, totally teacher-directed, and important only as a means of realizing academic success. And, of course, realizing academic success means getting that A. These characteristics then also determine the appropriate ways of arranging written-language interaction in a school context. Again, Kelly only writes when she is given an assignment. She writes only to the teacher, attempting to figure out what he or she “wants,” those all-important “do’s and don’ts.” And finally, only when Kelly receives her grade will she know if her writing has been successful. The point is that in spite of the different experiences Kelly has had of reading and writing, in spite of the different ways she has learned to engage in reading and writing interaction in different contexts, her experiences of reading and writing in school and the participant structures she has learned within that context eventually either eliminate other perceptions and understandings of reading and writing, or so diminish their importance that only school-related reading and writing remain significant, or “real.”
Clearly, Kelly's literacy story reveals a "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures," and I hope that from her story we can see emerging those "transient examples of shaped behavior" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10) that illustrate her understanding of reading and writing as literate practices. Furthermore, I hope that we can see that those understandings, as they develop, are not only influenced by, but are to a large extent determined by, Kelly's school reading and writing experiences and the ways she learns to interact through reading and writing in school.

RESEARCH NARRATIVE

The general aim of my original participant observation study was to learn more about students' understandings of their actual experiences reading and writing in three 1st-year college English classrooms. Collecting students' literate life histories, of which Kelly's story is an example, was at best only a minor part of that study. I had hoped that by learning about students' previous reading and writing experiences, I might gain some insights into their understandings of the reading and writing activities they were currently being asked to perform. I need not describe the entire design of that study here. Still, it is important, I think, to provide some sort of research narrative in order to suggest the ways in which these students' stories of their experiences as developing readers and writers became so significant.

As part of that original study, I distributed a series of four separate questionnaires, each attempting to elicit a specific kind of information. Three are particularly relevant. The first, entitled "Background," represented an attempt to establish the "sociological parameters"—social class, age, ethnicity, college or university experience, major field, and educational accomplishments (high school rank and SAT score)—of the students participating in the study (Trudgill, 1974, p. 31). From the information they provided about themselves, I was able both to gather a general sense of the population that I was studying (that they were mainstreamers, for example) and to select a more limited sample population for follow-up direct interviews.

The second and third questionnaires, entitled, respectively, "Autobiography of a Reader" and "Autobiography of a Writer," are similar to each other in that they attempt to elicit a sort of chronological inventory of students' reading and writing experiences. Both questionnaires begin with the invitation to "tell me the story of your reading [or writing] life." They continue with questions about "early reading [or writing] experiences," significant reading [or writing] experiences, reading and writing "out of school" and "in school," "feelings" about reading and writing, "typical reading [or writing] sessions," and so on. Later, then, using a combination of these second and third questionnaires as a protocol for direct interviews, I hoped to encourage the students to generate a more elaborate listing and more detailed descriptions of the kinds of reading and
writing activities they have performed in the past in order to provide, as I stated before, some insights into their understanding of the current reading and writing activities they were performing.

However, early on during the interviews, I noticed that students seemed especially enthusiastic to tell me their literacy stories. So enthusiastic, in fact, that my attempts to follow the protocol for the interviews were routinely thwarted. One story detailing their reading and/or writing experiences would lead to another, and then another, and so on. As I reviewed each tape before the next interview, I realized that the students were indeed following a rough chronological line with their stories, and that they were filling in the gaps left by their written responses to the questionnaires. Still, they were doing much more. Through their stories, they were offering a collection of autobiographical and developmental self-portraits. Those self-portraits allowed me to compare one student's reported experience with another, and then, from such a comparison, to generate a descriptive taxonomy of literacy activities, to locate those activities within a context, to construct an interactive frame within which those literate activities occur, and finally, to develop an appreciation for the students' understanding of themselves as readers and writers. Before I begin with the results of this comparison, I will present some background information on my sample population. As Heath (1983) demonstrated so convincingly in *Ways with Words*, literate activities have different meanings for members of different groups. Then, following those results, I will suggest what I believe are a few of the lessons that we can learn.

