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DEFINING LITERACY

LESSONS FROM HIGH-STAKES TEACHER TESTING

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Teacher educators face a dilemma: How do we prepare preservice teachers to pass new high-stakes certification tests when these tests are often based on philosophical perspectives that run counter to our own beliefs about literacy, learning, and teaching. In this article, the authors offer an inquiry-oriented approach that uses the lens of the New Literacy Studies to help prospective teachers simultaneously prepare for and critique high-stakes standardized tests such as the Communication and Literacy Skills (CLS) portion of the Massachusetts Educator Certification Tests. The authors describe a specific activity, inviting preservice teachers to explore the social nature of literacies, investigate the characteristics of the CLS, and reflect on this type of high-stakes assessment. After providing a critique of the CLS test based on this type of activity, the authors offer recommendations for more extended activities to be used in teacher education courses.

But this test goes against everything I'm being taught to teach!

This observation, from a frustrated undergraduate student participating in a workshop to prepare preservice teachers for the Communication and Literacy Skills (CLS) portion of the Massachusetts Educator Certification Tests (MECT), sums up a dilemma facing teacher educators across the nation: How do we prepare preservice teachers to pass new high-stakes certification tests when these tests are often based on philosophical perspectives that run counter to some of our most deeply held beliefs about literacy, learning, and teaching? As Massachusetts teacher educators and literacy scholars committed to a view of literacy as social practices and of teaching and learning as inquiry, we find ourselves facing this dilemma in relation to the CLS.

Designed by the testing company National Evaluation Systems, the CLS represents one half of Massachusetts's controversial new teacher certification test (the other half is a subject area test). The CLS consists of a reading subtest made up of multiple-choice and vocabulary items and a writing subtest that includes two writing exercises, a number of grammar and usage questions, and a dictation activity designed to measure test takers' grasp of written mechanics (see Table 1). Since its first April 1998 administration, when more than one half of the test takers failed, the MECT in general and the CLS in particular have generated storms of controversy in Massachusetts (Ebbert, 1998; Mason, 1998). Debates continue to rage about the appropriateness of the tests and about the quality of Massachusetts teachers and teacher education programs. In the meantime, however, the stakes

TABLE 1 Overview of Massachusetts Educator Certification Test: Communication and Literacy Skills Test

Reading subtest
Multiple-choice items are linked to reading passages. The sample passage is about bacteria farming, and the questions deal with main idea, writer's purpose, inferences about content, and underlying assumptions.
Word meaning (vocabulary) items require candidates to write definitions of words. The words on the sample test are <i>abolish</i> and <i>democracy</i> .
Writing subtest
Written summary requires candidates to read a passage and write a summary of it. Summaries are scored for fidelity to the content of the passage, conciseness, organization, sentence structure, usage, and mechanical conventions. The sample passage is about the meaning of the Constitution.
Written composition requires candidates to write an essay on a specified topic. Essays are scored for appropriateness of topic and style, mechanical conventions, usage, sentence structure, focus and unity, organization, and development of ideas. The sample prompt involves taking a position about raising the federal tax on gasoline.
Grammar and usage
Multiple-choice items are linked to passages that contain grammatical, usage, or structural errors. The sample item involves a passage about Martha Graham, with questions about the order of information and punctuation conventions.
Sentence correction items present sentences that contain one or more errors and require the candidate to rewrite the sentence in edited American English. The following is a sample item: "Even though they both knew the boat was your's, neither Arthur nor Ed thought to ask themselves whether it was proper to use it without first obtaining permission." (Hint: There are two errors.)
Grammar definition items require candidates to write definitions of grammatical terms. The sample items are "noun" and "preposition."
Written mechanics involves listening to an audiotaped passage and writing it down word for word. Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are scored. The passage on the first administration of the test was from <i>The Federalist Papers</i> .

SOURCE: Adapted from Massachusetts Department of Education (1998).

remain high: Teacher candidates must pass the CLS to teach, and teacher education programs must reach an overall pass rate on the MECT of 80% of their graduates to retain their accreditation from the state.

