Introduction

We who are teachers would have to accommodate ourselves to lives as clerks or functionaries if we did not have in mind a quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we all share. It is simply not enough for us to reproduce the way things are.

—Maxine Greene

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT that it's the first day of school and you are a high school junior named Anthony.[1] As fifth period begins, you're headed toward room 209A. It's a long walk down a fluorescent-lit corridor, through streaming crowds of strangers and, once in a while, past someone you know. A short pause, a quick high five, and on you go, weaving through the current of talk, music, moving bodies, slamming locker doors. Inside the classroom, silence. Thirty chairs in rows. Students waiting for class to begin. A teacher up front waiting for the bell to ring. Welcome to English class.

It's all so familiar. Yet even on this first day of school, you don't feel any real connection with what goes on in this room. You know you're supposed to graduate. Go to college. Get a good job. You've heard it all a million times. Ever since third grade, teachers have told you that what they are teaching will make a huge difference in your life. It's never worked out that way. Last year you squeaked by with Ds and one C.

You take a seat and look around. The teacher looks familiar. You've passed her in the hall, been in classes with a few of these kids before, but you don't

really know any of them. Your thoughts wander. Time passes. You realize the teacher has been talking but you haven't really been listening. Now she's passing out heavy thick books. In your mind, the year stretches ahead endlessly. You feel you really don't belong here, in this room, with these people. You wish you were some place—anyplace—else. Suddenly, you are very tired. You feel yourself slumping in your seat. You want to put your head down to go to sleep.

We begin this book by asking you to imagine *being* Anthony, to see what he sees, to think his thoughts, to do your best to live—if only for a few moments—inside his mind and his body. Our purpose is not only to offer a portrait of a person in a challenging situation but also to introduce a pedagogy we have been developing during the past dozen years to address the challenges Anthony, his teacher, and the students in his class are likely to face, an approach we describe in detail in this book.

Were we to explore Anthony's situation in depth, we would ask you to enter his world as fully as possible by raising a series of questions about who he is, what he knows and cares about, and the specifics of his daily life in school. We would ask you to bring Anthony's story to life by exploring these questions through one or more media—improvisation, visual arts, music, dance—and then engage in a series of activities that combines and integrates literacy and the arts. We would ask you to read more about Anthony as well as other students who are very different from him. Working together, we would talk, think, write, then create a *performance of understanding* that responds to the initial questions we raised as we explored his story.[2] We might begin with a question like, "How can we create a learning environment that students find relevant, challenging, and worthy of their attention and effort?"

Those of us who teach have known many, many Anthonys. Our challenge, and indeed our responsibility, lies in doing our best to help Anthony and every other student we encounter to connect, absorb, and make use of the course content and processes to grow and develop as thinking, fully functioning human beings who contribute in positive ways to the world. Some students come to school believing academic content is relevant to

their lives, understanding the small steps that will lead to academic success, and being willing and able to take those steps. Others give these beliefs lip service but not the necessary effort. Yet others have never been convinced that school matters either to their present or future lives. By the time they reach secondary school, many have a history of failure that has become both a pattern and an expectation that limits and diminishes their sense of who they are and what they can become. This perspective is exactly the opposite of what we educators want schooling to accomplish.

For the past dozen years, a group of teachers and artists based in the Education Department at Brown University have worked to create learning environments that bring academic content to life. The major focus of the enterprise we named the ArtsLiteracy Project has been to enrich literacy pedagogy through the arts. Our goal has been to design environments that help students develop receptivity, focus, effort, and the ability to think, learn, create, and reflect. In doing this work, we ask what it means to be a literate person and how we can best create rich, memorable learning opportunities for students.

WHAT IS LITERACY AND WHY ACQUIRE IT?

