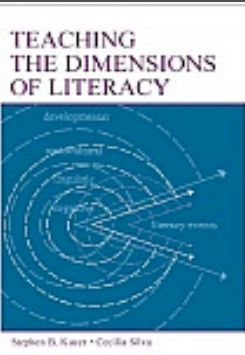


<i>Teaching the Dimensions of Literacy</i>			
Author:	Stephen B. Kucer and Cecilia Silva (2006)		
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Pp. xv + 406	0-8058-5020-1 (paper)	\$49.95 U.S.	



In the initial section of *Teaching the Dimensions of Literacy*, Stephen B. Kucer and Cecilia Silva articulate the central argument of their book. Conventional approaches to literacy, they argue, tend to break complex processes into discrete parts and then to offer these parts, in a particular sequence, to students. Such approaches, they maintain, have two problems. First, these parts often operate differently when combined with other parts. Second, these parts must be integrated for successful reading and writing. Particularly for English language learners, these approaches represent particular problems because they eliminate many contextual cues otherwise useful in acts of meaning-making.

In contrast to those who use conventional approaches, Kucer and Silva argue for an approach that integrates what they consider the four dimensions of literacy: cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental. For Kucer and Silva, the cognitive dimension involves the "discovery, construction, and sharing of meaning" through strategies that transcend language, which is the "vehicle through which meanings are shared" (pp. 3-4). Beyond individual acts of meaning-making, these events simultaneously have sociocultural dimensions, and while each dimension influences the others, the developmental dimension, i.e., users' current limits and incipient opportunities for learning, overshadows the others (pp. 4, 67).

Even as some readers might find their approach unconventional, more might find their structure for the book somewhat surprising. Having organized the book as three

sections, the authors devote more than 70% of its pages to the second section: themes within each dimension of literacy. Within this section, each strategy lesson itself is arranged according to the same structure--concepts, materials, procedures, variations, and sample materials--an organizing principle that facilitates quick comparisons between and among the different lessons. In the other sections, the authors offer a theoretical justification for their approach and a possible implementation of it. The introductory theoretical section seems based largely upon Kucer's previous work (p. 6). This section presents an overview of each dimension of literacy, based upon a synthesis of relevant research. The concluding section demonstrates a way to implement this approach across the curriculum (pp. 371-78). This section defines thematic units and outlines writing, reading, and responding activities.

As might be expected, the biggest appeal of this book, as the plural in its title suggests, is its multidimensional approach to literacy. While I might quibble with the authors on their schematic diagram of concentric circles--I mean, how fine are those lines separating cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions anyway?--I applaud their effort to integrate all of these dimensions into a working model. Among other potential benefits, this approach opens the discussion to acknowledge that reading and writing are multiple and differentiated acts, a position which has been extensively documented in recent literacy research. Moreover, such a model represents a theoretical synthesis of existing approaches and, as such, can serve as a basis for programmatic and institutional critiques.

A second strength of this book is its underlying model of instruction, which those of us in composition studies would call the workshop approach. In general, the workshop approach devotes large sections of class time to reading and writing, supplemented with regular individualized instruction through mini-conferences and small-group instruction for mini-lessons. In fact, Kucer and Silva do cite Nancie Atwell and other proponents of the workshop approach (e.g., p. 377). In my experience, this approach has been one of the most successful forms of literacy instruction in achieving both short-term goals of specific classes and long-term goals of lifelong reading and writing, at least with native speakers. (My experiences with nonnative speakers have been more mixed.) For those who want to experiment with, or already use, a workshop approach, the individual strategy lessons can easily serve as mini-lessons to support students' ongoing reading and writing projects.

A corollary of Kucer and Silva's strong instruction model is the book's positioning teachers as professionals. Rather than the lockstep curricula of other books, this book seems to suggest that curricula need to be driven by specific students' needs, which can only be assessed by their teachers. While the approach of other books has been called "teacher-proof," this approach presupposes the expertise of professionals who must determine the necessary and appropriate lessons for the students in their classrooms. At the same time, such a presupposition can also be problematic, in that it depends upon teachers' substantial levels of awareness and experience, levels not always operative and

not just with those outside language arts or English. From my experiences as a (former) coordinator of a campus-wide writing program, I know firsthand the range of abilities for literacy instruction in today's classrooms both in English and across the curriculum. For instance, some teachers who themselves are competent readers and writers lack sufficient awareness and ability to teach these practices to others.

Perhaps a larger problem, at least for the book's readers who teach ESL or EFL, is likely to be the authors' relative neglect of second language issues. Obviously, my concern is not that the authors fail to recognize the linguistic, social, and cultural influences on all students' acquiring reading and writing skills. In fact, Silva seems to have been brought onto this project precisely for her expertise in bilingual and biliteracy education (p. 6). Still, such relative neglect of second language issues throughout this book is unexpected. Even worse, these issues, when they are acknowledged, are treated perfunctorily. For example, the most extensive recognition of second language issues is a short discussion on biliterate readers in the section on literacy's cognitive dimension (pp. 30-31). Beyond this, these issues surface in more limited ways, such as acknowledging the influence primary language phonemes have on English spelling or illustrating a thematic approach with a third grade bilingual class studying immigration (pp. 54, 374). Outside these limited instances, the default assumption seems to be not only native speakers of English but also readers and writers with relatively uniform literacy experiences.

In other words, this book advocates a multidimensional approach, yet in spite of its synthesis of cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions, it seems to ignore the existence of multiple literacies. While I welcome the challenge it represents to the limited models of literacy that authorize, for example, the English Competency Exam at my university, I wonder whether it suffers from the totalizing tendency of literacy theory, one that attempts to offer a universal(ized) explanation of writing and reading at the expense of local language practices. At the same time, I also realize that the latter perspective can work against nonnative speakers and writers, some of whom are already distanced from the language of power. Nevertheless, my larger concern is the homogenization of language, and language instruction, along with its concomitant ideology, that I see everywhere, including my university and my kids' school.

Given my concerns, I would recommend this book for anyone interested in ways to think about a multidimensional literacy model in his classroom or for her program. But I offer only a qualified endorsement for those whose classrooms include learners with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences, which in my experience seems increasingly the norm. As it is, this book offers a more accurate account of literacy than many of those currently used, and yet I suspect, and hope, there is so much more to be said about teaching literacy.

Christopher Schroeder

Northeastern Illinois University
<c-schroeder2@neiu.edu>

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