We want to help our teacher education students prepare for and pass this high-stakes, standardized test of communication and literacy skills, but we want to do this in ways that support and further, rather than contradict, the understandings about literacy as social practices and learning as inquiry that we promote in our courses. In this article, we offer an inquiry-oriented approach that uses the lens of the New Literacy Studies to help preservice teachers simultaneously prepare for and critique high-stakes literacy tests such as the CLS and similar tests their own students may be required to take. After a review of the literature related to the New Literacy Studies, we describe an activity designed to engage preservice teachers and teacher educators in an inquiry into the CLS as a literacy practice. As a part of this description, we provide a critique of the CLS from the perspective of literacy as social practices. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for additional ways to use high-stakes testing as an opportunity for preservice teachers to enrich their understandings of literacy and to engage

in models of inquiry that may be used with their students as well.

Perspectives From the New Literacy Studies

The theoretical perspectives on literacy that ground our work in teacher education and our critique of the CLS are drawn from recent scholarship in the field sometimes referred to as the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1990; Street, 1995). The following key points from this literature inform our consideration of the CLS.

Literacy is not a single body of knowledge but a varied set of social practices. In contrast with the prevalent understanding of literacy as a body of knowledge and skills possessed by individuals, the New Literacy Studies focus on the ways that people use reading, writing, and oral language in social situations for social purposes. This approach emerged in the early 1980s with anthropologically based work by Heath (1983) in the United States and Scribner and Cole (1981) in Africa showing that different cultures and communities have different "ways with words" (Heath, 1983), that even seemingly universal acts such as asking questions and telling stories vary across cultures and situations, and that the

type of literacy valued in schools is just one of many types of literacy practices outside schools. So instead of literacy in the singular, scholars have begun to speak of literacy practices, multiple literacies, or situated literacies and to see individuals as having varied repertoires of literacies.

The meanings of oral and written texts are embedded in sociocultural contexts, and interpretation depends on those contexts. Barton (1994) describes language as a symbolic medium through which people represent experience to themselves and others in ways that are continuously negotiated within particular social groups or discourse communities. Meaning is not carried by texts but is located in the interactions between speaker/writer, listener/reader, and the text. On this basis, Street (1995) and others (e.g., Tannen, 1982) have argued against the notion that written language is autonomous and decontextualized and carries singular meanings (e.g., Olson, 1977). Although some written discourses, such as the law, are designed to be explicit and self-contained, the variety of interpretations generated when legal arguments are made in court demonstrates the impossibility of this ideal (Barton, 1994). Thus, the production and interpretation of texts always involve understandings rooted in sociocultural contexts.

The forms of oral and written texts are designed to serve personal and social purposes in particular sociocultural contexts and are difficult, if not impossible, to generate or evaluate in the absence of purpose and context. A large body of research in sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication (e.g., Gumperz, 1982; Heath, 1983) demonstrates that the vocabulary, grammatical and textual structures, and delivery or formatting of texts are shaped to meet the communicative purposes and cultural norms of the social situation. Linguists describe varieties of a single language as dialects (varieties shared within a region or social class) and registers (varieties typical of particular social contexts), and they argue that all varieties are systematic, grammatical, and functional (Kutz, 1997). People learn a number of varieties through membership in social groups and participation in social interac-

tion, and they draw on these varieties flexibly to serve their purposes in social situations. Even genres that seem ubiquitous, such as rules and regulations, take different forms depending on the context and circumstances. Kress (1999) compares rules posted in three different institutions and describes how prohibition, for example, is expressed more directly in some settings than in others (e.g., “NO EATING at all in ambulances” vs. “Please respect the facilities and equipment, and take particular care with untrained children”) (p. 465). He argues that text production is always “generative,” with texts designed in response to the perceived needs of the maker of the text in a given environment. Thus, matters of form are integrally tied to context and purpose and cannot be prescribed or evaluated without considering context and purpose.

Literacy practices involve the interrelated use of oral language, reading, and writing, which become altogether different practices when decomposed into separate, discrete skills. Studies of situated literacies have challenged the traditional divide between orality and literacy and have demonstrated that in a literate society, the forms and functions of oral and written language overlap considerably and that oral language, reading, and writing often occur within the same language event (Street, 1995; Tannen, 1982). For example, numerous studies show how academic reading and writing practices are embedded in and shaped by classroom talk (Dyson, 1993; Rex & McEachen, 1999), whereas other studies focus on the relationship between academic and nonacademic literacy practices. For example, Gilmore (1986) describes how the features of written language enter into the choreographed oral performances, or “steps,” of urban African American girls. When these same features are isolated for instruction, practice, and assessment in the classroom, however, they become very different practices in which the same girls perform very differently. Similarly, instruction and assessment practices that call for conscious awareness and articulation of aspects of language, such as defining parts of speech, are quite different from using those same aspects in other types of practices. The evidence suggests

that instruction and assessment practices that isolate language from its contexts of use and decompose it into separate skills or require rote definitions of terms bear little relation to the practices people need to learn and use to participate fully in a literate society (e.g., Calkins, 1980).

