Consciousness and the Literary Engagement:

Toward a Bio-Cultural Theory of Reading and Learning

Tammy Iftody, Dennis Sumara, & Brent Davis

In this paper we expand the notion of embodied literary experience (Sumara, 2003) in order to represent human consciousness as a bio-cultural symbiosis that both participates in the acts of reading, viewing and response, and at the same time, is potentially transformed by those acts. Yet within education, certain uninterrogated assumptions continue to underlie a common (folk psychological) understanding of consciousness – what it *is*, what it *does*, what it *feels* like. These assumptions, in turn, shape the way collective experiences with literature are structured in the classroom in predominantly implicit ways. A theory of embodied literary experience aligned with recent studies in consciousness allows us to identify the kinds of reading practices that are necessary for navigating the multimodal "communicational landscape" (Kress, 2003) characteristic of contemporary popular culture. We suggest that lingering assumptions concerning human consciousness may be limiting the transformative possibilities inherent in various literary experiences within the classroom.

The Hype about Harry

Despite an assumedly mind-numbing multimedia overload, the summer of 2005 saw readers young and old rush to buy the latest installment in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005). To date, there are over 270 million copies of J.K. Rowling's books in print, in more than 60 languages. The wide appeal of these novels extends to the film versions as

well. With an enviable November release the latest in the film series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,* earned $101.4 million its opening weekend and the number 1 spot in the box office. Equally impressive, a recent Google search using the key words "Harry Potter" generated over 71 million hits. Taken together, these examples suggest that Harry Potter represents more than a literary fad; he is the hub of a cultural (and therefore collective) phenomenon.

The popularity of heroic fantasy tales like the Harry Potter series seems to suggest that many readers continue to seek out imaginative, explicitly fictive, literary experiences. Some are content to enter this imaginative world conventionally through reading the primary texts, while others might augment (or even bypass altogether) this conventional reading with other modes to be found in film and on-line experiences. There is something both collective and subjective about these Harry Potter-like reading/viewing experiences that make them unique to contemporary popular culture.

As noted by Mackey (2001) multivolume series like Harry Potter "demand and indubitably receive a serious commitment from readers" (p. 168). This devotion often develops skills in tracking multiple and extra-to-text readings over time. Repetitive and elaborative reading is rewarded as the cultural network that surrounds the novels becomes increasingly complex.

Tracking such changes in literacy practices in the "new media age," Kress (2003) argues that contemporary cultural complexity – as evidenced by more and more "multimodal forms" of text – make it necessary to "rethink our notions of what reading is" (p. 141). In his view, the contemporary communicational landscape marks a shift away from "reading as interpretation" (where the object of knowledge is assumed latent in the text) towards an understanding of "reading as ordering" (where the object of knowledge is yet-to-be designed). In both cases, the reading process is conditioned by context wherein "*The shape of what there is to be read* has its

effects on ‘reading.’ Reading practices, and the understanding of what reading is, develop in the constant interaction between the shape of what there is to read and the socially located reader and their human nature” (Kress, emphasis in original, p. 140,).

Reading-as-design suggests that the reader has to make some decisions about “how, in what ways, and with what material and cultural resources” he or she will make meaning from the text (Kress, p. 141). For example, Harry Potter novels can be read following a traditional reading path established by the image of the page; each novel would be read one at a time, and in order of their release. Or one can read Harry Potter as a contemporary cultural network, following a “yet-to-be constructed” reading path shaped by ongoing engagements with multimodal versions of the text.

According to Kress, the main difference between the traditional page and the screen page is in terms of the epistemological commitment each entails. In the traditional image of the page, information is considered completed text; with the screen page, a more fluid notion of information “as-supplied” emerges, allowing the reader to shape meaning as she or he experiences it. In contemporary terms, the depth of the *Harry Potter* experience (or any literary experience for that matter) is ultimately determined by the ordering skills it evokes in its participants; that is, the way “the shape of what has to be read” compels us to design a way to read it. In a multimodal culture, reading as design is the ability to “impose salience and order” across various modalities (Kress, 2003, p. 50).