**BACKGROUND OF THE STUDENT POPULATION**

The general demographics of the three 1st-year college English classes are as follows. There were a total of 65 students in the sample population, 33 men and 32 women. Approximately 90% of the students were white, 5% were black, and another 5% were Hispanic. The representation of these two minority groups is slightly less than the minority representation at the particular university where the study took place. The average age of the students was 18.5 years old. Seventy-two percent of the students were 1st-year students, 12% were sophomores, 11% were juniors, and 5% were seniors. It is important to note that there is a relatively large percentage of advanced students (28%) in these three introductory classes. The only university requirement was that this course be successfully completed before graduation. (Many of these students commented that they had avoided registering for the class as long as they could.)

Of the 65 students, 65% had graduated in the top third of their high school class, 34% had graduated in the middle third. Only 1 student graduated in the lower third. Their mean SAT score was 1002; the median score was 970; the highest reported score was 1470; and the lowest score was 640. Generally, this sample population had experienced significant academic success.
The parents of these students had experienced success also, academic and otherwise. They were, on the whole, well educated and well-to-do. Eighty-two percent of the parents, both mothers and fathers, had attended college; approximately 65% had completed college, and 20% had completed either master’s or doctoral degrees. Fifteen percent of the parents had completed high school and had no further schooling; only 3% had not completed grade school. Ninety-seven percent of the parents had a combined income of $20,000 or more per year; 83% earned more than $35,000 per year, and 62% earned more than $50,000 per year. Only 3% earned less than $20,000 per year.

The average family size was nearly five. Twenty-two percent of those families live in a metropolitan area (population > 1,000,000); 42% live in a suburban area (a city adjacent to a metropolitan area); 18% live in a city (population ≤ 100,000); 8% live in a small town (population ≤ 10,000); and 10% live in a rural setting.

This information suggests that most of the students in this sample were members of a relatively homogeneous group. Most hailed from upper middle-class backgrounds. Most, like their parents before them, had experienced significant academic success. Most also expected to continue experiencing success in school and beyond. Indeed, many reported sharing the belief that success in school “leads” to success afterwards. Last, most had been educated in relatively large public school systems and, as a result, were very familiar with the kind of education large institutions provide. I suggested earlier that Kelly was typical of the students in my sample. At least in terms of her background, Kelly certainly is representative, and, like Kelly, the students in the sample can best be characterized as mainstreamers.

**LEARNING REAL READING**

Students classified reading into three types: (a) story reading, (b) school reading, and (c) leisure “popcorn-trash” reading. Story reading is the personally engaging and enjoyable experience of a story. Students often reported identifying with the characters, being interested in “what’s going to happen next” (the twists and turns of the plot), or being especially caught up by the particular subject (sports biographies or romance novels). School reading is different. Students reported that they felt “forced” to read, that they read simply in order to learn information (students often used the word “facts” to describe the nature of that information), and that the way they knew whether or not they had learned the information was through some sort of testing and evaluation. Finally, leisure “popcorn-trash” reading is a time filler, and not considered “real” reading at all, much as junk food is not considered real food. Students reported that something generally had to catch their attention before they would read it.

The students all reported that their first experience reading (or at least the first one they could remember) was story reading. And, like Kelly, their early recol-
lections were that reading was an interactive, often collaborative, and always enjoyable activity. Most students remembered being read to by their mothers, grandmothers, or sometimes even by their big sisters (rarely by their fathers); and, in turn, when they could, reading to them. They also recalled reading the same books over and over again, and with each new reading, enjoying their experience of the story. As noted earlier, the average age of the students in the sample was over 18, yet some remembered the titles, even the plots of the books they had not seen in nearly 15 years. Gradually, reading became more of an individual experience in that once they started school, rarely did someone in the home read to them or they to someone else. Although reading was less interactive and collaborative in precisely the ways it had been, mothers would usually “keep up” with their children’s reading: ask them questions about what they were reading in school, take them to the library to check books out, and buy them books they wanted to read. Many of the students in the sample remembered the first book they read by themselves, although the age they reported this happening varied considerably. They also remembered the early series books—the Agatha Christie, “Nancy Drew,” “Black Stallion” books—and some even recall reading one or more of these series through several times. Students remembered reading at night and often in bed. Typically, at least until 7 to 9 years of age, the only understanding of reading that students had was that associated with story reading, and story reading was personally engaging. They claimed that it was a “fun” sort of thing to do. In this sense, reading was its own reward. Of course, there were many related reinforcements: the special attention from another family member, and so on. Yet, the students in this sample rarely mentioned that. They simply reported being very excited by the experience that reading provided them and even by the activity of reading itself. The contextual characteristics of story reading are listed in Table 1.

