

## CHAPTER TWO

# DEEP READING AND THE SPACE OF THE CLASSROOM

The West Side experiment helped us to formulate our strong belief anchoring this book that natural language and linguistic narrative (i.e., story) are central to human identity and purpose and that language and story should remain the primary focus for educational development and pedagogical activity in the 21st-century classroom. This belief is not simply an unfounded bias. It is grounded in our understanding of democratic education and philosophical tradition, the meaning of the liberal arts in general, and in the cutting-edge research of contemporary science, especially in the area of the brain. At the core of our belief is the knowledge and practice of that innovative program, started in 1991, called Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL; Waxler & Trounstine, 1999), a program that embraces the kind of educational purpose that Thomas Merton had in mind when he wrote:

Education's purpose is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world, not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself. (Merton, 1979, p. 3)

To explore further our perspective on the importance of literary narrative in the learning environment, we want in this chapter to move through the following topics: first, a brief discussion about technology as one of the chief challenges to literacy in the 21st century (a topic which we will take up more fully in Chapter Six); second, a detailed and somewhat lengthy meditation on deep reading, with some attention to how language operates and what happens when people read; and finally, a focus on the elements inherent in the best kind of classroom environments for promoting deep reading (a topic which we will explore in more detail in Chapter Three), along with practical examples from the literature classroom which help to illustrate deep reading in action.

## CHALLENGES TO LITERACY AND SOCIETY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Much has been made about the growing sense of “a global community,” as if human beings are expanding consciousness and deepening their knowledge of others through new technological devices; yet increasing numbers of human beings today seem to experience feelings of extreme isolation and alienation, detaching themselves from others and avoiding direct human interaction. There are many reasons for this apparent contradiction, but we want to suggest that despite people’s assumption that electronic devices help human beings to connect to each other, those devices often intensify feelings of isolation and alienation. Such devices create the illusion of connection, but actually often keep people separated and at a distance. Instead of contributing to a genuine human interchange, these electronic devices lack the depth of a fully embodied face-to-face live encounter.

When people interact through a screen, for example, that interaction seems to us cold, lacking the warmth that comes through direct human presence—the flesh and the body—close enough to touch. Having hundreds of friends on Facebook and a full inbox of text and e-mail messages does not necessarily build authentic community or grant people the authentic experience of embodied and heartfelt connections with others. In fact, the rushed and hurried connections made through screens often increase rigidity and fear, encouraging a dehumanized sense of distance between human beings, a sense of distance which only serves to intensify stereotypes and prejudices.

For us, the face-to-face living encounter inherent in the flow of conversation with others about a shared literary text is much more generative for creative narrative connections and community with others than any encounter with or through a machine. Through face-to-face live encounters, human beings open themselves to the possibility of creating their narrative self in relation to the other narratives being simultaneously created around them.

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, an Italian philosopher and psychoanalyst, makes just such an argument in *The Metaphoric Process* (Fiumara, 1995) when she emphasizes the importance of narrative and its role in overcoming feelings of detachment and fear, dislocation and chaos:

As developing humans absorb narratives they get ideas about how they may create links within potentially chaotic situations. Meaningful stories contribute to maturing persons’ attempts to engage with interactive life and to perceive some order in the disparate