

**Viewpoint:  
Seeing and Then Seeing Again**

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Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called *pentimento* because the painter "repented," changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again. (Hellman, 1973, p. 3)

Elaborating on her introduction to *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits*, Lillian Hellman remarked that the book's title signaled simply her interest in examining, now that the paint had aged, "what was there for [her] once, what is there for [her] now" (p. 3) in terms of the people and events she was about to portray. Here, I draw on Hellman's sense of *pentimento* to evoke images (at the invitation of the *JLR* editors) of my research and scholarship in adolescent literacy—images of people and ideas that influenced me once, and that are there for me still, though often in perceptibly changed forms. Once captured, these images become starting places for a discussion of the present and future of adolescent literacy from my point of view.

**The Original Lines**

Twenty-seven years have elapsed since I first stepped foot into what was then the Department of Reading and Language Arts Education at Syracuse University. With only

a vague notion of why I wanted to enter a doctoral program, I had selected Syracuse because of its fine faculty, which in 1977 included Margaret Early, Diane Sawyer, William Sheldon, and Hal Herber. It was these four individuals who painted the first of several indelible images on a canvas that is part and parcel of what I think of as my academic heritage. The images, mostly textual in form, are of Margaret leading heated discussions over readings in psycholinguistic theory; of Diane planning remedial instruction for a child struggling to read; of Bill insisting that any research study “worth its salt” must have classroom applications; and of Hal writing that “content determines process”—or the notion that implicit within the content of subject matter texts, which teachers expect students to read, lie the reading skills or processes they will need to comprehend the material (Herber, 1970). By giving content the upper hand over skills and strategies, Hal made it clear that he did not equate content area reading instruction with teaching reading as a separate subject or with using commercially prepared strategy packages and pull-out programs that undermine students’ opportunities to learn content in meaningful exchanges with their peers and subject matter teachers.

These images align closely with research that I completed within a decade or so of graduating from Syracuse University’s Department of Reading and Language Arts. For example, Hal’s and Bill’s imprints are visible in my work on teaching high school students to comprehend their history texts with the aid of graphic organizers that allowed them to manipulate the texts’ underlying structures (Alvermann, 1981). Diane’s interest in students who were reading below expectations, and who thought of themselves as “being in trouble” when it came to comprehending, found its way into a study I did on the effects of spontaneous and induced lookbacks on self-perceived high and low ability

readers' comprehension (Alvermann, 1988), while Margaret's penchant for engaging doctoral students in deep discussions of assigned readings highlighted for me the mediating role of oral language in comprehending subject matter texts (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990).

### **Lines Painted Over**

With the passage of years those original brush strokes were painted over but not lost, as soon will become clear. For now, however, it is enough to say that the aging canvas is awash with images of studies that I conducted during the late 1990s onward in an attempt to blur and destabilize (in some small way) certain time-honored literacy practices that serve to perpetuate old hierarchies and relations of power. Showing through the canvas, however, are images and reminders of an earlier time, of old lines now transparent. Here, for example, one sees on close inspection the images of a quasi-experimental study, conducted to determine the effects of interactive discussion on learning counterintuitive science concepts (Alvermann, Hynd, & Qian, 1995), intersecting with a qualitative case study of three after-school Read and Talk clubs (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999). In another corner of the canvas, a critical literacy/media club study (Alvermann, Hagood, & Williams, 2001) makes way for research on the role of prior knowledge in comprehending incompatible texts (Alvermann, Smith, & Readence, 1985). And, in still another spot, an intervention study aimed at improving text-based classroom discussions (Alvermann & Hayes, 1989) shows through an investigation of three teachers' attempts to interrupt gendered discursive practices in classroom talk about texts (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997).

On this same canvas are images of research on what can be learned from reading adolescents' reading identities (Alvermann, 2001), from reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998), from using popular culture in the classroom (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), and from analyzing the similarities between professional wrestling and secondary school literacy practices (Alvermann, Huddleston, & Hagood, 2004). There are also reviews of research on critical media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000), doctoral student mentoring in literacy education (Alvermann & Hruby, 2000), and narrative methodologies for literacy research in new times (Alvermann, 2000).