In the earliest grades at school, K–3, story and school reading are not very different. Often, students remembered being read to by others and reading to others in the “reading circle.” They also remembered “quiet reading time,” when they chose a favorite book to read by themselves. Like Kelly, many of the books they read in school, they took home to finish; and, many of the books they read at home, they brought to school to show their teachers. It wasn’t until the later grades, 4–6, that school reading began to compete with, and even to replace, story reading.

One of the clearest indications that story reading and school reading are different is the lack of clarity in students’ recollections concerning their school-related reading experiences. Students simply did not remember what they read in school. Very few students listed (or could list) more than five books that they read between fourth grade and the end of high school. Many reported disliking, even hating reading associated with school. One more moderate student said:
I never enjoyed reading in school, especially in elementary and junior high. The stories were always stupid and always too obvious in the way they [the teachers] used them to teach morals.

She went on to say:

I didn’t like most of my literature classes [in high school] because my teachers were always telling [me] my interpretations were wrong. As if she knew. Only the writer really knew what he meant and sometimes he wrote simply to tell a story—no hidden meanings.

This student’s experience of reading, along with the experience of many others, had changed. Reading was no longer associated with the interactive, collaborative, or even private experience of a story (although the only book titles that this student and others could remember during these years were novels). The experience of the story was no longer as important as finding the “morals” or comprehending the “hidden meanings.” Reading as an activity had become appropriated by the teachers because only the teachers “knew” what the morals and hidden meanings were. Actually, this student’s denial that her teacher knew what was important or what was hidden from her is evidence for how complete the appropriation was, and how excluded she felt. Yet, interestingly, this same student, when asked later in the questionnaire and during an interview how she felt about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Characteristics of the Story Reading Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the reading activity?</td>
<td>Story Reading: Reading children’s literature, mysteries, and adventure stories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Who are the participants?</td>
<td>Child/Trusted Adult: Child and adults are co-participants. Why is the reading activity done? Child Alone: Child or early adolescent is the only participant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3. Why is the reading activity done? | Self-initiated: Reading is viewed as a personally engaging and enjoyable experience.
Function? Poetic: Reading to experience the story “for its own sake.” |
| 4. How is the reading activity done? | Single Sessions: Reading activity is completed within a single session.
Sequence of actions? Repeated Single Sessions
Multiple Sessions: Completion of the reading activity is extended over several sessions. |
| Nature of participant interaction? | Interactive/Collaborative Private (Poetic) |
| 5. When and where is the activity done? | Evening/Home
reading, wrote and said, "I love it." This seeming anomaly represents, I believe, her desire, apart from her school experience, to hold on to those earlier before-school experiences of what reading was, and perhaps, could be again.

Student after student in the questionnaires and during the interviews reported that they did not like being "forced" to read, and school reading was "always" forced. The previously quoted student, when asked to describe when reading is currently an engaging and enjoyable experience for her, responded, "Always. As long as it isn't forced." Now, I do not believe that this student or the others like her mean to suggest that they never enjoy anything that they read in school. However, if they do enjoy something, they seem to enjoy it in spite of its association with school. As I suggested before, reading was no longer the experience of a story, but a required task. The purpose of this required task was to "learn" something: the "morals," the "hidden meanings," or in the case of textbooks, the information or "facts." And finally, in order to determine whether or not they have satisfactorily completed the task, and really have learned something, they needed to be given a test.

During the interviews, I asked students what constituted a successful school reading experience. Most said that a successful school reading experience involved first, discovering and using alternative reading strategies for completing the assigned reading task (e.g., skimming and targeted reading or reading to answer specific questions); and second, getting the highest grade possible for the least amount of work. This should not be interpreted as students' either being lazy or lacking a commitment to doing well in school. Rather, it reflects their evolving understanding of reading as a demonstration of what they know. If they discover ways of reading that prove effective for realizing their goal of getting the highest possible grade for the least amount of work, for adequately demonstrating what they know or have learned what they've read, then they truly are good readers. Again, the contextual characteristics of school reading are listed in Table 2.

