A Conversation with Miles Myers
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A conversation with Miles Myers
Glynda Hull

In this column I feature a recent book by and a conversation with Miles Myers, former Executive Director of the U.S. National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Myers taught English for many years at Oakland High School in Oakland, California, as well as English methods courses at the University of California, Berkeley, and several other universities. He was a director of the National Writing Project during its first decade. Most recently he has been involved in the standards movement, serving as co-director of the literacy unit of the New Standards Project. Myers has combined an impressive career of teaching and policy making in English and writing with long and active involvement in unions; he has been president both of the Oakland Federation of Teachers and the California Federation of Teachers.

Miles Myers’s union background no doubt accounts in great measure for his interest in the relationship between education and the workplace, an interest that he developed in some detail in his latest book, Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy (NCTE, 1996). This is one of the few publications I am aware of that sets forth a theoretically persuasive and historically grounded connection between the language and literacy practices developing in certain new workplaces, and the conceptions of literacy that many people believe we should be promoting at this moment in the schools.

What’s more, the book targets literacy educators and English teachers. Myers and I certainly agree on how important it is for teachers to be aware of the work worlds that await their students. He acknowledges that “within the English teaching community, there are those who are skeptical about using the workplace to rationalize the teaching of English” (p. 114). Nonetheless, he argues throughout Changing Our Minds that “there appears to be a close fit in our new information society between what schools offer and what work, citizenship, and personal growth require” (p. 114).

NUMMI and changing work practices

One of the workplace examples that Myers uses in Changing Our Minds is the reorganization of a U.S. automobile manufacturing plant in Fremont, California. The old General Motors plant laid off the last of its 3,000 workers in 1982; according to Myers, the problems that brought about this demise included poorly made automobiles and poorly designed work processes that relied excessively on routinization. In fact, one GM employee described working on the old assembly line as “being paid to flunk high school for the rest of your life” (p. 8). In 1984 the plant reopened as a joint venture between GM and Toyota. Newly dubbed NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing Incorporated), the plant changed its production procedures and, in cooperation with the union of United Auto Workers (UAW), asked for different habits of work and mind from its employees.

Myers explains that “in the old plant, workers needed a tolerance for fixed, unchanging routines. In the new plant, workers need a tolerance for negotiated solutions to problems and an eagerness to think about new and better ways of doing...
the work" (p. 10). In the old plant, a premium was placed on individual responsibility and individual skill; in the new workplace, each person was assigned to a team where responsibility (and intelligence) were distributed. In the old plant, tool use was mostly relegated to physical labor: "pliers to bend things, levers to lift things, drill presses to cut things, transport to move things" (p. 12).

At NUMMI, workers needed a much broader set of tools—for example, data processing equipment like electronic calendars and computers—and the emphasis was on intellectual work. Finally, at the old plant, Myers reports, workers weren't expected to know much, since production processes were generally set in stone, making workers' decision making and involvement peripheral at best. But at NUMMI, Myers observed, information abounded, and a premium was placed on analyzing and translating that information. Workers needed to know "how to observe, how to use group discussions to solve problems, and how to translate data into different representations, from say, lists to visual charts" (p. 12). Myers thinks of such work practices—negotiated and translated meaning, distributed intelligence, and situated problem solving—as new patterns of literacy.

We have, of course, heard time and again about such "enchanted" workplaces (see this column, JAAL, September 1998), and there are certainly those who are skeptical about the extent to which the rhetoric has been implemented (me included). This is a tension that Myers acknowledges at several points in Changing Our Minds, but he chooses to focus most of his attention on "what could be or should be" (p. 113) in our workplaces, rather than in dwelling on the troubles of the traditional majority. As one of the skeptics, I admit that I find his optimism uplifting.

**Historical shifts in definitions of literacy**

Another thing that sets Miles Myers's discussion of new literacies and new workplaces apart is how he situates his claims in a thoughtful, detailed historical analysis of the ways in which literacy has changed over time. That is, to buttress his argument that we are in the midst now of a great shift in how minimum literacy is defined in the United States (and, I would add, in many other countries), he revisits four earlier periods in U.S. history, and details the literacy practices and values that dominated in those eras, along with the occupational, technological, civic, and ideological influences that shaped them. For example, from 1660 to 1776 in the U.S., Myers describes a shift from "orality" to "signature literacy." While a predominately oral culture made sense in a stable agricultural society where people lived out their entire lives in the same communities, signature literacy better served the needs of a transient agricultural society where people were more apt to move about. There came a need then for written records and contracts.

A second shift in valued literacy practices in the U.S. occurred between 1776 and 1864 with the movement from signature to "recitation" literacy. Recitation literacy suited people's needs when they left their farms to work in cottage industries and small factories. At this time, valued literate practices included copying and oral language performance.

