

Jerrie Cobb Scott

## LITERACIES AND DEFICITS REVISITED

**ABSTRACT:** *This article identifies two factors that contribute to the recycling of deficit pedagogy in programs designed for what Rose calls “students on the boundary.” The first factor is traditional, technocratic definitions of literacy, viewed here as a mechanism for importing deficit theories into the content of instructional programs and accounting partially for the “missed” education of marginalized students, including students in basic writing programs. Shifting the focus to the “mis-education” of teachers, the discussion explores the second factor: “uncritical dysconsciousness,” defined as the acceptance, sometimes unconsciously, of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of good intentions, defend the norms, superiority, and privileges of the dominant group. The paper challenges basic writing professionals to move to a higher level of critical consciousness in designing and implementing a pedagogy of success, thereby eliminating recycling deficits into programs designed for marginalized students.*

Why do we continue to revisit the issue of deficit pedagogy, particularly in programs designed for what Rose calls “students on the boundary?” It is reasonable to assume that we have either failed to get to the root of the problem or refused to accept the explanations offered. In this discussion, I identify two factors that

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contribute to the recycling of deficit pedagogy in basic writing and other programs targeted for marginalized students. The first factor is traditional, technocratic definitions of literacy, viewed here as a mechanism for importing deficit theories into the content of instructional programs, resulting in the “missed education” of marginalized students. The second factor has to do with attitudes that pervasively but persistently resist change, notably in the delivery of instruction. To explore attitudinal effects on pedagogy, I offer the concept of “uncritical dysconsciousness,” defined as the acceptance, sometimes unconsciously, of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of good intentions, defend the advantages of insiders and the disadvantages of outsiders. Throughout the second part of the paper, I present “think abouts” to challenge professionals working in basic writing programs to move to a higher level of critical consciousness and toward nondeficit approaches to programs targeted for marginalized students.

### **Definitions of Literacy**

One clear linguistic indicator of an important societal problem is the redefinition of terms. Certainly “literacy” has been redefined often enough over the last two decades to give us pause. Do we need yet another definition? What does the term literacy really mean? And, have the various definitions moved us to a point of meaninglessness rather than meaningfulness? This discussion is less concerned with the precise definitions of literacy than with their effects on our approaches to instruction.

Narrow definitions of literacy, or even the perception of only one kind of literacy, account in part for deficit approaches to instructional programs designed for students who either fail in schools or are failed by the schools. For example, remedial or developmental programs, including basic writing programs, often identify their target population in relation to the narrow definition of literacy, the ability to read or write. At the outset, then, such programs assume that the learner has deficiencies that must be remediated. Based on the logic that these deficiencies can be precisely diagnosed, the next logical step is to prescribe methods for correcting the deficiencies. We now know that it is merely wishful thinking that allows us to assume that learning processes are so neatly packaged, or that we have reached a level of understanding of learning that allows us to pinpoint discrete skills and a sequence for learning that has psychological reality for any one learner, much less a whole group of learners.

The notion of “unpacking literacy” (Scribner and Cole) can

be found in evolving definitions of literacy, some of which support and others that reject deficit approaches to instruction. In support of deficit approaches to instruction for nonmainstream groups is the view that explains literacy in terms of membership in advanced, high-tech cultures, particularly those that use an alphabetic writing system (Ong; Goody and Watt). This way of defining literacy leads us to a division among the cultures of the world—literate vs. oral cultures; it is inherently biased against oral literacy. Culture is also discussed in relation to the term “cultural literacy,” the Hirschian model (Hirsch, 1987). While expanding the definition of literacy to include knowledge, the Hirschian viewpoint is biased toward the shared knowledge base of the dominant group or, more accurately, information and facts that the dominant group stores. If this viewpoint is carried into pedagogy, it can easily import the baggage of a deficit pedagogy, precisely because it makes unimportant the knowledge base of different subcultures within a diverse society.

Rapidly gaining attention among language educators are definitions of literacy that are not inherently biased against certain groups and that support nondeficit approaches to instruction. One such term is critical literacy, defined as neither a skill nor membership in a particular group, but an act—the act of socially transforming oneself to the level of active participation in and creation of a culture. Emphasis is placed on the use of creative and critical sensibilities of the general culture as well as its subcultures, to include nonmainstream groups. From the Freireian perspective, the importance of literacy rests with the ways we use reading, writing, and speaking skills so that our understanding of the world is progressively enlarged (Freire).