The third and last kind of reading that students reported was leisure "popcorn-trash" reading. For most of the students, leisure "popcorn-trash" reading involved magazines like Seventeen, Elle, Sports Illustrated, and People. It involved newspapers and sometimes magazines like Time and Newsweek. One student described it as "supermarket reading," or any type of newspaper, magazine, or book that could be bought in the supermarket. Generally, students did not consider this to be real reading. And it is just this fact that makes this kind of reading interesting. Since leisure "popcorn-trash" reading was not required, since there were no hidden meanings to be revealed as there were in school reading, and since the students were certainly not going to be tested to determine how well they understood what they had read, it was not real reading. These students' understanding of reading as a literate activity had become so identified with the school context that those literate activities or behaviors that did not share the same characteristics or participant structures were either not considered real
TABLE 2
Characteristics of the School Reading Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. What is the reading activity?</th>
<th>School Reading: Reading textbooks or books that are not actually textbooks per se, but that students label as textbooks.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Who are the participants?</td>
<td>Student/Teacher (Instructor) Student/Teacher (Examiner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Why is the reading activity done?</td>
<td>Teacher-initiated: Begins with an assignment. Referential: Reading to learn Metalingual: Reading to learn about the “code.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasion?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence of actions?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of participant interaction?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When and where is the activity done?</td>
<td>Evening/Home: Variable according to the demands of the reading task. Daytime/School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

reading, or were simply not done. The characteristics of the leisure “popcorn-trash” reading context are listed in Table 3.

A few closing notes. Like Kelly, most of the students reported that the further they progressed in school, the less they liked to read, and consequently, the less they would read. Also, I mentioned a student, who, when asked how she felt

TABLE 3
Characteristics of Leisure “Popcorn-Trash” Reading Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. What is the reading activity?</th>
<th>Leisure/“Popcorn-Trash” Reading: Supermarket reading, magazines, newspapers, popular novels.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Who are the participants?</td>
<td>Adolescents Alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Why is the reading activity done?</td>
<td>Self-initiated: Special interest reading. Referential: Reading to learn Expressive: Reading to learn information responsive to the reader’s interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasion?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How is the reading activity done?</td>
<td>Single Session Private (Informational) Situational: Whenever and wherever the special interest is stimulated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence of actions?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of participant interaction?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When and where is the activity done?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
about reading, wrote, "I love it." Like this student, many claimed still to love story reading. However, only a very few of the students in this sample continued to seek out story-reading experiences as they grew older. And, even those few felt that somehow reading stories was not the kind of reading they should be doing. Like Kelly, they felt that story reading had little to do with their future.

**LEARNING REAL WRITING**

Students also classified writing into three types: school writing, personal writing, and creative/imaginative writing. School writing, like school reading, is also demonstrative. In fact, these two share some of the same characteristics. Students reported that school writing is required, totally teacher-directed (in the sense that they try to give the teacher what he or she wants), usually quite formulaic (many report writing the well-known "five-paragraph papers"), and valued primarily as a tool for achieving academic success. The most often cited examples of school writing were "book reports" and "research papers." Personal writing, on the other hand, is not associated with school at all. It included letters to friends and private journals or diaries. Neither is personal writing demonstrative. Instead, most students understood it as expressive, occasionally self-instructive (according to Kelly, "if I see something, it clicks"), and always personally valuable. Finally, creative/imaginative writing is sometimes school-related, sometimes not, and included short stories and poems written for parents, teachers, or peers. Most students considered creative/imaginative writing a distinctive and distinguishing activity. And, most creative/imaginative writing, like personal writing, is done during the early adolescent years, Grades 7 to 9, and often abandoned when the school writing became dominant.

Most students reported that their first experience writing happened in school and usually involved "printing" (encoding) their name. One student wrote, "I remember writing on the 'Big Chief tablet letters like a-e-i-o-u in Pre-Kinder. I remember scrawling my name for my parents as well." Generally, students enjoyed these early writing experiences. Students reported that parents were very encouraging. However, some students had less positive experiences in a school context. Occasionally, students recalled that a teacher would comment on how "bad" their printing or handwriting was. One student who had such an experience wrote, "I hated writing when I was in elementary school because my handwriting revealed a bit of messiness and unconformity. My . . . teacher wrote to my parents and asked them what went wrong with my hands because my writing was so bad." This student's experience might be extreme, yet we can see from this experience and the others mentioned before that students' earliest experiences of writing were demonstrative (they had to show how well they could make their letters) and that that scribal demonstration was often evaluated.