All of this is to say that when older conceptions (images) were replaced by later choices, a way of seeing and then seeing again was made possible. This re-seeing, I submit, can be a fruitful starting place for gaining insight into the present and future of adolescent literacy research. In the next section of this article, I outline what I perceive to be key insights into the current research on adolescent literacy, as well as areas needing further research if the field is to move forward in its effort to support all middle and high school youth in their development as literate beings who are capable of making informed choices in ways that matter to them now and in the future.

### **Insights into the Present and Future of Adolescent Literacy**

Adolescent literacy is increasingly a topic of interest as evidenced by the number of position papers and themed issues commissioned in the last five years by professional organizations, such as the International Reading Association (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999); the National Reading Conference (Alvermann, 2002); and College Reading Association (Bean & Readence, 2002); as well as by policy groups in the private

sector, such as the Alliance for Excellent Education (Kamil, 2003; Sturtevant, 2003) and the Carnegie Corporation (*Schools for a New Society*, 2001). Claiming that a crisis situation exists in secondary school education, President Bush in his 2004 State of the Union Address opened the door to federal support for helping readers who struggle to read their assigned subject matter texts. Close upon the heels of the President's televised address, an announcement from the U.S. Department of Education reported that it would receive through the fiscal year 2005 budget "\$333 million for several small initiatives to increase the educational achievement and attainment of middle and high school students" (Alliance for Education, February 9, 2004).

For the most part, these initiatives will focus on improving adolescent literacy teaching and learning, and thus it is conceivable that the individuals in charge of developing them may look to the research on adolescent literacy as a resource for programmatic planning and evaluation. Assuming that this will be the case, what might these people find? Alternatively, what might they need to know that is either unavailable (or poorly represented) in the current knowledge base? These two questions provide a framework in which to discuss the insights gained from the images evoked through *pentimento*.

### **The Current Picture**

It is likely that a top priority in any literacy initiative aimed at improving young people's reading will be an attempt to locate existing intervention programs that show promise. Recently, Leslie Rush and I (Alvermann & Rush, 2004) reviewed seven reading programs that are representative of a range of interventions currently in use at the middle and high school level: Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning,

<http://www.renlearn.com>); Read 180 (Scholastic, <http://teacher.scholastic.com/read180/research/timeline.htm>); Reading is FAME (Curtis & Longo, 1999); the Supported Literacy Approach (Hindin, Morocco, & Aguilar, 2001), the Strategic Literacy Initiative's Reading Apprenticeship (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001), Project CRISS (Santa, Havens, & Maycumber, 1996); and the Talent Development High School Literacy Program (McPartland, Balfanz, & Shaw, 2004). Not surprisingly, each of these programs differs widely in its purpose, approach (design), intended target group, level of teacher involvement, and choice of indices for measuring success.

All, however, have one thing in common; they call to mind an image similar to one that I evoked in my attempt to see and then see again the people and ideas that influenced me once, and that are there for me still. That image is one of looking for ways to help youth who read below expectations to comprehend and learn from (and with) their subject matter texts. No new insight there, I heard myself saying. For over two decades, scholars interested in tracing the origins of content area reading (Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983) and the contexts in which this type of reading occurs (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Moore, 1996) have documented the field's preoccupation with changing not-so-good readers into better readers, or good readers into even more highly skilled readers. The focus generally has been on changing *students* rather than on re/mediating the *conditions* in which students learn (but see Cole & Griffin, 1986; Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997; Luke & Elkins, 2000). It was this point, specifically, that provided insight into how to analyze the seven reading intervention programs just named.

As noted elsewhere (Alvermann & Rush, 2004), Luke and Elkins (2000) relied on the communicative, material, and relational meanings associated with *medium*, *media*, and *mediate* to construct the notion of re/mediation—a term they use to signify the need to move beyond fruitless searches for a particular method or program that promises to fix kids’ so-called reading deficits. Re/mediation, in the sense that Luke and Elkins used the term, involves fashioning instructional conditions that enable us as researchers and teachers “to come to grips with the contextual variables in adolescent lives, all of the complex causes and consequences of any given action and intervention, and the multiple relations between media technologies that adolescents juggle every day” (p. 397). In a metaphoric sense, then, re/mediation involves fixing the conditions in which students learn rather than fixing the students per se.