Work in anthropological studies, note Bloome and Green, argues for “reconsideration and redefinition of what counts as literacy in the broad sense, and literacy learning and pedagogy more specifically” (2). Similar views are held by scholars of this persuasion.

[They] share a rejection of technocratic views of literacy and education. They reject the view that literacy consists of decontextualized cognitive and linguistics skills and that becoming literate is defined by the acquisition of skills. Instead, literacy and education are viewed as social and cultural practices and actions that vary across cultures, communities, and across situations even within the same setting. Thus, there are multiple literacies rather than a single literacy and individuals may be literate in multiple ways. (2)

A point not to be overlooked about these various ways of defining literacy is that each definition varies according to purposes for defining. Bloome suggests an instructionally motivated purpose for anthropological studies: "The promise and substance of anthropologically based research on teaching the English language arts lie, in large part, in the possibilities and vision it yields for social equality in and through educational settings" (2).

I believe that instructionally motivated definitions of literacy are best conceptualized in ways that include the do's and can do's of the population to be served, rather than their weaknesses or differences from other groups deemed successful. Concerned that narrow definitions of literacy, e.g., the ability to read or write, yield instructional models often targeted toward problems associated with ways that nonmainstream groups differ linguistically and culturally from mainstream groups, I set out to define literacy broadly enough to be inclusive of multiple literacies and diverse ways of using literacies by different groups.

Thus, I define literacy as ways of knowing, accessing, creating, and using information. Literacy is neither a product nor a finite state, but a process that changes in response to different contexts. From this perspective, reading and writing are two important tools of literacy, particularly in a print-oriented society such as ours. There are, however, other tools of literacy, including oral and visual skills that can be represented in both print and nonprint forms.

This view of literacy has worked well in my own work, yielding a variety of models that seek to enhance multiple sensibilities through multisensory perceptions. One example is the Visual-Print Literacy model (Scott, Davis, and Walker). Developed in collaboration with an artist, Willis Davis, this instructional program encourages students to access information from both visual and verbal texts, to create meaning—multiple meanings, and to use those meanings to read the different messages in their personal, social, and academic worlds. It is important that the visual-print literacy program, as well as others, evolve from a definition of literacy that rejects deficit approaches to instruction.

In short, my definition of literacy, along with those that basically reject the technocratic orientation mentioned by Bloome, guards against importing the negative baggage of deficits into instruction, thereby allowing for instructional content that might otherwise be reserved for the so-called gifted or normative group. Narrowly defined definitions constrain content to what is perceived as simple, but is experienced as boring, insignificant, irrelevant, and nonchallenging to all, including basic writers.

## Attitudes and Uncritical Dysconsciousness

Widely acknowledged is the pervasive manner in which attitudes affect instruction. From self-fulfilling prophecies, a recurring theme of the 1960s and 1970s, to their behavioral manifestations in student-teacher interactions discussed widely in applied anthropological linguistics of the 1980s and the early 1990s, attitudes may be seen as a mechanism for resisting change. As we approach the twenty-first century with a more rigorous agenda for change, we are challenged toward greater understanding of how attitudes affect teaching and learning.

Clearly, the research on linguistic and cultural diversity has played a significant role in the restructuring of curricula, including the integration of information about language differences into language instruction for ethnically and socially diverse students and the infusion of multicultural content across disciplines. Nevertheless, many questions regarding attitudes as mechanisms for resisting change remain unanswered, leaving the problem of deficit approaches to instruction for marginalized groups unresolved.

Without reviewing the literature on attitudes, suffice it here to say that we know more about what the negative attitudes are than about how to change them. Noting the importance of the "will to educate all children" to effective education in a pluralistic society, Hilliard calls for deep restructuring:

Deep restructuring is a matter of drawing up an appropriate vision of human potential, of the design of human institutions, of the creation of a professional work environment, of the linkage of school activities and community directions, of creating human bonds in the operation of appropriate socialization activities, and of aiming for the stars for the children and for ourselves academically and socially....The beauty and promise of true restructuring is that it will provide us with the opportunity to create educational systems that never have existed before, not because they were hard to create but because we have not yet made manifest the vision or tried to create them. (35)

The vision of creating educational systems that never existed is widely sought after, as evidenced in the New American Schools program's (1991) call for break-the-mold innovations in educational programs, presumably changes that will address the needs of a diverse student population. However, as Hilliard's explanation of deep restructuring suggests, restructuring is needed not only at the level of content, but also at the level of attitudes that

ultimately determine how the content will be delivered.