Soon after they learned the manual skills associated with printing and handwriting in school, students reported another kind of writing experience associated
with the home. Often parents encouraged and supervised the sending of letters, cards, and thank-you notes to relatives. Of course, the supervising parent (almost always the mother) usually suggested a brief message and dutifully noted the messiness or neatness of the script. However, it seems from students' descriptions that sending these letters, cards, and notes involved many more activities than just writing: buying the card initially, putting a stamp on the envelope, mailing the card, and so on. Writing, then, was simply one activity among many that contributed to the completion of a project. In addition, the functions that writing served changed. For example, writing inside the card was always intended to convey a message, to say something particular to someone else. So, the messiness of the script was not as important as the message. On the other hand, in addressing the envelope, saying something to someone else was not as important as making sure that the script was neat enough to assure delivery. Like Kelly, early writing experiences for most students in the sample involved either a kind of scribal demonstration or were lesser activities incorporated as part of a larger collection of activities associated with a project. However, by distinguishing writing inside the card from writing on the envelope, for instance, students seemed to be learning the different functions that writing as an activity might have.

The next kind of writing experience that students reported seemed to happen both in school and at home. As early as 7 years of age, students recalled beginning to write stories and poems. One student wrote:

Yes, I used to write things around the house. I wrote little stories and poems for my family. The stories were usually simple when I was younger. When I was in the fourth grade, my friends and I tried to write a book and spent all our time on it. The poems were a little more complex....

Another student, also in response to the questionnaire, wrote:

When I was younger, I wrote a lot of poems. My mom always encouraged me because she loved hearing what I wrote. She still has copies of them all.

Finally, a third student wrote:

I always wrote stories. Ghost stories and adventure stories. They all started out "Once upon a time." I used to make them up in the fifth grade....

Many of the same students who reported writing these early creative/imaginative stories and poems were also members of literary groups in junior high and high school. The readers for creative/imaginative writing—parents, peers, teachers—seem to be quite supportive. Parents seemed to be the more active supporters early on. Later, sometimes teachers, but more often peers, provided most of the
encouragement. Also, the older the creative/imaginative writer was, the more selective he or she became in his or her choice of an audience.

As I suggested before, creative/imaginative writing is a distinguishing and distinctive activity, especially during the adolescent years, later junior high and high school. It is distinguishing because writing short stories and poems, as one continuing creative/imaginative writer commented, was viewed by most students as "a little bit weird." Students writing these short stories and poems, in addition to school writing—those required book reports, essays, and research papers—were considered strange, outside the norm. It seemed that, for most students, school writing was such an unattractive and/or demanding activity that they could not understand why anyone would want to do more writing. These particular students did not recognize creative/imaginative writing as distinctive or different from school writing, whereas creative/imaginative writers clearly acknowledged the differences. Creative/imaginative writing for them seemed to be more personal or fanciful. For example, students reported writing stories and poems often in response to events in their lives. One student wrote:

I would see a couple [in love] . . . see something on T.V., or hear a song and it would spark off a story in my mind.

Also, quite a few students wrote short science fiction pieces. One student recalled most vividly a story about a minotaur that he wrote in the seventh grade. In paraphrasing the story, he said:

There was this minotaur and it lived on this planet only recently settled by humans. Since it was killing people, they were forced to hunt it down and kill it on the dark side of this planet.

The functions of these creative/imaginative writings, unlike the school writings, were expressive and/or entertaining. And, as one student said of the appropriate response to creative/imaginative writing, especially when the readers were one's peers, "We were always effusive in our comments . . . and never criticize, never." The characteristics of the creative/imaginative writing context are listed in Table 4.