The argument here goes beyond a plea for the use of multimedia texts in the classroom. First and foremost, it is an attempt to uproot a very powerful assumption that continues to shape the relationship between individual intelligence and mass culture. Yet another example of dichotomized thinking, the cleaving of individual from culture has led us to imagine that the relationship between the two is an inherently antagonistic one. As Johnson (2005) suggests, mass

culture is assumed to follow the "lowest-common-denominator" principle; that is, it assumes that left to our own devices, "the masses want dumb, *simple pleasures*…" (emphasis in original, p. 9). Like Johnson, we believe that rather than "dumbing us down" contemporary popular culture—in its ability to engage us in ordering our world—is actually making us smarter.

Playing the New Reading Game

> Reading is only one of the myriad of symbolic games we play—games that inspire our mutual exploration of the possible and our collaborative extension of the boundaries of our subjective awareness. *It is the game itself that drives us,* as our cognitive depths, both individual and cultural strive for wider and wider horizons. (Donald, 2001, emphasis in original, p. 276)

What sort of pleasure or reward do readers derive from their cognitive, emotional and even social commitments to book series like *Harry Potter*? Undoubtedly, identifying with others as part of a collective experience is appealing to many readers. To be a member of this particular group, it is assumed that you have read these books, and likely more than once (Mackey, 2001). As new channels for interaction emerge around the network created by the text, virtual strangers can spontaneously share their thoughts and experiences as easily as peers (Johnson, 2005). While participating in shared readings of the Harry Potter texts requires some subjective response skills, the real test is navigating the network created by *other* readers. Devoted readers eventually learn how to seek out and assess the ideas and interpretations of others, weaving subjective patterns (designs) in the cultural web within which the text is embedded.

While primary identifications with plot lines and characters are important starting points for this engagement, it is often in the act of re-reading that many *Harry Potter* fans find their richest experience of subjectivity. Elsewhere, Sumara (2002) has argued that ongoing re-readings like this

can lead to a form of mindfulness as readers continue to collect new information and interpretations in the commonplace organized around the literary engagement. With each return to the literary text, the reader is compelled to interpret the gap that exists between this reading and the last one, thereby creating a generative recursive process. Over time, these engagements become collecting places where the reader is always in the process of inventing a new relationship among what is remembered, what is currently experienced, and what is imagined. Mindfulness, in this context, is a particular orientation in consciousness that attends to the transformative potential of re-reading practices.

In sum, the *Harry Potter* phenomenon is a complex cognitive-cultural network that requires sophisticated skills to navigate. Furthermore, it is not just the engagement individual readers have with one reading of a *Harry Potter* book that matters; but rather, the way a particular reader tracks multiple (and multimodal) readings over time as an ongoing literary experience. In this way, each text serves as a collecting place from which the reader may track his or her subjectivity. Repeat engagements allow readers to consider their readings more deeply, in light of and often in combination with, competing extra-to-text information (internet sites, chat lines, web-logs, movies, games, etc.) noting differences, affiliations, and developments along the way. Literary cultural networks like the one that has emerged around Harry Potter have important implications for reading theory in the "new media age" (Kress, 2003).

Natural-born Hybrids: Toward a Bio-cultural Theory of Reading and Learning

> What is special about human brains, and what best explains the distinctive features of human intelligence, is precisely their ability to enter into deep and complex relationships with non-biological constructs, props, and aids…**Minds like ours were made for mergers"** (Clark, 2003, emphasis in original, pp. 5- 7).

From a pedagogical perspective, the neurological, emotional and socio-cultural matrix that surrounds any reading/viewing experience is rich with possibilities for interpretations This suggests a need to better understand the unique role literature and literary experiences play within the larger cultural framework of learning. Pedagogy that recognizes the inter-connectedness of biology and culture creates conditions for students to refine their abilities to respond appropriately and innovatively to that ambiguities that are part of any literary engagement. Such refinement may be described as an expansion of consciousness.

Biologically, literary experiences are productive spaces that serve to sharpen innate neurological capacities. Literary experiences compel and thus aid in developing the brain-based "probing" and "mirroring" competencies all humans share (Johnson, 2005). Reading is a language activity that not only shapes the way the reader interprets social and cultural events but actually influences the development of neural pathways in the brain (Sumara, 2002). At the same time, reading in school is understood to be an inherently social process; that is, a dialogue inevitably emerges between individual responses and other talk around the text (Bakhtin, 1981). The common thread here is that at both the biological and social level, we are motivated by the search for contingencies and possibilities in the text.