### **A Critique of the Seven Programs from a Re/mediation Point of View**

Somewhat parallel to the idea that it is the conditions for student learning in subject matter classrooms that need changing, and not the students per se, is Greenleaf, Jimenez, and Roller’s (2002) definition of *intervention*—namely, the “integrated, strategic, meaningful, and, if necessary, intensive curriculum and instruction to powerfully enrich and expand adolescents’ reading lives” (p. 495). How closely do the seven reading programs that Leslie Rush and I analyzed (Alvermann & Rush, 2004) align with this definition of intervention and the notion of re/mediation?

Although Accelerated Reader (AR) is advertised as a program for motivating reluctant readers, its design is based on the assumption that students with reading difficulties lack practice in reading and that providing practice with books at their reading level will improve their fluency and comprehension. Here, the problem is perceived as

residing within the student and the partial solution is to turn that student over to a computer program for assistance. Even if AR is viewed purely as a motivational tool, problems arise because of what we know from research on extrinsic motivation for reading (e.g., Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), and from research that suggests the program has little effect on long-term motivation to read (Pavonetti, Brimmer, & Cipielewski, 2002).

Like AR, READ 180 is a computerized program designed to assist youth who struggle with reading. Although more technologically sophisticated than AR in that it provides feedback to students, makes use of video and audiotape components, and provides support for English language learners, READ 180 is based on the same assumptions about students who struggle with reading: that the problem lies within the student, and that a program such as this can provide a quick fix to that problem. Another concern with both of these programs is the ease with which it is possible for teachers to turn students who struggle with reading over to computerized programs, instead of working to understand how classrooms and instructional methods might be changed to meet adolescents' needs.

Reading is FAME is a program largely based on the assumption that adolescents who experience difficulty comprehending either have an inadequate vocabulary or problems with phonological processing. The program is designed to resolve the difficulty by providing intensive instruction in decoding and word meaning. Although improving word meaning is a worthy goal, the program's focus is a bit limited and limiting, especially when evaluated within a re/mediation framework. In a nutshell, Reading is FAME would seem to lack the contextual support and flexibility that is required of a program within this framework.

On the other hand, the Supported Literacy Approach is a good example of a program couched within a re/mediation framework. Its success among middle school students with disabilities in language processing is attributed to teachers' abilities to scaffold whole class, small group and peer-led discussions of young adult literature in ways that teach valuable comprehension skills as students talk about highly motivating material. Although this is a step forward in changing the learning conditions to meet individual needs, the Supported Literacy Approach is limited at the present to a focus on literary texts. Whether this approach would work equally well with content area texts is unknown.

The Strategic Literacy Initiative, which incorporates the Reading Apprenticeship framework, and Project CRISS are even better examples of programs that would fit within a re/mediation framework. Instead of simply changing conditions of learning for a particular type of student reading a particular type of text, these two programs provide professional development opportunities for content area teachers that support them in helping students learn from (and with) various subject matter texts. For example, teachers in the Strategic Literacy Initiative learn to use the apprenticeship model as a means of helping students become more capable readers and writers in their content area classes. In Project CRISS, teachers are encouraged to engage in action research projects of their own choosing to improve learning conditions within their own classrooms.

What sets the Talent Development High School Literacy Program apart from the other programs described thus far is its comprehensive school-wide teaching and learning components at the ninth-grade level. Teachers and students in this program are involved in semester-long professional development and specially designed strategic reading

courses, respectively. These courses are coordinated in a manner that not only changes the conditions for learning but also the curriculum. Rather than trying to fit within a school's particular prescribed curriculum, those involved in the TDHS Literacy Program are the beneficiaries of re/mediation at its best.

### **What is Missing?**

The degree to which the various interventions took into account the need for direct instruction in critical and evaluative reading could not be determined from the available literature on the programs. Because disciplinary structures differ, so do the skills and strategies necessary for reading them with an eye to evaluation and critique (Alexander & Jetton, 2000). For sure, some of the programs discussed here did indeed incorporate strategies for encouraging students to discuss critically the material at hand and to use elements of the writer's craft to point out textual inconsistencies. In this regard, the Supported Literacy Approach, the Strategic Literacy Initiative, Project CRISS, and the TDHS Literacy Program appeared to do a credible job.

