

“Literacy and the Politics of Education” by C.H. Knoblauch

A Study Guide

Purpose: Knoblauch intends to discuss four arguments for literacy as well as the assumptions and beliefs of those who make these arguments in order to show that they have more in mind than mere reading and writing but a political/social agenda as well. *“Sketching the more popular arguments may remind us of the extent to which definitions of [literacy] incorporate the social agendas of the definers, serving the needs of the nonliterate only through the mediation of someone’s vision of the way the world should be” (Ins. 53-54)*

Key Terms

1. Literacy - used to mean a variety of things – skills, attitudes, beliefs – by a person or group motivated, implicitly or explicitly, by political/social objectives *“Literacy never stands alone. . . as a neutral denoting of skills; it is always literacy for something...” (Ins. 57-58)*
2. Ideology – the doctrines, myths or beliefs that guide a person, group or movement
3. Functionalist Literacy – **Literacy as a means for preparation for life...**It readies people for the necessities of daily life...with the skills to function in a supremely technological society.
4. Cultural Literacy - **Literacy as a means for shared identity...**It provides all of us Americans with a shared vision, a shared understanding of who we have been, who we are and who we should be.
5. Liberal Literacy – **Literacy as a means for personal growth. . .** because language “expresses the power of the individual imagination” ergo literacy provides for the development of that power.
6. Critical Literacy - **Literacy as means to power...**Literacy allows individuals to see more clearly the way(s) they’ve been repressed...literacy gives us the power to take power back.

Article Outline and Summary by paragraphs

- 1 *Literacy means more than the ability to read and write. It means a variety of things depending on who is defining the term . . . and it’s usually someone who is literate.*
2. *It is a cultural value promoted by individuals and groups who have something to defend, attack, preserve or profit from.*
- 3 *And since it has most often been a means to an end rather than an end in itself, it is only prudent to analyze those ends.*
- 4 *There are four primary competing arguments or ends, and the preeminence of one is not a victory of semantics: cultural identity, laws, the nature of language, education often turn on the rise and fall of these definitions.*
- 5-6 **Functionalist Literacy** - *emphasizes readying people for life in the world, for completing the necessary tasks of life, for getting a job, for material gain. And yet it maintains the socio-economic status quo by promising freedom but only freedom to choose from a variety of options the “powerful” (read literate) offer.*
my note – “We’re falling behind the rest of the world! More literacy! We’ll get back on top but we’ll need you to fill a position at the bottom.”
- 7-8 **Cultural Literacy** – *affirms the principal values we all share and serves a source of “social cohesion.” Protecting the language (and we desperately need to) protects the status quo...for us to survive you and your culture (language) may have to go.*
- 9-10 **Liberal Literacy** – *With literacy we’ll teach you to find your own voice, to express your individuality but keep it to yourself if it undermines the institutions we’ve created to help you find it.*
- 11-12 **Critical Literacy** – *Inspired by Marxist ideology...literacy will give you a critical awareness of “the extent to which language practices objectify and rationalize these conditions and the extent to which people with authority to name the world dominate others whose voices they have been able to suppress” (Ins. 184-86).*
- 13 Clearly, there is no one definition, “definitions only tell what some person or group – motivated by political commitment – wants or needs literacy to be” (210-11) And a definition is powerful to the degree that it is invisible. “A critique of whatever assumptions and beliefs are fueling their passionate benevolence” is the best safeguard from those who would “set us free through literacy” if we’ll just follow their plan.

Knoblauch’s Thesis: _____