Literary experience is therefore shaped by both biological and phenomenological structures. Adding an evolutionary spin, Daniel Dennett (2003) has suggested that human beings are essentially *informavores* – "epistemically hungry seekers of information, in an endless quest to improve our purchase on the world" (p. 93). Part of this seeking process involves sharpening our abilities to order our experiences with information. Culturally then, experiences with literature might create productive spaces for rendering this seeking and ordering process more explicit. Since alternate forms (and contexts) demand that readers organize their perceptions in

particular ways. (Sumara, 2002), the ability to organize perceptions is a development of conscious awareness, or consciousness.

Research has not yet addressed how conscious awareness and its development are mediated by the literary experience. Contemporary literacy trends that interweave popular culture and ongoing individual reading/viewing practices (i.e. graphic novels, literary hyper-text; reality television game shows) create complex socio-cultural networks. Navigating these networks requires an ongoing sophistication of innate (biological) "probing skills" and an ongoing (culturally learned) tolerance for aimlessness and ambiguity during the exploration process (Johnson, 2005).

Cultural critic Steven Johnson (2005) provides an illustrative example in this regard. He describes the contemporary gaming environment as one where a certain amount of directionless searching is the accepted "price of interactivity" (p. 30). What draws the gamer in to these virtual worlds and keeps them coming back is "an elemental form of desire; the desire *to see the next thing*" (emphasis in original, p. 37). Built-in to the learning structure of this environment, a certain amount of *ambiguity* motivates the player to begin ordering the world of the game. Not unlike Merlin Donald's (2001) notion of human symbolic games, Johnson suggests that it is not the content of the game that compels the individual to engage, but rather, it is the *game itself* that drives the player to participate.

In contrast, education appears to be mired by a metaphor-of-mind that conceives the "game" of literary meaning-making in far more instrumental terms. That is, teaching is often oriented toward the gradual elimination of possibility in order to achieve a stable and relatively objective interpretation of the text. In this view, textual ambiguity is a force to be restrained, reduced and reconciled. In the language of such teaching, information that is "unclear, disorganized, or does

not make sense to the reader" is inherently a barrier to learning. (Billmeyer and Barton, 1998, p. 63). Consequently, reading and discussing texts in school often involves the dissemination of strategies for reducing contextual complexity and ambiguity in favor of generic structures (i.e. graphic organizers, either/or charts, story grammars etc.) that point to surface features of text such as plot and theme without attention to the deeper practices of (critically and emotionally) engaging in a character's worldview. There is an apparent disconnect between the seemingly *tolerant* personal reading practices that are required to engage in popular media texts and the intolerance that is characteristic of reading-for-school.

This fear of ambiguity reflects an educational structure that emphasizes unimpeded access, acquisition and retrieval of information as its primary goals. An increased emphasis on structure and strategy becomes a means of managing the ambiguity - and consequent anxiety- that currently pervades the conditions in which teaching occurs. As Tobin Hart (2001, p. 17) puts it – "What has happened is that the essential currency for learning, information, has become mistakenly identified as the goal. And as information grows exponentially, so does our educational anxiety about needing to absorb more of it." This over-emphasis on information acquisition perpetuates knowledge as a closed system. Hart goes on to argues that the danger in confusing knowledge with "Truth" is that a "*consensus content* begins to shape a *consensus consciousness* as we are invited to swallow the same content in the same way without question" (emphasis in original, p. 55). For teachers of literature arising questions include: How might we encourage students to embrace the ambiguous aspects of the text as invitations to explore possibilities, rather than as impediments to meaning-making? What if teaching strategies were designed to bootstrap—rather than manage—the inherent ambiguity shaping reading practices outside of school?

Firstly, teachers might notice the various ways in which students *already are* quite adept at using their imaginations in response to popular media. This suggests creating a productive space and an explicit discourse through which students might begin to share and examine these alternate literary experiences in the context of the classroom. If students are able to mediate these cultural experiences and devise personal strategies for doing so, it is likely these skills will transfer over to their reading of other (traditional and non-traditional) texts.