A third shift, 1864 to 1916, moved us from recitation literacy to "decoding/analytic" literacy. The latter flourished as the U.S. became more and more industrialized. Myers writes, "Decoding/analytic literacy constructed the student self as a factory worker who needed to have his/her schoolwork managed, segmented, and organized around prefabricated assembly lines of intellectual work" (p. 143). Decoding literacy has been dominant in our century, and prizes efficient communication to others and the decoding of unfamiliar texts.

Last, Myers believes we are now shifting from decoding/analytic literacy to what he terms "translation/critical literacy," in which the purpose of reading is to be able to interpret many texts and to produce multiple translations of many different kinds of texts in many sign systems. More on this new form of literacy later.

I've not done justice to Myers's elaborate historical argument, and I recommend to you Changing Our Minds for the complete account. But I think it's easy enough to grasp, even via my simplified summary, this notion that the kind of literacy we value, practice, and teach has shifted roughly over time and that these changes can be explained by, among other things, occupational shifts. This is not to say that these shifts are linear or stage like; if we know anything about technologies, it's that old ones exist right alongside new ones, and that currently dominant notions of literacy don't give up without a fight.

And it's not to say, either, that the last shift to "translation/critical" literacy is complete or widespread; for example, I would take umbrage at the idea that new literacies predominate in new workplaces. In Myers's words, "it would be a mistake to take these periods too literally. What literacy periods give us is a sense of the mentality of a period" (p. 16). Finally, I think we should resist the assumption that literacy practices are evolving toward some more ideal state—from oracy onward to translation/critical literacy—by a point we will return to later.

**What is the new literacy?**

Miles Myers's book is set apart from many current discussions of new literacies and new workplaces by the way in which he provides a persua-
Gaps between theory, policy, and lived experience

Glynda Hull: One of the themes implicit in Changing Our Minds is the intersection of policy and learning theory.

Miles Myers: The way you organize the school, the way it functions and works, is in fact an underlying definition about how learning works. One’s notion about what learning is, is very much connected to how one might talk about what it means to be literate. To say somebody is literate is to say that they’re learning something of value that they can use, whatever that might be. I took a team of the NUMMI workers to—did I tell you this?—an MLA [Modern Language Association] conference.

GH: You took them to MLA?

MM: Yes, I took four workers from different parts of the NUMMI assembly line to a conference on literacy that MLA was sponsoring in Pittsburgh. I was with these workers most of the time, and what was interesting, first, was their reaction to this conference. They were coming out of collaborative groups in this workplace. And so when they worked with their colleagues at NUMMI there was a good deal of collaboration. But the conference was being put on, as you might imagine, in a “get-up-and-lecture-then-answer-questions” format. The other interesting thing was that these workers found their way at the conference to some special interest discussion groups in which the academic left was saying that people should not be trying to achieve these new forms of literacy; what they should be trying to do, rather, was to overthrow the boss, overthrow the cultural setting.

GH: Ahhhhh....

MM: And it was just a sham to talk about new ways of learning or new ways of behaving and so on. This was just a fraud to remove the focus from the capitalist system and its efforts to exploit workers. And their mouths dropped open. They were, like, “Well, you know, I’m just trying to do a job, I’m trying to get a good job, trying to earn a decent living, feed my family, and have a decent life—that’s what I’m after. And you tell me that I should just ignore schooling and all those issues? What I should do is engage in revolutionary activity?” And of course it wasn’t lost on the workers that they were talking to people who have job security; none of the intellectuals had had their factories closed down. The workers saw many conference participants as having this casual attitude about what you know, what you can do, and how you can become more powerful just by being able to read better. Being with the workers and in the conference brought to light for me a gigantic disjunction between left academic attitudes on such issues and working people and the kinds of worries, fears, and concerns they have. I have not gotten over that!

GH: It blew you away!

MM: It did, absolutely. And, by the way, I see our current standards debates as having the same sort of quality about them. The public sees the professions as people, by and large, working on taxpayers’ funds who are denouncing those taxpayers’ views of what learning is.

GH: This isn’t to say, of course, that workers don’t have a critical view of the workplace. The fact that your team of people could go to the Pittsburgh conference and be amazed that folks on the left were seemingly asking them to go out and work for the revolution and ignore the material realities of their lives— the fact that they were amazed by this doesn’t mean, though, that the workers themselves couldn’t be critical about the things that are happening in workplaces.

MM: Absolutely. I agree. In my view, the critical literacy discussions don’t get close enough to the work-
day life; they remain too global. And that’s why as well that it is so difficult to get the academic community interested sometimes in the standards discussion: Academics don’t regard it as particularly relevant. But it is of great relevance to other people in their day-to-day life, and I would argue that paying attention to these debates is something every body ought to do. There is a gap in our language, in the way we talk, in how we try to describe what we think schools should be, a gap between public policy makers and professional educators. Now, I think we’re smart enough actually to deal with the divide if we first started with the understanding that the policy question about what our schools are going to be like—the standards we should adopt, et cetera—all of these questions have underneath them views of what the mind is like, what kinds of literacy are we going to stress in this institution. That’s what’s at issue.