There is no continuum or hierarchy of literacy; different literacies serve different purposes and are valued differently in different social settings. On the relationship among the variety of situated literacies, Barton (1994) wrote the following:

There is not a single dimension on which they can be placed from simple to complex or from easy to difficult. So-called simple and complex forms of literacy are in fact different literacies serving different purposes. They do not lead on from one to the other in any obvious way. (pp. 38-39)

But in addition to being situated in sociocultural contexts, literacies are also ascribed value within sociocultural, institutional, and political contexts. Barton, for example, points to the common perception that reading books is more valuable than reading comic books or magazines, and Street (1995) traces (and critiques) the history by which “essayist literacy” came to be seen as the embodiment of reason despite the evidence of similar kinds of reasoning in many other language practices. Even the standardization of so-called correct spelling and punctuation is described by Clark and Ivanic (1997) as a normative valuing of a particular set of language conventions that have come to represent social acceptability and educational achievement. Particular literacy practices often take on symbolic value (either positive or negative) that has little to do with their meaningfulness and functionality in everyday life and more to do with rationalizing prejudice against particular social groups and maintaining the social status of the elites.

Taking a historical perspective, Luke (1998) and Street (1998) have argued that instruction and assessment practices based on the New Literacy Studies better serve the economic and social needs of the present and the future than do the assumptions of what Street calls the “autonomous model” of literacy, or the belief that literacy is a single hierarchy of decompos-

able skills and that written texts should carry singular meanings isolated from context and reflect a single set of “correct” conventions. The autonomous model, according to Street (1995), inappropriately generalizes a narrow set of what are actually situated practices, and it disregards the sociocultural contexts that make these and other literacy practices meaningful. It thus fails to address the social, cultural, and intellectual complexity of the classrooms our preservice teachers will enter. Our goal in what follows is to describe how the theoretical perspectives from the New Literacy Studies have been and can be used with preservice teachers as a framework for examining the CLS test as a situated literacy practice. Our own inquiry about the test with preservice teachers and teacher educators suggests that it is framed by the assumptions of the autonomous model, as we show through our discussion of the activity we have used.

Situating, “Unpacking,” and Critiquing the CLS

In this section, we describe a three-part activity that draws on the notion of literacy portfolios (Hansen, 1992), pedagogical approaches related to critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 1999; Lankshear, 1997), and the concept of situated cognition (Resnick, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). This activity is designed to encourage preservice teachers, in the context of a test preparation workshop, to explore the social nature of literacies, to investigate and learn about the characteristics of the CLS test as a specific literacy practice, and to reflect on the implications of using this and other high-stakes literacy tests to assess students. The specific three-part unpacking activity outlined in this article was originally designed by all three authors to be used at conference workshops with audiences of teacher educators, current and preservice teachers, and administrators. All of us also have used aspects of this activity in our classes and in test preparation workshops. Our experiences using the full three-part activity we describe below have convinced us of the value (for preservice teachers in particular) of

simultaneously situating, unpacking, and critiquing high-stakes tests such as the CLS.

The activity described below reflects a perspective on learning that arises from sociocognitive studies and is complementary to our understanding of the ways in which literacies are enacted in social contexts. Researchers working within a Vygotskian tradition have argued that our notion of cognition needs to be reframed so that it is seen not as acts of mind occurring in the individual in isolation from the social environment but as shaped and fueled by social context (Wertsch, 1991). The concept of situated cognition presents cognition as thinking shaped in relation to a specific situation (Resnick, 1991) in much the same way that the notion of situated literacies focuses on what is called for to practice a literacy in a specific situation. Sociocultural approaches to learning emphasize the importance of constructive activity and model building, mediated through language, to the acquisition of both new ways of using language (i.e., new literacies) and new modes of cognition.

