

Thinking Processes in the Language Arts Curriculum

Standards for the English Language Arts (NCTE/IRA, 1996)

"Language is the most powerful, most readily available tool we have for representing the world to ourselves and ourselves to the world. Language is not only a means of communication, it is a primary instrument of thought, a defining feature of culture, and an unmistakable mark of personal identity. Encouraging and enabling students to learn to use language effectively is certainly one of society's most important tasks" (p. 12).

Literacy and the Language Arts:

"Literacy today includes the capacity to accomplish a wide range of reading, writing, speaking, and other language tasks associated with everyday life" (p. 4). Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more. Visual communication is part of the fabric of contemporary life. Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts . . . is [an] essential component of the English language arts curriculum. . . . By studying how visual texts work, students learn to employ visual media as another powerful means of communication" (p. 5-6). "Based on this expanded definition of literacy, the standards . . . address six English language arts: reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing" (p. 6).

Communication:

Communication is "the meaningful exchange of ideas or information between a speaker and a listener (or a reader and a writer, etc.). Communication may be primarily functional ('Pass me the salt'), primarily expressive ('To be, or not to be'), or some combination of the two. Throughout these standards, communication is understood as an interactive process in which both speaker and listener . . . create meaning for the texts they read, view, or listen to. These meanings are built from the connections the reader makes between the new material and his or her prior knowledge, the ways the reader structures meaning, and decisions the reader makes about what is important or relevant" (p. 71).

Critical Reading and Critical Thinking:

Critical reading involves "reading a text in such a way as to question assumptions, explore perspectives, and critique underlying social and political values or stances. Critical reading is resistant, active, and focused on both the text and the world. Critical readers bring a range of experiences to texts, and, in turn, use texts to develop critical perspectives on personal and social experience." Critical thinking includes "the thought processes characteristic of creativity, criticism, and logic in literature, the arts, science, and other disciplines" (p. 71).

Four Dimensions of Literacy and Language Learning:

- Content – what students should learn in the English language arts. This includes knowledge of written, spoken, and visual texts and

the processes for creating, interpreting, and critiquing such texts. The standards emphasize three essential understanding-based elements of knowledge: (1) understanding and enjoyment of a broad range of texts, (2) understanding the processes and strategies for comprehending and producing texts, and (3) understanding the systems and structures of language.

- Purpose – why students use the language arts. This considers the range of motives, reasons, and desired outcomes for literacy practices. The standards emphasize four purposes: (1) obtaining and communicating information, (2) literary response and expression, (3) learning and reflecting, and (4) problem solving and application.
- Development – how students grow as language users. The standards emphasize two distinct issues: (1) how students acquire knowledge and develop competency over time, and (2) how the quality of student performances improve over time, particularly in the clear, strategic, critical, and creative use of language.
- Context – social and cultural contexts in which learning takes place. The standards emphasize that social and cultural contexts surround and influence students' participation in various language communities. Creative and communicative powers are enhanced when students respect the diversity that exists in spoken and written English, develop and maintain multiple language competencies, and learn the language of wider communication (or Standard English) that is spoken and written by those groups with social, economic, and political power in the United States. (p. 13-14)

English Language Arts Standards

The English language arts standards are intended to . . .

- prepare students for the literacy demands of today and tomorrow,
 - present a shared vision of literacy education, and
 - promote equity and excellence for all.
1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
 2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e. g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.