



Book Review

*Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*

by Robert P. Yagelski

Publisher: Teachers College Press (2000)

Paperback, 240 pp. \$25.95

ISBN: 0807738921

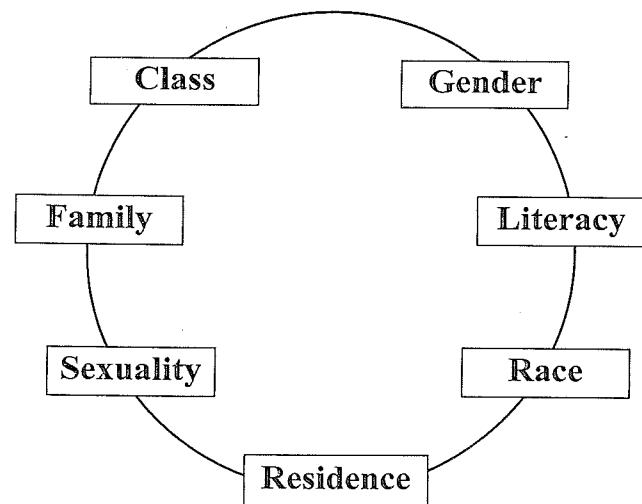
— Reviewers: Cynthia A. Lassonde  
Christine A. Woodcock

Many teachers seek practical knowledge to address the needs of their students, yet are also concerned with the theoretical and pedagogical implications of related research. What appears to be desired, by many teachers and scholars alike, is that delicate balance of theory and practice which truly is accessible. Alas, such an accessible balance is rarely tapped. *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self* by Robert P. Yagelski does strike that balance. Yagelski, assistant professor of English at the State University of New York at Albany, has successfully meshed theories of critical literacy with his own intriguing life experiences, making the book not only insightful but enjoyable as well. Scholars, teachers, and pre-service teachers will find Yagelski's thoughts enhancing, personally touching, and meaningful to their practice.

Yagelski's basic premise is grounded in Paolo Freire's research in critical literacy as a means of social change and individual empowerment. Intricately threaded throughout the book are examples of how everyone struggles with literacy's abilities to either empower or marginalize, based on how literacy *functions* in a person's life. Bordering on the philosophical, Yagelski describes how students shape identities for themselves through their writing and reading.

With other theorists, Yagelski contends that literacy is not a skill to be acquired, but instead is an interwoven piece of one's identity as an individual.

In *Literacy Matters*, the reader may see that *literacy matters* in different ways to different people, based on how writing and reading function in a given person's life. That particular function itself is based on theory that literacy is one of numerous sociocultural attributes which make up an entire continuum of interrelated attributes that affect one another. By seeing Yagelski's ideas displayed in a circle, one may envision a multi-textured image that encompasses all of these parts of life that not only matter, but have an impact on one another.



Literacy, shaped and molded by all of these socio-cultural aspects, is **one** of the pieces of the circle.

Familiar issues within the field of education are raised, such as seriously questioning our approaches to curriculum, seeing the need for more student-



centered, authentic avenues. Yagelski's writing prompts the reader to reflect on positions, on the presence of dialects in students' writing, and the dilemma of preparing students for standardized test-taking episodes. However, Yagelski does this in a refreshing way. For example, he strategically blends the impact of technology on the function of literacy in our lives, and reveals how technology shapes our definition of literacy discourse in this new communications era.

The order of *writing* and *reading* in the subtitle surely must have been intentional, as Yagelski focuses on the discourse of writing as a tool to construct one's self. Providing various perspectives on how writing is related to consciousness, the author views writing as a way to try out multiple identities, supporting the use of critical literacy in the classroom. Many teachers still present English through passive approaches, assigning tasks that involve literacy acts, but do not engage students in experiences that connect to their lives in meaningful ways. Cautioning the reader against perceiving the student writer as someone who is flawed and needs to be shown the correct way to write, the author supports a view of the student as an individual seeking control over his or her life. To encourage opportunity and freedom, students should experience literacy as a local (or personal) act of empowerment, and explore issues of culture, politics, and race. Literacy can powerfully influence life, and students should be taught in ways which reflect this notion as they construct their literate identities.

*Literacy Matters* is a profound read for anyone in the field of education, and particularly those in literacy studies. Although Yagelski envisions his audience to include teachers of secondary English and college instructors, educators and students on all levels would benefit from reading this book, as well as all literate persons seeking to lift the hood of literacy and take a look at how it works in our lives.

Whether addressing self-interest in literacy or

the role of literacy in self-construction, Yagelski paints a thorough vision of how *literacy matters*. To fully benefit from reading this book, the reader must come to it ready to spend some time contemplating and rereading the ideas Yagelski presents. The reader should plan to be intrigued, challenged, and possibly inspired to expand ideas about literacy by rethinking curriculum through reflective analysis.

*Cynthia A. Lassonde is a doctoral student in the Reading Department at the University at Albany, State University of New York and teaches at Schoharie Elementary School in Schoharie, New York.*

*A former special-education teacher, Christine A. Woodcock is currently a full time Ph.D. student in the Reading Department at the University at Albany, State University of New York.*