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TALKING BACK

Social Justice and the Reading Crisis

By Debra Pellegrino

As a teacher educator at Rockhurst University and a mother of three with children at Creighton University, Marquette University, and the University of Texas at Austin (alum of Saint Louis University), the essays on *Reading at Risk in Jesuit Universities* caused me to stop, to reread, to reflect, and finally to write.

The National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education suggested that faculty across Jesuit campuses are assigning fewer books in 2005-2006 than in previous years. On July 8, 2004, a report released from the National Endowment for the Arts survey stated that literary reading is in dramatic decline with fewer than half of American adults now reading literature. NEA chairman, Dana Gioia reviewed the study that documented an overall decline of 10 percentage points in literary readers from 1982 to 2002, representing a loss of 20 million potential readers. In the last issue of *Conversations*, Dean Rader rais-

es an interesting point about the NEA's report, *Reading at Risk*, stating that perhaps the focus is less about reading and more about economics. The rate of decline is increasing and, according to the survey, has nearly tripled in the last decade. Is the Seminar correct in connecting the crisis in reading with Jesuit campuses across the United States?

Surprisingly in October 2004, then Interim Dean Joseph M. O'Keefe, S.J., of Boston College's Lynch School of Education reported that the mission statements of many, if not most, of the schools, colleges, and programs of education at Jesuit colleges and universities reflect some level of acknowledgement and integration of social justice in both vision and purpose. The common theme in this regard recognizes that education in the preparation of women and men should lead a life of service for and with others, translated into a commitment to work for the establishment of a society and world of justice and equity.

What does this really mean? Across all Jesuit campuses the cry

for justice must be seen as liberation in literacy. Literacy is freedom. Imagine reading Langston Hughes's "*Harlem: A Dream Deferred?*" When "the poet laureate of Harlem" poses the rhetorical question: "What Happens to a dream deferred?" and compares the dream deferred to "a raisin in the sun" (1959), the reader takes the simile and creates new patterns. However, when a member of society does not experience the works of literature, and literacy does not become part of seeing the world, then the quest for justice dies. The last stanza of *Harlem* uses the metaphor, "does it explode?" Literacy for all can no longer be just a dream.

Teaching for social justice should be in the heart, head and hand of faculty, students and staff across all Jesuit campuses. Hughes described the dream

*Talk about
what we read.*

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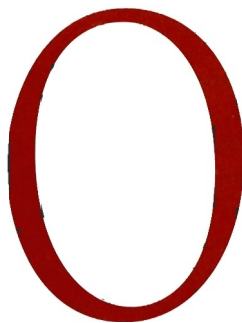
deferred; perhaps the NEA survey is another rotten dream that should not be ignored. The time has come to wake up and analyze our own teaching, syllabi and belief system. Teaching for social

Reading is a social act.

justice is teaching for the arousal in each and every one of our students. It is not only the written mission statements or the "branding" exercises that we partake in, but what ought to be.

A central axiom of teaching is that education, to be meaningful, must be connected with the learners' real life, with his or her "world." How can our students across the ACJU campuses connect to understand the word when the word is not reflective of their world? Today in the United States, it is those with power that decide what constitutes valuable education. The students at our 28 Jesuit institutions are presented with this choice every day. They have two options: Either they comply in trying to accept a word without understanding, disconnected from their world or they use the word to think, act and speak in order to serve others.

Reading the fall 2006 *Conversations* made me realize that listening to the teacher community speak, we find this blaming of the students as justification for their failure to making the learners submit to the education pedagogy of the elite a common cry. "They do not try..." "They don't care..." "They can't read..." "If they don't want to read, what should I really do?" The saddest aspect of this circle of failure is that the students themselves have accepted this policy of blame as truth. As faculty members at Jesuit institutions what can we do about the crisis in reading, one asks?



Once an educator understands the political nature of literacy by unpacking the meaning of "discourse," addressing the conflict between literacy of the privileged vs. the unprivileged, the literacy crisis will be deferred. How can we solve this problem? No matter how much money we put in the system, no matter how much we pay our faculty, as long as we continue to try to enforce a pedagogical system that does not

consider our students' world, their historical, cultural, political, social and economic realities, and as long as we do not allow our students to participate in the process of learning, but see them as mere receptacles of our knowledge, the system is predestined to fail.

Jesuit universities should work as a collective in order to have an impact, and not just with other educators, but also in solidarity with our students. Reading is a social act. According to linguist, James Paul Gee, discourse means: a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network." The number one way to enhance comprehension is to talk about what we read. At a faculty strategic planning meeting just last week, I heard someone mention the Ignatian pedagogy. I started to wonder is that similar to read, write and talk? Perhaps, Ignatius imagined the "social network" of discourse, too.

All of us have the indirect and direct ways to empower our students to think and to talk. Whether it is the poet's pen, the artist's palate, the theologian's words, as teachers we can conceptualize what is happening to us if we can make clear about the experiences that we want for our students. Perhaps this explains why my pre-service teachers will still be reading Paulo Freire's *Literacy: Read the Word, Read the World*, and struggling with the text.

Imagine! Literacy is freedom! As faculty members at Jesuit universities we must collaborate, work together, and indeed reinvent a new common world filled with social justice. ■



Students attend a lecture by Tom Bowie, S.J. at Regis University.