The current gap between reading practices in and out of school suggests a need to further delineate the networked nature of neurology, culture and literary experience and to explore the ways in which they are all nested within the larger frameworks of literacy and learning. We will argue that in an educational context, consciousness emerges as the orienting interface that brings together the biological, social, political and cultural implications of the reading experience. The following discussion will integrate relevant contributions from those writing about consciousness (Damasio, 1999; Dennett, 1996, 2003; Donald, 2001; Capra, 2002; Edelman, 2004 etc.) in order to 1) provide an overview of current conceptions of consciousness; 2) determine how particular literary experiences might serve to enrich our experience of conscious awareness; and 3) use the analyses to draw implications for practice.

Expanding Conceptions of Consciousness

Within a bio-cultural model of learning (and reading), flux and ambiguity become catalysts for learning, rather than impediments. Human consciousness has emerged as a special kind of cognitive process that allows us to *track* our own subjectivity within this emerging complex bio-cultural matrix (Donald, 2001; Capra, 2002). Mindful practices like reading develop our ability to cope with environmental complexities and invite new possibilities via an expansion of conscious awareness. If the function of learning is to promote an organism's ability to respond

to the broadest range of contingencies then possibility exists not in what we can already perceive, but rather in what we can *conceive* amid the patterns presented to us. Similarly, from Donald's (2001) perspective, it is precisely the ongoing "tension between cultural symbolic systems and the underlying intelligences that use them" that has resulted in the qualities we ascribe to our "uniquely human modes of consciousness" (p. 286).

To arrive at a richer understanding of the biological and cultural components of consciousness, we contend that the notion of literary experiences ought to be broadened beyond traditional print texts to include hybrid forms like graphic novels and literary hypertext as well as popular media forms such as video games and reality television programming. Each of these forms allows space for reflection on the way the consciousness of "the other" is represented and therefore might enhance our ability to understand the way our own consciousness mediates our literary experiences. Along with opportunities to navigate the complex socio-cultural webs in which these experiences are embedded, literary engagements can also include practices that promote the development of social and emotional intelligence.

The following review of studies in consciousness includes ideas drawn from neuroscience (Edelman 1992, 2004); neurobiology (Damasio 1999, 2003); philosophy (Dennett 1991, 1996, 2004); cognitive psychology (Donald 2001); complexity science (Stewart and Cohen 1997; Capra 2001) and cultural studies (Johnson 2004, 2005). Three main questions are relevant to the task of developing an understanding of the literary engagement as an embodied focal practice that creates conditions for the expansion and enrichment of human consciousness: What is consciousness? What does consciousness feel like? And finally, how does an understanding of consciousness inform the literary experience?

In order to appreciate what consciousness does, it helps to preface what it does *not* do. Contemporary cognitive science now recognizes that most of what we would consider conscious thought is actually unconscious in origin (Varela, et al., 1991; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). The knowledge gained through our interactions in the world is not limited to what is noticed by the "conscious self" but, more importantly, consists of vast amounts of information perceived by the biological body, yet never brought to the level of consciousness (Sumara, 1998). It is this embodied knowledge that gives human beings the ability to understand, through mere observation or interaction, how certain patterns are emerging without necessarily being able to explain how one knows. We experience a gut-feeling or intuition that cannot be verbalized. Malcolm Gladwell (2005, p. 23) has recently explained this form of rapid cognition as "thin-slicing," a phrase which refers to our unconscious ability to extract patterns from our experiences with very little information.

Epstein (1994**)** similarly defines the cognitive unconscious as a fundamentally adaptive system that organizes and influences behavior automatically, effortlessly, and intuitively. Our body implicitly stores information from our environment and when a novel situation presents itself, emotional cues (or somatic markers) help us assess and address far more information than we could handle consciously (Damasio, 1999). We experience these neurobiological and neurochemical patterns of response in gut reactions like "He's lying" or tacit mood assessments like "Something doesn't feel right." The result is neurobiological patterns of response that are much more efficient, and often more reliable, than the ones evoked by conscious thought (or reason) alone (Epstein, 1994; Damasio 1994). The cognitive unconscious is assumed to play a role in all mental tasks, including those we are conscious of, and thus has important implications for teaching and learning (Baars, 1997).