Derived from the Latin *litteratus*, in its most literal meaning, *literacy* refers to an acquaintance with letters. In this sense, it has been defined as "the ability to read and write a simple message."[3] In the current-day context, however, educators recognize that literacy goes far beyond merely understanding and communicating simple messages with print texts. We understand that literacy and the pedagogy of literacy have become more complex and multifaceted and, simultaneously, more crucially tied to students' social futures.[4]

Some years ago, a group of international literacy educators, the New London Group, convened to explore the way that literacy is developing and changing. The group coined the term *multiliteracies*. The prefix *multi-* points in two directions: first, to the multiplicity of channels for communication and comprehension that includes, but extends far beyond, print;

and, second, to the cultural and linguistic diversity most people encounter in this increasingly global society. In the first sense, the term refers to the plurality of text types and forms that circulate and connect, the "increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on."[5] In the second sense, multiliteracies refers to the multiple languages and communication patterns each of us is likely to encounter, the broadening range of specialist registers and situational variations that more and more frequently cross cultural, national, and community boundaries.

Every day in classrooms, teachers encounter the full range of multiliteracies. We meet some students who are proficient readers and writers, skilled at academic literacy; others who are talented visual artists or musicians who struggle to master high school–level print texts; those who speak three or four languages with ease but resist putting pen to paper; and still others expert at negotiating the rich and complex world of the Internet. As options and variations increase, so too does the evidence that students' experiences in school—and with literacy pedagogy in particular—contribute in major ways to their life chances. Their school achievements are closely tied to their prospects in the years beyond and to the creation of their social futures. What happens to Anthony in the next few minutes—and in the days beyond—really matters.

By the time students reach high school, they have developed an *identity kit* of personal goals and interests closely tied to the kinds of literacies they practice.[6] They have a long history of school success and failure, often based on their facility in mastering traditional literacy forms and processes. Their histories affect how they see themselves as well as how others see them and contribute in major ways to their educational outcomes and life opportunities.

MULTILITERACIES AND POSITIVE SOCIAL FUTURES

How might educators design and establish classrooms in which a student's academic history is not a predictor of her social destiny? How might we

create academic environments that inspire rather than limit, that incorporate the full range of multiliteracies, and that support students in developing a range of skills, knowledge, and dispositions they can use to participate fully and productively in public, community, and economic life? These are formidable and critical questions. To address them requires a vision for what such environments can accomplish and a design for bringing these environments to life, what Maxine Greene describes as a "quest for a better state of things."[7]

As educators, we assume responsibility for developing that vision and design. As mentors, our ideas need to be transparent and explicit enough that our students can both adopt and adapt the vision and modify the design for their own purposes. The kinds of sharing we have in mind involve: (1) giving students access to materials and ideas that open new educational and social possibilities and help them to establish their own personal vision; and (2) encouraging them to connect actively with content, "to develop the capacity to speak up, to negotiate and to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives."[8] As the New London Group points out, the combination of access and critical engagement motivates students to develop and refine the tools they require to design their social futures.

At the ArtsLiteracy Project we began to explore ways to link literacy and the arts in order to bring to the learning environment the full range of multiliteracies. We imagined classrooms in which students learn to be active and skilled readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and creators, all in the service of exploring and addressing significant issues in their lives and the lives of others. We imagined methods of inquiry in which students connect their interests, personal stories, and questions to the rich storehouse of existing literary and artistic texts. We believe students can use this process to design and construct positive social futures.

In the pages that follow, we describe this approach, agreeing with educational historian Diane Ravitch that no "silver bullet . . . magic feather . . . or panacea will miraculously improve student achievement."[9] Instead, we offer our experience as a modest example of an approach that brings to life and makes transparent our vision of what education can be. At its best, this

approach welcomes students into the world of learning, promotes civility and mutual respect among participants, and offers a balance between rich academic content and the tools for working with that content.