More specifically, the activity we describe draws on pedagogical models developed within the New Literacy Studies for supporting the acquisition of new literacies and the transformation of current literacy practices. Gee (1999) argues that both situated practice and meta-awareness are required for the acquisition of a new literacy, especially when early preparation and lengthy apprenticeship are not available. He suggests comparing and contrasting the practices and values of different discourses as a useful strategy for developing meta-awareness. Such meta-awareness, according to Lankshear (1997), both enhances performance in the new literacy practice and allows for critique and change of that practice, as demonstrated by students at the University of the Virgin Islands who engaged in a critical examination of West Indian Creole and Standard English. As a result, they gained proficiency in Standard English and learned when and how to draw on it for specific purposes while also challenging the dominance of Standard English by affirming the social values and uses of Creole (Anderson & Irvine, 1993). Both Gee and

Lankshear and others (see Fairclough, 1992) emphasize the importance of building meta-awareness on the basis of the actual literacy practices of students.

Delpit (1988) suggests that an approach to literacy education combining situated practice and a critical awareness of issues of power is particularly important for students from nonmainstream cultural backgrounds. Even as these students are being taught the codes of the culture of power “within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors,” Delpit (1988) argues, “they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent” (p. 100). Given the well-documented disparity between the pass rates of minority and mainstream teacher candidates on teacher certification tests (Villegas, 1997), it would seem that an urgent goal for test preparation workshops specifically, and teacher preparation programs more generally, is to provide all students with chances to practice, compare, and critique a range of situated literacies, including those called for by standardized literacy tests.

The specific three-part activity we describe below reflects these goals and understandings as it takes participants through an active process of identifying and reframing what they know about their school literacies and the other literacies they practice and of reconceptualizing the CLS test as representing a particular socially situated and societally privileged literacy practice. In the final section of this article, we suggest more extended pedagogical approaches that allow for both situated practice and critical reflection in the context of teacher education classes.

Situating the CLS

The first component of this activity involves each participant in the creation of a table of contents for a literacy portfolio. The notion of a literacy portfolio (Hansen, 1992) differs from the (both more and less generic) teaching portfolio (Yagelski, 1997; Yancey, 1997) in its emphasis on the entire range of its creator’s literacies—both in and out of school—and in its focus on the collection of documents or artifacts that an individ-

ual sees as representing himself or herself as a literate person across a variety of contexts.

To help participants understand what we are asking them to do, we begin by sharing a sample literacy portfolio table of contents. Author Luna's table of contents, for instance, represents her established and developing literacies and is divided into three categories. Under the category "Items Representing Teaching Literacies," she includes a "student paper with my written response & audiotape of a writing conference," a course syllabus, a written recommendation for a student, and a printout from a class Listserv. Under "Items Representing Learning/Research Literacies," she lists "audiotape of interview with a research informant," ERIC online search directions, the "script from my latest AERA presentation," and a published book review. Under "Items Representing Other Life Literacies," she provides just a few examples, such as poetry, e-mail correspondence, a local hiking map, and a 1040 tax form.

In one CLS test preparation workshop attended by 20 preservice teachers, participants generated similar lists containing a wide range of artifacts: computer disks, tape recordings of student talk, academic essays, children's books, owner's manuals, lesson plans, dictionaries, running records of student reading, and videotapes of class discussions. Simply generating these kinds of lists of artifacts representing their own literacy practices—as they do in this activity—can help preservice teachers (and teacher educators) gain an awareness of the variety of ways in which they and their students are literate as well as an appreciation for the narrowness of the definition of literacy that undergirds some standardized assessments. Actually collecting these artifacts, writing reflections about them, and sharing them with each other—something that is not part of this particular activity but that we and other teacher educators regularly invite students to do in our classes—can further deepen preservice teachers' understanding of the contextualized and social nature of literacies.

Unpacking Situated Literacies

To help preservice teachers develop meta-awareness about the nature of various literacy

practices as suggested by critical language awareness approaches, it is necessary to take this activity a step further and ask participants to unpack the characteristics of the practices they have identified. To facilitate this unpacking, we provide a form that asks participants to answer some straightforward questions about five aspects of literacy practices: form, purpose, participants, process, and evaluation (see Table 2). These "what," "why," "who," and "how" questions focus attention on the ways that people use reading, writing, and oral language in specific social situations for particular social purposes. The "who decides" question (under evaluation) invites participants to consider the power relationships that shape these uses of literacy as well.