Creative/imaginative writing and personal writing—letters to friends, private journals, and/or diaries—seem to occur at roughly the same period during these students’ lives: the early to middle adolescent years. Personal writing, like some creative/imaginative writing, is occasional or situational, its subject is generally personal or private, and the function is essentially expressive. However, unlike creative/imaginative writing, at least two types of personal writing, private journals and diaries, were often not shared with others. And, if they were shared, then it was only with a very carefully selected and specific audience (usually a single person) and only a particular and comparatively brief passage. Of course,
TABLE 4
Characteristics of the Creative-Imaginative Writing Context

1. What is the writing activity?  Creative/Imaginative Writing: Short stories, poems, science fiction.
2. Who are the participants?  Child/Trusted Adult
   Adolescent Student/Teacher
   Adolescent/Peer
3. Why is the writing activity done?  Occasion?
   Function?  Self-initiated
   Teacher-initiated  Expressive: Writing to communicate the writer’s “attitude” or self.
   Poetic: Writing to communicate the “message for its own sake.”
4. How is the writing activity done?  Sequence of actions?  Single Sessions: Writing activity is completed in a single session.
   Multiple Sessions: Completion of writing activity may be extended over several sessions, perhaps even, several years.
   Situational: Whenever and wherever the “inspiration” strikes. However, occasionally students report very ritualized writing routines.
5. When and where is the activity done?  letters to friends were written to be shared. Still, the content of these letters was often very private; like the journals and diaries, the function was apparently expressive, and the audience, again, was very carefully selected.

Perhaps what most differentiates creative/imaginative writing from personal writing is that, more than with any other kind of writing, students asserted their right to claim personal writing as their own. They claimed exclusive ownership. One student said in an interview:

My journals were mine. They were for me. If I did show something to a friend, it was only because I wanted them to understand something about me.

Another student who did show parts of her diary to a friend said:

I’d share my writing [diary] in hopes that it would bring us [closer]. . . . In fact, a friend of mine . . . we’re still good friends . . . we still feel extremely close because of the things we would read of each other’s . . . we would know more about each other than most people would know because we had that . . . we saw each other’s deepest, innermost thoughts when we were younger.

Clearly, these private journals and diaries were intensely personal documents. Indeed, if they were shown to someone else, it was because the writer wanted
that someone else to understand something specifically about that writer. Maybe one student suggested the purpose of the journals best when she said, “I kept a journal of my feelings . . . I just like writing my feelings down . . . .” Journals and diaries represented the writer’s self and, therefore, was his or hers to show or not show as he or she chose. The letters to friends seemed to be much like the passages writers selected from the journals or diaries to share. The contextual characteristics of personal writing are listed in Table 5.

As I suggested before, most students reported that they were first introduced to writing as a literate activity when they began school, and then as an evaluated scribal demonstration. This initial experience of writing as demonstration remained with most of them. The book reports, essays, and research papers that they recalled writing later in junior high and high school were all demonstrations, albeit more complex. One student, describing her experience of school writing said:

Mostly we did essays in junior high. I hated it because we had to write about the stupidest topics, instead of doing what we wanted. . . . In [high] school we did . . . research papers, I really didn’t like it much because my teachers didn’t like it if you tried to be creative. I made bad grades . . . [so] by the time I was a junior, I really didn’t care much about writing for school.

Another student who had a different experience of “writing for school,” somewhat more positive, wrote in response to the questionnaire:

Essays! My teachers told me I had a problem with writing, but every year the grades got better. My senior year, my English teacher, known to be the hardest, told me that I wrote very well and fulfilled every assignment—I was very happy!

These two students’ descriptions of their experience “writing for school” (a phrase that appears often on the questionnaires and in the interviews), when combined with Kelly’s description, provide at least a sketch of most students’ understanding of school writing.

To begin with, all school writing is assigned or required. The teacher always initiated the students’ school writing activities with an “assignment,” instructions to do something in particular: an essay, a research paper, or in the elementary or early junior high grades, a book report. Notice that the assignment is typically genre-specific. The subject matter or the topics of these “papers” were most often selected by the teacher. Unlike personal writing and much of creative/imaginative writing, students engaged in school writing only when required or “forced.” And, even though some students, one in particular, reported being very satisfied with papers they had written—“I remember writing a paper over two books—The Bell Jar and Catcher in the Rye. It was my favorite paper of all time. . . .”—they still would not write such papers unless required. Later in the interview, the same student who had talked about her “favorite paper of all
### Characteristics of the Personal Writing Context