However, not one of the programs under review demonstrated an overt concern for developing the multiple and nuanced nonschool literacies youth use on a regular basis (Lewis & Finders, 2004; Labbo & Reinking, 1999). It is as if the nonprint literacies that adolescents also value—e.g., the visual and digital literacies that can extend print-based learning and provide struggling readers with alternative pathways to comprehending subject matter texts (Beach & Myers, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003)—were nonexistent. From my point of view, this is a serious oversight, especially given that these same literacies account for a significant amount of adolescents' learning outside school (Alvermann, 2004; Gee, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Moje, 2000; 2002).

Having presented a case for being more inclusive of what counts as literacy, I must also acknowledge that the extent to which new media and interactive communication technologies effectively support literacy teaching and learning in classrooms is largely unknown. There is little empirical research on the topic generally, and even less that applies specifically to instruction at the middle and high school level (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000). Still, from the work that has been done (and synthesized by Kamil et al., 2000; Leu, 2000; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Luke, 2004), there is growing evidence in support of the effectiveness of literacy instruction that integrates hypermedia, hypertext, the Internet, and other information communication technologies.

This is especially the case among populations of second-language readers, youth diagnosed with reading disabilities, and students with physical disabilities who can benefit from assistive technology (Kamil et al., 2000). There is also evidence that adolescents are making valuable reading-writing connections in their bid to communicate with others in a computer-mediated world (e.g., Alvermann, 2003; Beach & Bruce, 2004; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Horney & Anderson-Inman, 1994). Given this, it would seem particularly important for future researchers to design studies capable of documenting, like Leander and McKim (2003) or O'Brien (2001), the ways in which young people's participation in ICT activities may lead to the development of literacy and communication skills that are not readily acknowledged as valid or useful in formal education settings.

### **A Final Word**

Another image evoked in my attempt to see (and then see again) the lines painted over on a canvas richly populated by adolescents is that of a youth I knew as Grady (Alvermann, 2001). Observing and working with Grady in an after-school media club for the better half of a year, I came to see him in a far different light from the one he first presented. Grady was in the lower twenty-fifth percentile of his ninth-grade class when I met him, and he was adamant that he couldn't read. He said he preferred "magazines that have only pictures," and yet each week in media club, I found him deeply absorbed in a Pokémon game book that offered players strategies for advancing to different levels of proficiency. Grady's goal was to become a trainer—a player who was capable of bringing Pokémon characters back to consciousness after they had fainted in a battle (a mild form of warfare, much different from the violence-packed Metal Gear, which Grady also played).

As noted elsewhere (Alvermann, 2004), Grady's father, like his teachers, wished that Grady would focus on reading his schoolbooks, not books about video games, or, even worse, the games themselves. This was understandable. Yet I knew it was going to take more than wishing to focus Grady's attention on academic literacy, a kind of reading and writing that requires long-term and in-depth engagement with subject matter texts in science, history, mathematics, literature, and other content areas. Without such engagement, it was likely he would fall further behind in his studies. He seemed to sense this, too, but changing his outlook on school-related reading was not an easy task.

Grady, of course, is not alone in this regard. Recent estimates by the Carnegie Corporation of New York reveal that in the United States close to 50 percent of the incoming ninth-graders in this country's comprehensive public high schools cannot

comprehend the texts that their teachers assign (Rava 2001). Given this staggering percentage, it is little wonder that a search is currently underway for intervention programs that hold promise for improving students' academic literacy. However, if found, will such approaches work for the Gradys among us who can read but choose not to?

In retrospect, the insights I gained from playing video games with Grady each week in media club—an activity that was a first for me, and one for which I lacked some pretty basic skills—were instrumental in my decision to focus on working with youth who, like Grady, are not motivated, for whatever reason, to engage with school-related reading. These are the students who choose not to read—the aliterates for whom subject matter reading seems irrelevant, not worth their time or effort. They are the same students who kept me awake at night as a classroom teacher in the early 1970s in middle schools in Texas and New York, worrying that I had not properly motivated them to want to read and learn from the history texts the school provided. They are the ones who referred to social studies, my favorite period of the day, as social-slops. Although I looked for ways to turn things around for them, I had little understanding then of concepts such as prior knowledge, text structure, student engagement, and re/mediated instruction—concepts that are central to my scholarship some 30 years later. Concepts, no doubt, that also have their origins in lines painted over.

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