The three examples below illustrate what can happen if we limit restructuring efforts to surface level changes in the curriculum: (1) linguistic differences, cast in the traditional delivery mold, treat differences as deficits (Scott, 1992); (2) literature-based reading programs, delivered in the same manner as basal programs—popularly referred to as the basalization of whole language approaches, import the same pedagogical problems that the literature-based programs sought to resolve; and (3) a reductionist approach to multicultural education lends itself to a devaluing, rather than an appreciation and understanding, of the richness and potential unifying dimensions of diversity. The challenge, I submit, is to find ways to bring about deep restructuring to accompany the surface-level restructuring of curricula. And this will require a fuller understanding of various forms of marginalization.

There is now a growing body of literature in the areas of racism, sexism, and classism that has implications for the more general problem of marginalization. Moreover, it appears that this work could be of use to teachers. I offer here some notions about “uncritical dysconsciousness,” not as models but as “think abouts.” Think first about the term uncritical dysconsciousness, a phrase coined from critical consciousness and dysconsciousness. “Critical consciousness,” notes King, “involves an ethical judgment about the social order,” whereas dysconsciousness is “an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (154). Broadening the two terms to cover various forms of marginalization, I use uncritical dysconsciousness to refer to the acceptance, sometimes unconsciously, of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of intent, defend the advantages of insiders and the disadvantages of outsiders. As teachers, we tend to operate without questioning the extent to which practices deviate from the ideal, socially sanctioned ideologies of society or how our individual processes of self-identity interplay with the self-identity of students. To fail to critically examine the practiced vs. the preached ideologies of society or the student vs. the teacher’s self-identity is to support, through uncritical dysconsciousness, the recycling of attitudes that resist changes that benefit those marginalized in school systems.

What can be gleaned from discussions of ideology and self-identity is that we have largely focused on one side of the marginalization coin—the problems, ideologies, and identity of outsiders, resulting in a pattern of defining problems in relation to

inequities experienced by the disadvantaged but finding solutions in the ways and means of the advantaged. On the other side of the coin, there also exist problems, ideologies, identities among insiders. We might think about exposing both sides of the coin, thereby providing a more balanced picture of what needs to be changed and a fuller understanding of resistances to change, or more specifically, the staying power of deficit pedagogy for marginalized students.

In the article "Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity and the Mis-education of Teachers," King illustrates how a group of preservice teachers, accustomed to accepting the ideals of the democratic ethic, may readily accept what Tatum calls the myth of meritocracy: the belief in a just society where individual efforts are fairly rewarded. Focusing on ethnically based marginalization, King found that her students tended to link racism to either the distant past—slavery, individual cases of denial, or lack of equal opportunity—or to normative patterns of discrimination. King concludes that these responses show the general failure to recognize structural inequities built into the social order. Of importance to this discussion, the responses point to the ease with which one can ignore the differences between the practiced and the preached ideologies of society. Teachers can easily move toward a sense of hopelessness because of their inability to change the past, their understanding of the problem as individual cases of discrimination for which they are not responsible, and their social distance from the problem. Further, if attention is focused on only the experiences of outsiders, in this case African Americans, it becomes easy to provide a rationale for deficiencies. Despite the 1970s and 1980s preachings and teachings about differences, rather than deficits, Hull, Rose, Fraser, and Castellano explain that, "We struggle within a discourse that yearns for difference, and difference, in our culture, slides readily toward judgments of better-or-worse, dominance, Otherness" (24).

To rectify the problem of conflicts between practiced and ideal ideologies, King suggests the use of counterknowledge strategies that allows teachers to consciously examine their ideologies about "otherness." I am suggesting that one way to hurdle the difference-transformed-to-deficit obstacle and the self-fulfilling-prophecy pattern is by providing a context for examining the democratic ethic of social equality from the point of view of both the advantaged and disadvantaged, looking particularly at who benefits and who suffers from structural inequities that are built into the social order and allowed to have a practical existence that

contradicts the culturally sanctioned ideals of society. By examining societal ideologies from both perspectives, it should be possible to diffuse the thinking that confuses differences with deficits, a confusion that serves to justify the recycling of deficit pedagogy.

We also have an imbalance in the focus on self-identity. A good deal of attention has been given to the development of self-identity among nonmainstream groups—how for example, identity influences resistances to change toward the norms of the dominant group, including language (Ogbu). Looking at only the student side of the identity issue, it is easy to overlook the teacher side. Regardless of the qualifying basis for marginalization—ethnic group, gender, religion, income, or membership in developmental or remedial programs—self-identity will vary among individuals within a group as well as across groups. Moreover we each move in and out of marginalized status, teachers and students alike. Teachers in basic writing programs, for example, often share their students' sense of marginalization. Having linked self-identity to attitudes that affect student-teacher interactions, I suggest that exposure to various ways that individuals develop self-identity would provide a more balanced and useful way of understanding interactions among people in general and between teachers and students in particular.