What is Consciousness? A Neurobiological Perspective

According to neurobiologist Antonio Damasio (1999), a comprehensive theory of consciousness seeks to explain how the "movie-in-the-brain" (or stream of consciousness) is generated, as well as how the brain generates the sense/appearance that there is an *owner* and *observer* for the movie-within-the-movie (higher-order or reflective consciousness). He defines primary consciousness as a mental pattern, engendered by moment-to-moment experiences, that brings together the object and the self (Damasio, 1999). Neuroscientist Gerald Edelman (1992) similarly defines primary consciousness in terms of the experiencing self involved in controlling the flow of mental events. He has since used the phrase the "remembered present" to indicate this sense of true physical time that shapes our common experience of instantaneous conscious awareness (Edelman, 2004).

However, immediate experiential awareness alone fails to capture the uniquely human experience of consciousness over time, or what Damasio (1999, p. 16) calls "extended consciousness." This complex kind of consciousness "provides the organism with an elaborate sense of self - an identity…that places that person at a point in individual historical time, richly aware of the lived past and the anticipated future, and keenly cognizant of the world beside it." This higher-order consciousness represents the integration of remembered, currently perceived, and imagined (projected) experiences. Edelman (2004) suggests that this level of consciousness allows us to relate our experiences to a subjectively constructed, yet functionally emergent, notion of self. And it is this level of consciousness that is most susceptible to educational design.

The following description of consciousness captures current understandings across the disciplines:

> Despite popular assumption, our consciousnesses does not direct our thoughts and actions. In fact, for the most part, consciousness operates more as *a commentator* than orchestrator. However, consciousness does play an important role in *orienting attentions* – that is, through differential attention, in selecting among the options for action and interpretation that are available to the conscious agent. (Davis, 2004, emphasis in original, p. 178)

Most importantly, this conception of consciousness as serving an orienting purpose reminds us that not everything we learn is monitored consciously, nor does it need to be. Learning is more often a process of discarding or ignoring possibilities rather than accumulating them. (Davis, 2004) While most of this sorting takes place outside our sphere of influence, an awareness of the limitations of consciousness encourages learners to focus on and re-consider particular patterns of thought (or habits of interpretation) that serve to shape their perceptions. If these patterns prove to be no longer viable, the learner compelled by novelty, may begin to seek out more transformative alternatives.

What does Consciousness Feel Like? A Phenomenological Perspective

It has been well-established that various neurobiological patterns of response have already competed with one another outside our awareness to bring to the fore the sense of consciousness (self-awareness) we experience at any given moment. (Damasio, 1999, Dennett, 1996; Donald, 2001; Johnson, 2004, 2005) Yet, we continue to be intrigued—and sometimes consoled—by our ability to describe the singular feeling of consciousness as a willful gathering of the various "fragments of our subjectivity." Consider popular sentiment like "writing for your life" or "re-writing the self." In this context, the self is seen as an irreducible entity; that is, it maintains a

kernel-like existence that may be revealed or made coherent through language activities (Sumara, 2002).

Literary theorist David Lodge (2002) has suggested that we essentially "misrepresent" the conscious self every time we try to describe it "because we are trying to fix something that is always changing; but we really have no alternative" (p. 90). The relationship between consciousness, culture and the self is shaped by an on-going, co-emergent narrative. As Fireman, McVeigh & Flanagan (2003) note: "The stories we tell to ourselves and others, for ourselves and others, are a central means by which we come to know ourselves and others, thereby enriching our conscious awareness" (p. 3). These stories change as the contexts in which we tell them change. The self is continually created and re-created–a malleable "nexus of meaning" (Kerby, 1991, p. 34) rather than a stable referential core.

By way of illustrating this narrative shift in thinking about the self and consciousness, a particularly poignant excerpt from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) used by Johnson (2004, p. 26) bears repeating:

> How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one center, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point…

In this passage, the reconciliation that signals Mrs. Dalloway's sense of her self requires a sharpening or tightening of her efforts and appearance. Precision, composure, and centeredness are valued when consciousness is conceived in terms of a need to "draw the parts together."

Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (1998) adds a level of imaginative inter-textuality to the conception of consciousness as developed by Woolf through Mrs. Dalloway. In this particular passage, Cunningham steps inside the mind of Virginia Woolf herself, imagining the inner monologue as she prepares to write *Mrs. Dalloway*. Here, a very different experience of consciousness is depicted:

> She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she were religious, she would call it the soul. It is more than the sum of her intellect and her emotions, more than the sum of her experiences, though it runs like the veins of brilliant metal through all three. It is an inner faculty that recognizes the animating mysteries of the world because it is made up of the same substance, and when she is very fortunate she is able to write directly through that faculty. (Cunningham, pp. 34-35)

Through the persona of Virginia Woolf, Cunningham describes an experience of consciousness that also entails an impending sense of union, but it is not "pointed" or "dart-like" like Mrs. Dalloway's. Rather it flows, fractal-like and brilliant through all that she is. Much more than the sum of her parts, this "inner faculty" is attuned to the "animating mysteries of the world" seeking out the novelty in her experiences. This emergent sense of consciousness as more than the sum of its parts is oriented towards possibility rather than precision. Such a mindset reflects the contemporary enactivist understanding of consciousness being developed here.

Moving away from the essentialist ideal of pre-given self-contained "eye" through which experience is filtered, the "I" of consciousness emerges in complicity with culture and together provides the means for human beings to create and re-create the narratives that provide temporary coherence to their ongoing experiences. In this sense, consciousness does not regulate learning – as assumed when we strategize the processes of teaching and thinking—but rather

serves to narrativize it, rendering it useful in a social and cultural sense. From this perspective, consciousness does not originate in individual brains; consciousness co-emerges in relation to ever-evolving densely woven bio-cultural network. Or, as Donald (2001) argues, human consciousness is an emergent property of the creative collision between cognition and culture.

Applying a Bio-cultural Theory of Consciousness: Mind-reading

One key stage in the development of human consciousness is what cognitive psychologists call the Theory of Mind, or the realization that others have interpretations of the world that may be similar to or different from our own. Mind-reading is the innate ability to absorb and apply commonsense (folk-psychological) understandings about the minds of others in order to predict and explain behavior. As Johnson (2001) puts it "We come into the world with a genetic aptitude for building "theories of other minds," and adjusting those theories on the fly, in response to various forms of social feedback" (p. 196)

These patterns of feedback and response become part of a psychology of mind that influences the way we interact with others and the way we come to experience a sense of "self" in those interactions. Put another way, we are aware of the richness of our own consciousness by virtue of our ability to imagine the consciousness of others, not the other way around. As Johnson (2001) further argues "Only when we begin to speculate on the mental life of others, do we discover that we have a mental life ourselves" (p. 202).

According to Donald (2001) the most demanding criterion of human consciousness is a certain kind of social intelligence or specifically, "the ability to cultivate and remember individual relationships within a working social group" (p. 129). This cognitive skill relies on cues from the socio-cultural environment for its development. Successful navigation in social settings requires that we assess the mind-states of others very quickly, interpreting often subtle or ambiguous cues

on-the-fly. Steven Johnson (2005) further suggests that this intricate social mapping, like other cognitive capacities, is a product of the brain's inherent plasticity:

> By executing a certain cognitive function again and again, you recruit more neurons to participate in the task. Social intelligence works the same way: Spend more hours studying the intricacies of a social network, and your brain will grow more adept at tracking all those intersecting relationships. (p. 108)

It may be argued that mind-reading is a neurobiological capacity that has evolved in symbiosis with a complex socio-cultural network. In this case, the evolved human consciousness of contemporary society cannot be limited to the workings of individual brains, but rather, reaches its full potential in relation to and with others as part of a distributed socio-cognitive network (Donald, 2001). Consciousness is therefore an emergent property of an information-seeking human biology in complicity with a complex socio-cultural environment.

Since we can never know another's mind completely, our inferences—oriented by our consciousness—are inherently a product of our imaginations. Literary engagements encourage the act of imaginative mind-reading; that is, they permit explicit reflection on the mind-states of others thus enhancing our ability to navigate the complex social webs in which we are embedded.

As occasions for practicing the art of mind-reading, literary engagements may provide opportunities for readers' to experience their subjectivity in transformative ways. Literary relationships are unique in that they afford the opportunity to momentarily freeze time and space in immersing oneself in the consciousness of another. By bringing together memories, understandings and imaginings around commonplaces created by the text, readers may be encouraged to interpret the consciousness of the other in relation to their own subjectivity and narrative sense of self. As David Lodge (2002) argues, "One might suggest that the ability

novelists have to create characters often very different from themselves, and to give a plausible account of their consciousnesses is a special application of Theory of Mind. It is one that helps us develop sympathy and empathy in real life" (Lodge, p. 42).