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What is the writing activity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Personal Writing: Personal letters, diaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Adolescent/Alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Adolescent/Specific Trusted Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Who are the participants?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Expressive: Writing to communicate the writer’s “attitude” or self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Why is the writing activity done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Sequence of actions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How is the writing activity done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Nature of participant interaction?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Evening/Home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students understand school writing to be formulaic. They accepted that there is a right and a wrong, a correct and an incorrect way to do book reports, essays, and research papers. Indeed, students often reported frustration when “one teacher tells you how to do your papers one way, and another tells you different,” or when one teacher just “says it’s garbage and leaves you hanging.” Again, referring to the previous student who finally overcame her “problem with writing” because she “fulfilled every assignment,” notice that writing well and fulfilling the assignment certainly correspond, if they are not synonymous.

Finally, because school writing was so completely tied to the school context for the students in this sample, it would be strange if it were not valued primarily as a tool for academic success. During the interviews, students were asked what determined a successful school writing experience. There was a variety of an-
swers, yet student after student mentioned that getting the highest possible grade for the least amount of work is the best indicator. Again, as with school reading, this should not be interpreted as meaning that the students were lazy or lacked a commitment to do well. Instead, it reflects their evolving understanding of school writing. If they can demonstrate or show that they can do what their teacher wants them to do without struggling, then they truly must be good writers. The contextual characteristics of school writing are listed in Table 6.

A few closing notes. Most students reported that they like writing. However, when they listed the characteristics of the writing that they like to do, those associated with school writing were never included. Also, even though some students described on-going writing projects—one student claimed to be working on a children’s book about “bed monsters”—those projects were separated and somehow less important than the writing they did for school. In other words, the kind of writing students liked most was separated from the school context, whereas the kind of writing they liked least was associated with school and, ironically, considered more important.

LEARNING “SCHOOLED LITERACY”

It is commonplace to recognize that language learning is related to the context within which that language is learned and used, and the experiences one has learning and using it. In addition, we know that the particular participant structures or specific ways of interacting apparent within a context can and do contribute to language learners’ and users’ understanding of their own language learning and using experiences. Perhaps the most significant realization, evident in these

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 6</th>
<th>Characteristics of the School Writing Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What is the writing activity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Writing: Book reports, essays, and research papers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Who are the participants?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Teacher (Examiner)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Why is the writing activity done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-initiated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasion?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinqual: Writing to learn about the “code.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable: Changes with the teacher’s purpose in giving the assignment and with the student’s goal in completing the assignment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>How is the writing activity done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrational: Learning the “appropriate” language use. Development of language “skills.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence of actions?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of participant interaction?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>When and where is the writing activity done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening/Home: Variable according to the requirements of the writing task.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daytime/School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students' literate life histories, is the power that those reading and writing experiences in a school context wield in determining students' perceptions and understandings of reading and writing as literate activities and of themselves as readers and writers even outside that context and apart from those school-related experiences.

If we understand literacy as a kind of communicative competence—the ability to participate as a communicating member in a community of readers and writers—then, from the preceding amalgamation of stories, we can see that, according to these students, there are several literacies, or context-bound competencies in the use of written language: story reading, school reading, leisure "popcorn-trash" reading, and school writing, creative/imaginative writing, and personal writing. We can also see that there are various literate language communities: the home, the school, and peer communities. We can see that these literacies change, especially in their relative importance to the participating member: The home community that is so important early in the child's reading experience becomes less and less relevant as that child progresses through school. We can see, too, that these various literate language communities often overlap one another: The home and school overlap in early story-reading experiences and the school and peer communities overlap in later creative/imaginative writing experiences. And finally, we can see that there are ways to do reading and writing associated with each of the preceding literacies and literate language communities; and that these ways, in turn, reflexively influence the participant's understanding of reading and writing. However, in spite of such variety, the ways that students learn to engage in school reading and school writing determine their understanding of reading and writing as literate activities generally, and their understanding of themselves as readers and writers.