Focusing on ethnically based marginalization, Tatum's discussion of the development of self-identity illustrates the importance of viewing self-identity from the dual perspectives of outsiders and insiders. In her analysis of stages in the development of White and Black racial identity, she uses a journal entry of a White male to illustrate the first stage of White racial identity development, the Contact stage. This stage is characterized by the lack of awareness of cultural and institutional racism and of White privileges, and "includes curiosity about or fear of people of color, based on stereotypes learned from friends, family, or the media" (13). She uses the journal entry of an African American female to illustrate the first stage of Black racial identity, the Preencounter stage. In this stage the African American absorbs many of the beliefs and values of the dominant group. Both journal entries were produced in a psychology course that treats issues of racism, classism, and sexism:

As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage....I was taught to



see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group. (Tatum, 13)

For a long time it seemed as if I didn't remember my background, and I guess in some ways I didn't. I was never taught to be proud of my African heritage.... I went through a very long stage of identifying with my oppressors. Wanting to be like, live like, and be accepted by them. Even to the point of hating my own race and myself for being a part of it. Now I am ashamed that I ever was ashamed. I lost so much of myself in my denial of and refusal to accept my people. (10)

The final stage of each group represents a comfort zone that facilitates interactions across groups. For African Americans, the internalization/commitment stage is characterized by a positive sense of racial identity, sustained over time, allowing the individual to practically perceive and transcend racism and to develop and execute a plan of action. For White Americans, autonomy, the final stage, is marked by racial self-actualization, an ongoing process that leads continually to new ways of thinking and behaving regarding racism.

Three points are of special interest to this discussion: first, Taylor's discussion shows the problem of attitudes to be so deeply rooted that students resist talking about them; second, a process is involved for both mainstream and nonmainstream students, ending with behaviors that are more accepting of differences; and third, variations in identity development may be seen as potential sources of conflicts between members of different ethnic groups, and implicationally between students and teachers, as each brings different sets of self-qualifiers to the classroom setting. In essence, the questions of, "Who am I?" and, "Who are you?" affect interactions between teachers and students.

Tatum suggests that resistances can be reduced and development promoted by creating a safe classroom atmosphere and opportunities for self-generated knowledge, and by providing a model to enhance understanding of one's own processes and that utilizes strategies that empower one to act as change agents. I am suggesting that more attention be given to discovering how self-identity of teachers and students affects the context for learning. If treated as tendencies that people follow when their status is viewed as marginalized or nonmarginalized, the developmental stages may serve as a heuristic device for exploring deeply rooted attitudes that allow the resurfacing of deficit approaches. To "think about"

is the question of how different ways of defining oneself affect student-teacher interaction in the classroom and therefore the delivery of educational programs. Drawing on different sources of information, e.g., racism, sexism, classism, it is possible to generalize findings to the broader issues of marginalization, student-teacher interaction, and the kinds of changes needed to produce learning environments where students and teachers of diverse backgrounds confront the problems of resistance that negatively affect student-teacher interactions. No matter how the surface structures of the curriculum are restructured, without deep restructuring we can expect problems in the delivery of instruction.

In this era of new democracies and transformed curricula, it will be important to move toward a balanced treatment of attitudes, one that actually allows us to see both sides of the marginalization coin. To fail to do so is to continue to struggle with the ills of uncritical dysconsciousness. In no way can we expect educational reforms in curriculum to bring about educational changes, without also addressing the attitudes that shape the context for learning. We need, as Hilliard notes, "deep restructuring," and that involves the restructuring of frames for thinking about marginalization and changing practices that recycle deficits.

Why do we continue to revisit the issue of deficit pedagogy, particularly in relation to programs designed for students on the boundary? This presentation suggests not an answer, but different ways of thinking about the roots of the problem. Evolving definitions of literacy allow us to think differently about how definitions affect pedagogy. The notion of uncritical dysconsciousness challenges us to think about attitudes that are embedded in a complex matrix of societal ideologies and individual stages in the development of self-identity, two of the areas that can affect the effectiveness with which we deliver restructured instructional programs. The bottom line is that both knowledge and the care we take in delivering knowledge are important. Simply, very simply, students don't care what we know unless they know we care.

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