It is important to note that while the readers' initial engagements might confirm commonsense assumptions about why people behave the way they do, further engagements with the text over time supplemented by a variety of extra-to-text experiences might more importantly create the necessary conditions to confront and challenge these assumptions. Fictional experience allows the reader to "vicariously *possess* the continuum of experience" that is represented by a character's consciousness in a way that is not possible in reality (Lodge, 2002, p. 32). It allows us to step inside the consciousness of another fragmented self, imaginatively experiencing someone else's attempts to reconcile unconscious and conscious aspects of identity. In the context of the literary engagement, the development of empathic reading responses depends on the skillful application of mind-reading skills.

Implications for Practice

Commonplaces for transformation

Participatory relationships with the text create commonplaces for exploring the phenomenological experience of consciousness, or conscious awareness. Reading as transformation supports classroom practices that move students beyond subjective identifications with characters, situations and plots, and towards collective engagements that contextualize the event of reading itself. This suggests paying attention to the contingencies in (and extra-to) the text that provoke the reader, in relation to *other* readers, and taking note the conditions surrounding that provocation. Compelled to interpret the gaps between/across various readings, each textual engagement marks part of a recursively generative process. Each re-reading is

essentially a unique evocation and this understanding of "knowledge as open" brings with it the possibility for transformation. Hart (2001) describes education for transformation as concerned primarily with promoting conscious awareness of implicit learning structures. In his words:

> Transformation manifests as both an outcome and a process; it is the push and the pulse that drives self-organization and self-transcendence. When education serves transformation, it helps to take us beyond the mold of categories, the current limits of social structure, the pull of cultural conditioning, and the box of self-definition. (p. 147)

Relative to other teaching events, the literary engagement typically reflects the world as we experience it– complex, ambiguous, and fluid. Outside school, sophisticated cognitive capacities are already required to navigate a contemporary cultural environment characterized by inter-textuality and multiply-threaded narratives. This suggests creating opportunities for students to develop *mindful* reading practices (i.e. mind-reading, re-reading, extra-to-text reading) in response to a variety of texts and meta-texts (i.e. internet searches, web-logs, movies, games, etc.). In this way, students may be encouraged to acknowledge limitations in their own habits of interpretation.

Mind-reading and mindfulness

Students would likely benefit from the opportunity to theorize their reading experiences; that is, come to a more-or-less conscious understanding of the various Theories of Mind that have influenced their literary relationships. In other words, literary engagements can be fruitful sites for practicing the art of mind-reading. The reading event potentially educates conscious awareness by providing an opportunity to consider alternative habits of interpretation through the consciousness of another. We experience the consciousness of the other in order to refine our own.

The conception of literary engagements as commonplaces for the expansion of consciousness suggests that response practices like textual annotation, extra-to-text experiences, web-logs, and chat lines etc. are all part of an intellectual culture that rewards both tolerance and scrutiny. In today's culture, an occasional obsession is apparently a good thing. It is this intentionally sustained orientation in consciousness –mindfulness – that helps develop "expertise" around our chosen interests (Johnson, 2005, p. 194).

Tolerant reading practices

Why are we wild about Harry? The answer to this question lies in a bio-cultural hybrid theory of reading and learning. From a cultural perspective, extra-to-text commentary and supplemental readings are part of the "networked text" that easily conveys attitudes and connections in the online world (Johnson, 2005, p. 186). It does not require much commitment to be a part of this networked world, and its novelty and emergent possibilities attract our innate probing tendencies.

So we enter the virtual world of Harry Potter on our own terms, knowing that the experience is only one of many possible experiences available to us. Knowledge here is unstable, emergent, but nonetheless, tolerated for its novelty. This kind of reading experience demands bodily commitment. It usually entails reading and re-reading over sustained periods of time, using a variety of implicit and explicit techniques to track emerging responses. Intelligence in this context is a combination of learned tolerance and the ability to recognize patterns and interpret relations between and among possibilities.

Teacher as consciousness of the collective?