To model this unpacking process during our workshop, Luna answers these questions about one of her own literacy practices: reading and responding to a student paper. The form this literacy practice takes involves a mix of oral and written language; its shape is that of a dialogue between Luna and the student, and the emphasis is on content and meaning rather than on mechanics or specific structures. Luna has several interrelated purposes: to communicate, to maintain and nurture her working relationship with this student, and to help the student improve this particular text and improve his or her ability to write this type of paper. Both Luna and the student are direct participants in this literacy event, but we would argue that there are several indirect participants too; this is a literature review paper, so the authors of the books and articles the student is citing are indirectly a part of the conversation Luna and the student are having. A little more directly, we hear the voices of the members of the student's graduate support group as well as the voices of other faculty who have commented on this draft. This is a flexible, process-oriented literacy event; it involves an ongoing process of feedback and revision. The time frame is negotiated, and both professor and student have a number of human and material resources from which they can draw. These include the students and professors referred to above as well as written models of other literature reviews. Both Luna and the stu-

TABLE 2 Unpacking Situated Literacy Practices: Summary of Responses

	<i>Your Literacy Practice</i>	<i>Communication and Literacy Skills Test Literacy</i>
Form: What is it? What form(s) does it take?	Oral and written language, emphasis on content	Written responses to questions, emphasis on mechanics
Purpose: Why are you doing it? What purpose(s) does it serve?	Maintain relationship, help student learn/improve text	Display knowledge, get certification
Participants: Who is (directly or indirectly) involved in this literacy practice?	Student and I, authors of books cited, peers and colleagues	Test takers, test scorers, test developers
Process: How do you go about practicing this literacy? What material and/or human resources do you draw on?	Ongoing process of feedback and revision with negotiated time frame; resources are written models and other texts; colleagues	Prescribed process, time limited, use of resources not allowed
Evaluation: Who decides if you have been successful? On what basis?	Student and I evaluate based on student application of feedback; quality of ongoing relationship	Test scorers evaluate based on match with expected answers

dent evaluate Luna’s participation in this literacy practice based on several criteria, including how well the student understands and applies the feedback she is giving him or her and the quality of their ongoing teacher-student relationship.

After unpacking one of the literacy practices represented by an artifact on their list, workshop participants compare their results in small groups and then describe the patterns that they see. The kinds of comments participants make (which will be described below) stress the social, holistic, varied, and meaningful nature of these situated literacy practices. For some teacher educators and preservice teachers, this activity can provide a concrete way to understand what it means to say that literacies are contextualized social practices. This understanding can then generate excitement and animated conversation about the possibilities for expanding the kinds of reading, writing, and oral language activities that take place in our classrooms. Inevitably, however, the energy of such conversations is cut short when someone brings up the constraint of standardized literacy assessments: How can we invite students to take part in these kinds of literacy practices when they are going to be assessed through tests that do not seem to value these kinds of literacies?

Unpacking, Contrasting, and Critiquing the CLS

This question provides a segue to the third and final part of this activity. Using the same

form, we ask participants to unpack the literacy practice represented by the CLS. We provide an overview description of the test (see Table 1) as well as several sample test items. Based on this information, participants work in groups to answer the same “what,” “why,” “who,” “how,” and “who decides” questions that they applied to their own literacy practices. Overall, their answers (see Table 2) offer a powerful critique of the nature and implications of the literacy practice represented by the CLS.

Like all the artifacts that may be included in a literacy portfolio, a standardized test represents a particular, situated literacy practice. According to Emihovich (1994), “The testing situation is an interactive context in its own right, a context in which all the participants need to share an understanding of the appropriate norms and expectations of behavior in order to participate fully” (p. 35). Unfortunately for many students, this understanding may not be something that they share, and their failure to perform well on a test may reflect this lack of shared understanding rather than a lack of knowledge or ability (Resnick, 1991). One goal of our work with preservice teachers is to help them do well on this test by making the norms and expectations of the CLS testing situation explicit. At the same time, however, we hope that our inquiry into the CLS will raise important questions for these future teachers about the nature and consequences of the autonomous view of literacy that undergirds the characteristics of the CLS test. In

the next section of this article, we illustrate how engaging participants in comparing their own literacy practices and CLS test literacy can address both these goals.