In articulating this vision, we draw on the work of many who have preceded us—philosophers, educators, researchers, and theorists. Three who have influenced our work are educator Paulo Freire, philosopher Maxine Greene, and linguistic anthropologist and researcher Shirley Brice Heath. Freire was a passionate believer in the power and value of literacy to make sense of a difficult and confusing world and, ultimately, to create positive social change. His education project, developed in Brazil and implemented worldwide, is famously based on three elements: establishing an environment of mutual respect in which serious dialogue among equals can take place, developing participants' critical consciousness, and putting literacy learning to work in the service of equity and social justice. In Freire's view, the purpose of developing literacy must not be to replicate existing knowledge but, rather, to use inquiry to assist reason: "Apart from inquiry . . . individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."[10] Freire described environments in which people saw literacy learning as tied to their own self-interest as "pockets of hope": "The people wanted and needed to read and to write, precisely in order to have more of a possibility to be themselves . . . Reading and writing was an important instrument and also a sign of respect for them, self-respect."[11]

Like Freire, Maxine Greene's project is aimed at creating positive social change, or "looking at things as if they could be otherwise." Greene views the arts as a powerful tool for releasing the imagination, opening new perspectives, and identifying alternatives: "To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished . . . and to carve out new orders in experience . . . what might be, what should be and what is not yet." She identifies writers, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, choreographers, and composers as creating "as if" worlds in which work in

the arts leads to appreciating cultural diversity, making community, and becoming wide-awake to the world.

> What I am describing here is a mode of . . . thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world. That kind of reshaping imagination may be released through many sorts of dialogue: dialogue among the young who come from different cultures and different modes of life, dialogue among people who have come together to solve problems that seem worth solving to all of them, dialogue among people undertaking shared tasks, protesting injustices, avoiding or overcoming dependencies or illnesses. When such dialogue is activated in classrooms even the young are stirred to reach out on their own initiatives. Apathy and indifference are likely to give way as images of what might be arise.[12]

Recently, researchers have begun to use large data sets and analytical tools such as the fMRI to study the links between the arts and cognition. Some of this work explores the effects of what researchers variously call *embodied learning*, *kinesthetic learning,* or *mimesis*, situations in which people use their bodies to represent specific content. Others study the learner's attentional capacity, short- and long-term memory, and the effects of presenting material using a variety of symbol systems. Still others seek to identify ways that learning in the arts may transfer to learning in other content areas. Behind all of these approaches is the premise that multisensory learning—theatrical improvisation, visual art, writing, dancing, and singing in combination with the study of a challenging literary text—provides a developmentally appropriate means of engaging students, especially adolescents, with new ideas, with their own creativity, and with one another.

We began to see possibilities for moving from theory to practice in Shirley Brice Heath and Milbury W. McLaughlin's research on arts-based youth organizations. In an extensive, decade-long survey of 124 youth organizations in the United States, Heath, McLaughlin, and a team of researchers examined the multiple roles youth play in these organizations.

They took a particularly close look at language and found that "the influences of participation in the arts on language shows up in the dramatic increase in syntactic complexity, hypothetical reasoning, and questioning approaches taken up by young people within four-to-six weeks of their entry into the arts organization."[13] Furthermore, "students in theatre-based organizations of our research had in each practice session approximately six times as many opportunities to speak more than one sentence as they might have in their English and Social Studies classrooms." Students in community arts organizations practice "thinking and talking as adults." They have a side-by-side relationship with the mentoring adults in the organizations. Heath explains that "the highly frequent oral exchanges between youth and older peers and adults around problem posing and hypothetical reasons lead these youth in arts organizations to consider multiple ways of doing and being in their artistic work and beyond."

With these findings in mind, we began to ask why students don't participate at the same level during school hours as they do in community-based arts organizations. Might we envision a process where students and teachers engage collaboratively in imagining creative possibilities and developing authentic artistic products? Can the kind of hypothetical thinking and discussion that exists in arts-based youth organizations be part of the daily life of schools?

TRANSLATING VISION INTO PRACTICE: THE ARTSLITERACY PROJECT

The goal of the ArtsLiteracy Project is to create powerful learning experiences that have the capacity to transform participants' understanding and actions. Given that literacy achievement often determines student success in school, we wanted multiliteracies (including print texts and a range of other art forms) to anchor the work and to create communities of practice that use arts and literacy activities to promote collaboration, creativity, and literate behaviors.[14] We wanted participants to address significant questions,