Being a critical participant

GH: Miles, let’s talk a little about the overlap you see between the conceptions of literacy that you believe should inform schooling and the literate practices that are part and parcel of activities in new workplaces. This is a very interesting connection, but I’ll bet that a lot of people would resist it and would instead want to see a gap between the kind of literacy we promote in schools and the kind of literacy required in work. You call the new literacy that is needed now in certain workplaces and simultaneously should be valued in schools “translation/critical” literacy.

MM: And it’s a terrible phrasing and I apologize for it! But I still don’t have a better term. It has to do with the notion of how one can be both critical—both believing and disbelieving, to use Peter Elbow’s language—how one can be critical without being cynical, being critical while participating. You can participate and be a joyous participant, while at the same time being critical.

GH: I like that very much.

MM: I think it’s an important part of what life is like for people in our kind of world. This is the problem with critical literacy, you can end up such a distant commentator on other things, about how bad they are, that you become cynical rather than seeing yourself as a participant and a person who enjoys participating.

You can entertain belief about things that you criticize. And you can learn to do that in school; that’s one thing school can do. In fact, it’s probably one of the most interesting things that school can do, fostering that attitude of learning to believe something that you don’t believe.

What would it be like if I believed that? This idea is of course highly relevant to the multicultural arena. In my union experience, I loved the idea of being able to think, “What is it that the superintendent wants out of this discussion?” What could I do to believe his—the superintendent is usually a “his”—view while maintaining a clear sense of the critique?

GH: I do like the distinction between being critical and being cynical, and I agree that a lot of the talk about critical literacy verges on the cynical. There gets to be no hope left. I confess I’m sometimes of that opinion. To keep that balance and to maintain a kind of hopefulness about your ability to participate seems very important.

MM: It’s the thing that makes a class different, that sets it apart from a classroom where the world is represented as pretty well figured out, and the job of society is simply to deliver answers to you, to tell you what the tradition is and to get you to memorize it. There are of course times when that is called for and it has been a help to people—so I don’t want to be completely negative. But it’s just that at this time it isn’t workable as a way to live.

GH: You were talking about this balance as the particular contribution of education and schooling. What about when people get to the workplace?

MM: I believe in unions a lot; I’ve been a union member ever since I started teaching. But I also know that I’ve had friends over the years who were very talented, but who couldn’t hang onto themselves in very difficult times; they got denounced by the conflict. So, assuming you live in a society where conflict is going to be a natural part of life—

I assume this is part of what life is all about these days—you need to find a way to live in it that’s positive and generative. Now, it just turns out that this business of translating from one sign system to another, from one speech event to another, from one mode to another—from narrative to argument—that is a very practical way of knowing things. Then, on the other hand, to be able to stand back from it, to be able to treat it as fiction, to take a stance toward it, is also useful. Finding a way to fashion yourself in your daily life is connected intimately with what one might call literacy exercises.

GH: Pretty radical idea, really, connecting literacy practices with a sense of self?

MM: Yes, but I just think it’s fundamental. I have seen it, the workers’ sense of self. One worker at NUMMI was called “the glove lady.” She was in charge of the gloves. Some workers liked their gloves tight, some liked them loose, some didn’t care if there was a little hole in one finger, and so on. Every job had a certain variety of need for gloves. In the old plant the procedure was to collect all of the gloves on a given day, hand them all out, and this bothered the workers. In the new plant it became a big deal; workers actually said, “we’d like a better rotation, make sure we get the right gloves, it

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makes our work go better. So one person became the glove lady, and she was known for her expertise. She knew what gloves belonged where on the plant floor, she had an expertise that mattered to everybody there, and there was nobody in the plant who could even come close to the authority she had in something that was really important. I saw this sense of self, this identity as an expert worker, in a lot of the NUMMI employees.

GH: Did you see it in any ways directly related to literacy?
MM: Yes. The glove problem was in essence a management problem. It required a real step up to what we might call “meta-thinking” in terms of realizing that there was a system and a process. Solving the problem meant collecting data, conducting and participating in meetings, planning possible solutions, picking up feedback from folks on the floor, and trial and error and experimentation until they had got it right. The glove lady had to collect information, organize it, create metaphors of systems to make it go. And every step in the literacy, of course, also affected her sense of self, her own ability to think in this way.

GH: How she thought of herself as a worker and how she could imagine herself in the future as a worker.

Evolution and Literacy

GH: I think I understand the general argument of your book, that literacy has changed over time, due to the interaction of lots of things, such as occupations, technologies, ideologies. What I don’t understand is how we’ve ended up at this moment with “critical/translation” literacy that requires active engagement. It seems evolutionary in a way: We start back here with oracy and now we’ve evolved to a higher state.