We can see in their stories, for example, that students recognize themselves almost as dependent, yet isolated, "children," and that they understand reading and writing as demonstrations of what they know in the completion of peculiarly irrelevant literate language tasks (Rose, 1990). According to Jakobson's (1967) taxonomy of the functions of language, school writing and to some extent school reading seem to be "metalingual" (p. 302). That is, they focus mainly on the code or, in this case, on the acceptable use of a particular channel of that code. Because, as Jakobson (1967) claimed "any process of language learning . . . makes use of metalingual operations" (p. 302), that school reading and writing would make particular use of these operations seems reasonable. However, that the expressive function of personal writing, where the focus is on the writer's "attitude," or self, or that the poetic function of story reading, where the focus is on "the message for its own sake" (Jakobson, 1967, pp. 299–302), are clearly not apparent at all in a school context, certainly should give us something to think about. In addition, because students are, in effect, experiencing learning to read and write for school as a kind of "technical learning," the nature of those reading and writing activities becomes very conscious (sometimes even self-
conscious) and often singularly directed, in that their sole intent is to demonstrate what they know (Hall, 1959). Students often reported that they were painfully aware of their own confusion about whether or not, while reading, they were "covering the material that will be on the test," or if their use of the first person pronoun "I" in a story they were writing of their own experience was appropriate. So aware were they that even the potential to experience reading and writing as interactive, communicative, and creative activities other than, or apart from, those school-related demonstrations is lost. And, even for those students who reported feeling happy or sad as a result of their respective success or failure to perform reading and writing tasks adequately, the school reading and writing activities themselves are neither personally engaging, nor enjoyable. Instead, their understanding of what they are demonstrating is that it is a shared knowledge, a common capability, and that its essential value is instrumental. Students begin to accept, indeed, expect that there are universally acknowledged correct and incorrect ways to read and write that extend beyond a particular context. They accept and expect that there are good and bad readers and writers quite apart from their own experience that the "things" that different teachers stress as important surely change. And, they accept and expect that if they read and write correctly, they are, or at least, can become, one of those good readers and writers; they will then not only get that A, but realize success in their lives outside the academy.

This overview of students' lived experience learning to read and write—learning what "real" reading and writing are—is certainly not as extensive or as intensive as I would like. Interviews and questionnaires in which students are asked about why they read and write and the reading and writing they do can reveal only what those students themselves consider reading and writing to be. Indeed, such became my aim. However, there are other reading and writing activities that often go unreported. For example, students rarely report the "mechanical uses of writing" (Applebee, 1982, p. 370) or note taking, short-answer exercises, copying, dictation, and so on. Furthermore, because the school context is such an important domain in young peoples' lives, that school reading and school writing would assume preeminence can hardly be unexpected. Still, there is much that we learn of the social process by which their understandings of reading and writing are acquired, even constructed. For instance, we learn that these students, at least as young children first experiencing reading and writing, simply enjoy doing the activities. They find reading and writing fun and exciting. They enjoy the playful and purposeful interaction with a supportive adult. They enjoy the communicative and creative results. They enjoy reading and writing for the experience of a story or for the insights into their own lives and the lives of those around them that these activities provide. Then, as these children become students, we learn that as readers and writers within a school context, they gradually lose that sense of enjoyment. Instead of readers and writers reading and
writing, they become nonreaders and nonwriters who avoid reading and writing, in fact, must be forced to read and write. Too many of their earlier supportive experiences of literate language competency are replaced with the discouraging experiences of teachers who constantly point to their incompetence. Students are led to believe themselves so disabled that they fully accept that they now must be taught how to read and write. Reading and writing are no longer the more natural language learning and using experiences they once were. Rather, because of school, they have become demonstrations and, as a result, yield experiences of failure or experiences of a particular kind of gamesmanship: students attempting to give the teacher what he or she wants in order to ensure themselves, as Kelly said, of “getting an A.”

Cook-Gumperz (1986), as a result of her exploration into the developing connections between literacy and schooling, claimed that the purpose of school has been, and still is, to transform “commonplace literacy,” the reading and writing activities of our every day lives, into “schooled literacy,” “a system of decontextualized knowledge validated through test performances” (pp. 41-44). Through their own literate life histories, through their own stories of themselves as developing readers and writers, at least these students, those in the main stream of things—in many ways our most privileged young people, those for whom schooling is supposed to work best—are telling us that that purpose is indeed being realized.

REFERENCES