Primer: Literary Literacy Practices

The tools in this suite are designed to support teachers as they learn to teach students how to participate in the academic discipline of literary studies by teaching them specific practices readers of literature use to make meaning. Fundamentally, literary literacy practices are tools that are used with texts inside of a literary community. At their most specialized level, literary literacy practices are the ways that literary scholars use texts to build new knowledge.

The work to name and teach the literacy practices of literature is part of a larger body of scholarship that has sought to identify specialized ways of reading, writing, and reasoning in multiple academic disciplines for the purposes of informing K-12 teaching and learning (for review, see Moje, 2007). Scholars have argued that teaching students discipline-specific reading, writing, and reasoning practices will contribute to broad goals like college readiness, increased critical thinking skills, and improvements in adolescent literacy, and that the teaching of literature has an important part to play in this work (Lee, 2007; Lee & Spratley, 2010; Rainey & Moje, 2012).

While not a complete list, the literary literacy practices we have prioritized are: seeking moments of strangeness, seeking patterns, generating literary puzzles, considering multiple interpretations, and making and warranting claims. These practices came out of a careful review of disciplinary literacy scholarship and a recent empirical study of literary scholars and high school English language arts teachers as they read literary works (Rainey, 2015, in press).

Seeking Moments of Strangeness

Readers of literature look for and note moments of strangeness, surprise, or confusion as potential places for productive interpretive work. While reading, readers of literature ask themselves questions such as:

- “What seems puzzling?”
- “What seems strange at first glance?”
- “Are there contrasting ideas or features placed side by side?”
Seeking Patterns

Readers of literature look for and note patterns of various types as potential places for productive interpretive work. While reading, readers of literature ask themselves questions such as:

- “What comes up again and again?”
- “What structures in the text reappear in a patterned way?”

Commonly, readers annotate texts by marking moments of strangeness and emerging patterns so that they can revisit them. Alongside these two literary literacy practices, particularly when reading a text for the first time, readers of literature monitor their understanding and use generic fix-up strategies when necessary (e.g., using context clues to determine meaning of an unknown word). But, their reading is driven by their pursuit of potential opportunities for literary interpretation.

Generating Literary Puzzles

Readers of literature revisit their noticings and turn them into interpretive problems, or puzzles, to figure out. They do this by asking themselves questions such as:

- “What is the possible significance of this moment of strangeness?”
- “What meanings might this pattern convey?”
- “How is this moment of strangeness related to the text as a whole?”

Sometimes they may decide that a question they have posed is entirely answerable with the text and then drop that line of inquiry. Other times they may determine that the question is speculative in nature and that they cannot productively use the text to pursue that line of inquiry. The most productive literary puzzles are ones that can be answered in multiple ways using one or more texts because that is the heart of how new interpretive knowledge is built in literary communities.

Considering Multiple Interpretations

Readers of literature expect that their interpretations will get more and more precise and complex as they pursue them. They do not simply settle on the first possible answer to a literary puzzle that they think of. Instead, after thinking of an initial interpretation, they ask themselves questions such as:
● “What other responses to this question could be generated based on this text?”
● “Are there any places in the text that complicate my initial interpretation? If so, how might I rephrase my interpretation to include them?”
● “How might the various contexts of the text (e.g., the author’s larger body of work, the time period and place in which the text was written, its history of publication) inform the meaning I make?”

A major part of considering multiple interpretations happens in discussion with others. In part, discussions are a helpful place for readers of literature to get feedback on their interpretations, selected passages from the text, and their reasoning about how the evidence leads them to their interpretations. Discussions can also help readers of literature identify places in the text they had not considered, which can help them think differently about their own interpretations. Finally, discussions can lead readers of literature to revise their literary puzzles.

Making and Warranting Literary Claims

Readers of literature expect that eventually they will formally share interpretations guided by their literary puzzles with others. Interpretive claims come out of interactions with the text, and they are linked to specific elements of the text (i.e., evidence) with explanation (i.e., reasoning or warrant).

The work of making and warranting literary claims is iterative. As readers of literature consider the significance of their literary puzzles, they frequently “play out” various interpretive arguments in their minds and with others. This process can lead them to revise their claims, select new or additional evidence from the text, or revise their literary puzzles to begin a new line of inquiry.
Works Cited