One of the primary characteristics that workshop participants noticed when they looked across their own situated literacy practices was the close relationship between a particular text's form and its author's/reader's purposes. One participant pointed out that "there are a wide range and variety of literacies and literacy practices represented," and another commented that "there are different forms for different purposes." The types of reading, writing, and oral language represented by the literacy practices participants chose for their table of contents did not necessarily have predetermined forms or structures but more often were shaped by the author/reader to meet his or her own purposes and the needs of the particular situation or audience. In contrast, participants' analysis of the form represented by the CLS highlighted the predetermined, inflexible nature of the test questions and expected responses and related this to the fact that test takers' purposes in responding to test questions were externally imposed. Identifying "displaying knowledge" and "gaining certification" as the purposes of this literacy practice, workshop participants commented that "test takers have no authentic purposes or use for their responses" and "externally imposed goals are decided by external evaluators."

It is important for preservice teachers preparing for the CLS to understand the rigid nature of the test expectations in terms of form. This understanding can help them pass the test. Even more important, though, the value of inquiring into the form and purposes of the CLS test is that it can prompt reflection on the part of these future teachers about the relationships among authentic purposes, formal expectations, and meaning construction in the classroom. In our CLS test preparation workshops, we ask students to examine the test objectives, scoring criteria, and sample responses that are presented in the test information booklet (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1998). Of the eight types of test questions on the CLS, only the writ-

ten composition appears to invite something other than one right answer in one correct form. However, a close investigation of the criteria and sample responses for the written composition indicates that even this seemingly open-ended prompt actually calls for a rigidly structured response in the form of a traditional five-paragraph essay. This prespecified format, combined with the lack of a meaningful purpose or audience (the prompt suggests "a classroom instructor"), can turn responding to the written composition question into what one preservice teacher who took the test called an "empty" experience. This test taker's experience supports the conclusion of one workshop participant who said about the CLS, "There's not much room for meaning-making."

In addition to straightforward questions such as "what form does it take" and "what purposes does it serve," this analysis of the CLS test as a literacy practice suggests that preservice teachers should pay attention to other, deeper questions as well. These questions include "who decides the form," "is the form related to the test taker's own purposes," and "how much 'room' does this literacy practice allow for constructing meaning."

A closely related issue of form has to do with the disparity workshop participants noticed between the holistic nature of their literacy practices and the CLS test's representation of reading, writing, and oral language as separable and composed of discrete skills. Citing her own process of producing a grant proposal, one participant commented, "There's almost always a mix of written and oral literacies." In contrast, the CLS divides communication and literacy skills into reading and writing, both of which are tested through individual, written responses generated in a silent room. A seeming exception on the CLS is the dictation exercise. On the first administration of the CLS test, the dictation involved test takers in the transcription of a 156-word excerpt from *The Federalist Papers* as the tape-recorded text was played three times (see Melnick & Pullin, 2000 [this issue]). Although this activity could be construed as involving both oral and written language, the test objectives make clear that the

purpose of the dictation is to measure test takers' knowledge of written mechanics. The oral language involved is more aptly characterized as written language read aloud and the test takers' task as one of reproducing a written text. As do many standardized literacy tests, the CLS treats reading, writing, and oral language as isolable (and separately testable) activities.

Similarly, workshop participants noticed that the test further decomposed reading and writing into discrete parts. Reading on the test becomes finding the main idea and defining vocabulary, whereas writing becomes defining parts of speech and answering multiple-choice questions linked to passages containing grammatical errors. As one participant put it, "It's about demonstrating isolated skills." Although most participants agreed that practicing isolated skills can in some cases contribute to the development of one's other, more integrated literacy abilities, this comment raised an interesting question in terms of literacy assessment: Does the ability to define parts of speech or to identify and correct grammatical errors in decontextualized sentences necessarily reflect competence in any real-life literacy practices? What exactly is the relationship between the ability to perform well on a test such as the CLS and the ability to competently read, write, speak, and listen in and out of the classroom? Test developers claim that tests such as the CLS measure something called basic literacy, implying that activities such as defining parts of speech represent the first rung on a ladder toward something that could be called advanced literacy. Workshop participants' comments (and research and scholarship from the New Literacy Studies) suggest that this hierarchical model does not accurately reflect the relationship between test literacy and other situated literacy practices.