In an educational context, consciousness emerges as the orienting feature that brings together cultural and biological aspects of the literary experience. The teacher's role in structuring

engagements with literature may be compared to the role consciousness plays in orienting our experiences within the complex socio-cultural realm. At any level, consciousness is characterized by a fundamental capacity to draw from a pool of possible states, each with its own emergent (thus unpredictable) consequences (Edelman, 2004). The analogy to be drawn applies to the role of the teacher in "attending to and selecting from among those possibilities that become present in her or his awareness. In this sense, teaching is *minding*—being mindful in, being conscious of, being the consciousness of – the collective" (Davis, 2004, p. 178).

As consciousness of the collective, the teacher involves the learning system in noticing and selecting from the possibilities represented by the diversity of its parts. Simply put, individual insights and ways of knowing are allowed to bump up against the social, historical and cultural assumptions embedded in the literary experience. These collisions are emergent examples of (otherwise impossible) possibilities for knowing.

References

Baars, B.J. (1997). *In the theater of consciousness: The workspace of the mind*. NY: Oxford University Press.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). The dialogic imagination. In M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Billmeyer, R. and Barton, M. (1998). *Teaching reading in the content areas: If not me, then who? (2nd ed.).* Aurora, Colorado: McREL.

Capra, F. (2002). *The hidden connections: Integrating the biological, cognitive, and social dimensions of life into a science of sustainability.* New York: Doubleday.

Clark. A. (2003). *Natural-born cyborgs: Minds, technologies, and the future of human intelligence*. Oxford NY: Oxford University Press.

Cunningham, M. (1998). *The hours.* New York: Picador USA.

Damasio, A. (1994). *Descartes error: Emotion, reason and the human brain*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness.* San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Inc.

Damasio, A. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, sorrow, and the feeling brain.* New York: Harcourt Inc.

Davis, B. (2004). *Inventions of teaching: A genealogy.* Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dennett, D.C. (1991). *Consciousness explained.* Boston, New York and London: Little, Brown and Company.

Dennett, D.C. (1996). *Kinds of minds: Toward an understanding of consciousness* (1st ed.). New York: Basic Books.

Dennett, D. C. (2003). *Freedom evolves*. New York: Viking Press.

Donald, M. (2001). *A mind so rare: The evolution of human consciousness*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co.

Edelman, G. M. (1992). *Bright air, brilliant fire: On the matter of the mind*. New York: BasicBooks.

Edelman, G. (2004). *Wider than the sky: The phenomenal gift of consciousness.* Yale University Press.

Epstein, S. (1994). Integration of the cognitive and the psychodynamic unconscious. *American Psychologist, 49*(8), pp. 709-724.

Fireman, G., McVeigh, T. & Flanagan, O. (Eds.). (2003). *Narrative and consciousness: Literature, psychology and the brain.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking.* New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Hart, T. (2001). *From information to transformation: Education for the evolution of consciousness.* New York: Peter Lang.

Johnson, S. (2001). *Emergence: The connected lives of ants, brains, cities, and software.* New York: Touchstone.

Johnson, S. (2004). *Mind wide open:Your brain and the neuroscience of everyday life.* New York: Scribner.

Johnson, S. (2005). *Everything bad for you is good for you: how today's popular culture is actually making us smarter.* New York: Riverhead Books.

Kerby, A. (1991). *Narrative and the Self.* Bloomington: Indiana University.

Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age.* London and New York: Routledge.

Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh.* New York: Basic Books.

Lodge, D. (2002). *Consciousness and the novel.* New York and London: Penguin Books.

Mackey, M. (2001). The survival of engaged reading in the internet age: New media, old media, and the book. *Children's Literature in Education, 32*(3), 167-189.

Stewart, I. and Cohen, J. (1997). *Figments of reality: The evolution of the curious mind.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sumara, D. (1998). Fictionalizing acts: Reading and the making of identity. *Theory into Practice, 37* (3), 203-210.

Sumara, D.(2002). *Why reading literature in school still matters: Imagination, interpretation, insight.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Sumara, D. (2003). Towards a theory of embodied literary experience. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique 2*(2), pp. 88-95.

Varela, F., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind.* Cambridge and London: MIT Press.

Woolf, V. (1925/1994). *Mrs. Dalloway.* London, Chancellor Press.