MM: I don’t like that idea.

GH: So why are we so uncomfortable with this evolutionary notion?

Is it that in a postmodern age, we don’t want to say we are evolving toward a more enlightened state? This is something I struggle with.

GH: Oh, I see; to phrase it as a good/bad issue, to assume that we have a better literacy now is to simplify. It’s not that it’s better or worse, but rather that literacy grows out of a particular historical moment, the available technologies, the ideologies that are influencing people’s thinking at that time. So “critical/translation” literacy would not have been appropriate in the oracy age.

GH: And that’s something that people long for now that we don’t have.

MM: You had no need for an awful lot of print; you can communicate in this other way.

GH: What were the advantages of the “analytic/decoding” era in literacy?

MM: Industry, corporations, centralization. To deconstruct the car is to decode it, down to each little tiny piece, and then to organize the assembly line in this analytic way. This made cars cheaper, but human labor suffered. We lost crafts, all sorts of things, but you gained a lot of material goods. And you learned some things about how to decode, deconstruct something. This became a way of doing things, a habit of mind.

GH: An historical sense of literacy is important, and important for teachers to have, especially since, as you point out, children bring to school literacy practices associated with different eras that aren’t valued any longer.

MM: Yes, we all need to cultivate a multiliterracy attitude. In teaching there is an almost universal tendency to denigrate anything that isn’t immediately identifiable as “higher order thinking.” You see this reflex in the standards arguments, too. Anything having to do with memorization or rote learning cannot possibly be anything but anti-intellectual! I think this is absolutely short sighted about people who come into our classrooms.

GH: It’s all about being able to take someone else’s perspective and imagine life from someone else’s viewpoint. That’s what the intellectuals at the MLA conference were unable to do, or at least didn’t do, vis-à-vis the NUMMI workers. Is that a part of translation literacy, moving among different genres and forms, a habit of mind that lets you try on different perspectives?

MM: I’ll give you an example. I had a student who could stand up in class and recite scenes from famous movies, like the end of Casablanca. On the spot, he could stand up and do a scene. His performances gave my class a wonderful introduction into how these dramatic events and pieces could just take over our lives. We were enthralled. Now, this is basically memorization; you memorize and give it back. Similarly, in preschools, you can see the children becoming different people. They might be singing a song, doing a story, and the parents are sitting there watching. You can see the power they suddenly have. I hate to say this in public, but at one level I believe we ought to have moments of recitation literacy.

Respect for work

GH: In her book In the Age of the Smart Machine (Basic Books, 1988) Shoshana Zuboff distinguishes what she calls “sentient skills” from “intellective skills.” In the old paper industry, for example, workers were accustomed to touching the pulp, smelling the chemicals, and manually adjusting the levers of machines.
But now these same workers are sequestered in glass booths, and their work is mediated by computers and data. And these intellelctive skills have both more currency and more status. It seems that historically we have had respect for one kind of work and not another.

**MM:** I think so too. With the change from craft unions to industrial unions, I fear that something didn't get passed along about respect for work. It helps build solidarity that one person's work can't be distinguished from another's. But with that solidarity also came a loss of respect for the work. Teaching respect for work would be one rationale for having kids work as part of their school experience; that way they could learn that any job can provide a challenge.

**GH:** I recall an old ethnography entitled "Banana Time" about assembly-line work that was so routinized and mindless that workers resorted to inventing elaborate conversational rituals around their breaks to give meaning to their work day.

**MM:** Work did get so routinized that it lost its meaningful qualities. But jobs in new factories could potentially return a certain individuality to some of these jobs that would enable workers to put back into their jobs a real celebration of work itself. In schools it should be possible to teach this celebration for all kinds of work. For example, custodial jobs in schools are complicated.

**GH:** So you want a kid who's headed for Stanford to have a job while he's in high school as a custodian?

**MM:** I want that kid to have respect for that job, from having done it. I would say those words, "respect for work."

Miles Myers welcomes reader comments at miles.myers@ucop.edu.

In my next column, Mark Jury, from the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center in Pennsylvania, will offer a different twist to our discussions of the new literacies that new work organizations are said to spark. Jury will consider a different set of literacy demands—those placed on rural and semirural communities as their "traditional" industries decline or disappear in the face of global trade agreements and changing environmental regulations, and no or few new workplaces rush to fill the void.

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**Inner lives of students with disabilities**

What is it like to have prolonged difficulty in learning to read? Educators who work with older students or adults may need to consider the ways in which students who have reading disabilities view themselves. Tim Miles, a psychologist from Wales (UK), describes their various fears (of failure, of being different, of words, and of making social gaffes). He also discusses their ways of coping.