It is imperative that preservice teachers who plan to take the CLS test know in advance that they will need to answer discrete skill and knowledge-about-language questions. Many of the students who have taken our test preparation workshops have reported back that having a better understanding of the nature of the CLS as a literacy practice made it much easier for

them to prepare for and pass the test. For us as teacher educators, though, it is equally important that these preservice teachers also use their analysis of the test's format as an opportunity to raise larger questions, such as "how does this test define reading and writing," "what counts as literacy on this test and what does not," "what does it mean to call this 'basic' literacy," "what are the consequences of defining literacy in this way," and "who benefits from this definition of literacy?"

In contrast with their other situated literacies, which they described as interactive, with "an emphasis on interpersonal communication and relationship building," workshop participants saw CLS test literacy as being "not dialogic" and "like reading and writing into a vacuum." Although they identified several participants in the CLS literacy practice (test takers, test scorers, and test developers), workshop members characterized the CLS as an individual literacy activity, where "there's no interaction with a reader or writer, just with the text." In terms of test preparation, this is an important observation because it highlights the need for test takers to pay extremely close attention to whatever written information is available about the test process, test questions, and scoring criteria.

At another level, though, this observation can lead to an interesting question about the kinds of knowledge test takers actually need when they interact with the texts found in standardized literacy tests. James Gee (1997) explored this question by asking a group of honors students to answer multiple-choice questions from the reading portion of an SAT test without ever reading the reading passage on which the questions were based. About 80% of the nearly 100 honors students answered all the questions correctly, prompting Gee to suggest that "mastery of a cultural model" and "allegiance to its values (at least in action, at test time)" are what is actually being tested by standardized reading tests such as the SAT (p. 253). From the perspective of the New Literacy Studies, the meanings of texts are always embedded in sociocultural contexts; therefore, raising the question "who participates" in a particular literacy practice opens the door for other significant questions, such as

“what counts as successful participation,” “what kind of knowledge is needed to participate successfully,” and “who benefits from this definition of successful participation?”

Like the investigation of participation, an examination of the process involved in different literacy practices can also raise interesting issues for preservice teachers. In their comparison of the CLS test with their own literacy practices, workshop participants saw a strong connection between questions of process and of evaluation; furthermore, they highlighted issues of power and control as central to both. About her own literacy practices, one participant pointed out, “The creator/author is the one who evaluates her own performance.” Another added, “The evaluation is ‘looped’—it informs what the author or reader does next.” In contrast, participants noted that in taking the CLS, “Test takers have no power in the process or in the evaluation.” This lack of power on the part of CLS test takers is highlighted by a description of the test-taking experience provided by Jennifer Hurst (1999), an English education preservice teacher. Reflecting back on a seemingly endless day of admissions tickets, topic sentences, hallway checkpoints, and time limits, Hurst writes that she does not believe the CLS is the most accurate measure of teachers’ literacy abilities. However, she also writes, “What the CLS does assess is one’s ability to survive bureaucracy” (p. 30). Knowing about this aspect of the CLS test, just as knowing about the form of the test items, can be useful for test takers in terms of their preparation. What seems even more important is to follow Hurst’s lead and raise critical questions about standardized testing as a literacy practice. In addition to asking “how do you go about practicing test literacy” and “who decides if you have been successful and on what basis,” preservice teachers and other educators need to ask questions, such as “how do standardized tests position test takers in terms of power,” “who decides what is worth assessing,” and “what are the consequences of using high-stakes tests that are informed by an autonomous perspective on literacy?”

TOWARD SUSTAINED RESPONSES TO THE DILEMMA OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING

The activities described above effectively serve the purposes of situating, preparing for, and critiquing the CLS in the context of short-term workshops for preservice teachers. We conclude by offering some recommendations for more extended activities that might be used in the context of teacher education classes. The questions about literacy that are raised by the CLS and other standardized tests for prospective teachers apply to high-stakes testing for K-12 students as well. The ways in which teacher educators might work with prospective teachers to explore their own situated literacies and the sort of literacy that the CLS represents are also ways in which the teachers themselves might work with their own future students. So, the activities we suggest here are designed to model the sort of inquiry into literacies and preparation for standardized tests that prospective teachers can use with their own students as well.

Our first recommended activity involves preservice teachers in constructing full portfolios of their own literacies. As suggested earlier, having future teachers collect artifacts to represent the literacies that are important in their lives, write reflections about the functions of these literacies, and share their portfolios with one another deepens their understanding of the contextualized and social nature of their own and their students’ literacies (Hansen, 1992). Those who feel anxiety about their own literacy abilities, as these are defined in one high-stakes testing performance, may gain confidence from the fuller picture represented in the portfolio. In identifying what is involved in each of their literacies and what they use it for—looking, in effect, at its form, purpose, participants, process, and evaluation—they may learn also, through guided inquiry, how to approach the tasks of test literacy by drawing on the literacy practices that serve similar functions in their own literacy repertoires.

The exploration of situated literacies can also be expanded beyond the individual to focus on

literacy practices within specific communities, whether those of the preservice teachers or of their future students. Drawing on inquiry models such as that of Heath (1983), for example, prospective teachers could conduct ethnographic studies of a community's literacy practices, compare them with the practices of textbooks and high-stakes testing, and reflect on ways to bridge from one set of practices to the other. In conducting such inquiry, preservice teachers would not only enrich their understanding of situated literacies and prepare for high-stakes tests but also develop models of inquiry to use with their own students.

Other extended activities might involve collecting and examining texts that represent the literacy functions and genres that preservice teachers and their students are likely to encounter on standardized tests. Those likely to face a persuasive essay prompt, for example, could observe and collect actual examples of persuasion in spoken and written language, identifying what people do when they are trying to persuade in a particular context and what makes persuasion successful within and across contexts. Asking questions about who is being persuaded about what, why, and how these elements influence the form of what is said or written—and doing so over many examples—can help preservice teachers identify the real audiences and purposes for a variety of speech acts (see Kutz, 1997, on studying speech acts in discourse contexts). Examining how the forms of persuasion vary across social settings would also help preservice teachers perceive how literacy genres work, for example, by comparing a persuasive letter as a genre of the world with the persuasive essay as a school genre, identifying their similarities and differences with each other, and working together to name the elements of the school genres and thus the criteria by which they will be assessed. Preservice teachers can also analyze test genres and the genres suggested by test questions, in which the genre may be a persuasive essay but the purpose is for the test taker to display knowledge of how to structure the school genre. Such inquiry allows them to learn more about how language functions in the world, even as it makes possible

a clearer understanding of the implicit purposes of examination prompts for persuasive essays and of how to address their apparent and underlying purposes. Such work can also begin to raise the questions of social roles and power that can fuel transformative efforts (Gee, 1999; Kress, 1999; Lankshear, 1997).

When high-stakes certification tests such as the CLS represent definitions of literacy that run counter to the scholarly and pedagogical beliefs grounding our preparation of teachers, teacher educators face the frustrating prospect of taking valuable time away from other important activities to prepare students for the test and in the process giving contradictory messages about literacy, learning, and teaching. We believe, however, that theoretical perspectives from the New Literacy Studies provide the basis for pedagogical approaches, such as those we have described here, which help preservice teachers situate, prepare for, and critique high-stakes tests such as the CLS while preparing them to engage their own students in rich activities for exploring literacy and preparing for their own high-stakes tests.

There is substantial evidence that new teachers' practices continue to be most strongly shaped by their prior beliefs, despite the lessons of our teacher education programs and even of their internships (Weiner, 1993). Indeed, Burch (1997), in reviewing the contents of teaching portfolios produced by her own preservice students, found that despite the issues she had addressed in the course, portfolio contents focused on information about canonical literature, the products of composition in traditional modes, and worksheets on grammar and parts of speech. Whatever we might teach about the multiple literacy practices that people engage in and the ways they arise within meaningful interaction in specific social contexts, the dominant model of literacy that prospective teachers have received through their own schooling is a decontextualized, autonomous one. Tests such as the CLS, coming at the end of their own (ideally) rich teacher preparation, only confirm for prospective teachers that the real literacy, the one that counts, is test literacy. We want to disrupt that notion, to give them the tools to see the

literacies they and their students are acquiring in more complex ways, even in the context of this particular performance. We even dare to hope that the pedagogical approaches we suggest here will ultimately contribute to a better informed public dialogue about the appropriate assessment of teachers' and students' literacy.

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