

# ATTENTION TO AFFECT

## Rehumanizing literacy pedagogy through a focus on affect

By **Kelly C. Johnston**



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At the International Literacy Association (ILA) 2019 Conference in October, the theme “Creating a Culture of Literacy” brought issues of equity front and center. Keynote and session presenters advocated for our most vulnerable students who are positioned as “struggling” or “failing” when they do not align with the expected performance of the “ideal” learner in our classrooms.

This concern resonates with thousands of educators. We must continue to work toward equitable and humanizing literacy pedagogy if we are to create a culture of literacy that seeks to honor and support students in who they are and who they are becoming.

Literacy pedagogy extends *before* and *beyond* a teacher’s plan for instruction and student learning. Our values—philosophical, ethical, theoretical—always seep into who we are in the classroom and how we enact literacy pedagogy. This enactment also extends the pedagogical plan. Plans are one thing, but the actual enactment of literacy pedagogy is produced through an entanglement of instruction, materials, texts, and people that is felt and experienced in affectively charged ways.

Scholar Brian Massumi defines *affect* as the capacity to affect and be affected. In this sense, *affect* refers to the ways things and people act upon and with one another to create effects of all kinds. Students in our classrooms are always experiencing affect as they interact with one another, the world around them, texts, materials, policies, and so on. Whether through socially charged interactions, visceral response, or inexplicable felt perceptions, students’ literacy engagement is always affectively charged. Understanding the nature and presence of affect, then, might support our efforts in enacting humanizing literacy pedagogy in the classroom.

### Literacy as affectively charged

Understanding literacy as affectively charged calls attention to felt intensities in the process of literacy engagement and learning. As defined in ILA’s Literacy Glossary, literacy is “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context.” We know these literate practices are multiple, multimodal, and socially and culturally constructed, but what about the felt processes of engaging in these literate practices?

In their book *Affect in Literacy Learning and Teaching* (Routledge), scholars Kevin Leander and Christian Ehret argue for affect as a way to think about how these practices “*feel* as fully embodied experiences that are constantly unfolding.” The relationship between literacy and affect entails recognizing literacy’s capacity to affect intensities we sense or feel, even before we can name them.

These intensities emerge through students’ literacy engagement and, in turn, charge how they think, experience the world around them, and their “becoming” different-from-before. This includes who they are as literate beings. Why should these intensities be any less important than what someone or something else has imposed onto our students? Why should imposed control relegate students’

lived, felt experiences in ways that position them as off task, deviant, or out of control? Although I believe most educators want students to engage with literacies, we must foster opportunities for that to happen on terms that are less about imposed outcomes and control and more about the affective experience.

## Valuing students' affective engagement

When students get caught up, charged with literate activity, it is because of the bodies affected and becoming in that moment, not because of that five-paragraph essay or whatever textual endpoint another entity has determined for them. As a teacher educator and researcher, I have used affect theory to recognize unsanctioned forms of engagement produced through intensities of socially charged interactions, spontaneous peer literacy instruction, visceral response, and collective agency.

Inarticulable sensations, what might be more felt and visceral than planned and intentional, are a very real part of literacy engagement. For instance, when students' affective engagement moves toward other potentials—discontent, resistance, violence—educators might consider what constructs (e.g., racism, sexism, neoliberalism) affect such engagement. This mobilizes educators' support of and relationship with students, seeking out what might be worked against so that a different potential can be affected.

If educators were to value students' affective engagements with literacy, perhaps lesson plans and pedagogical choices might follow suit. Such changes would not only open up pathways for students to engage with literacies in our classrooms, but also push against overtly imposed schooled literacies that tend to dehumanize students by negating their affectively charged literacy engagement.

## (Re)humanizing literacy pedagogy in our schools

As educators, we must allow students to be human—to feel, to be moved, to act—as they become literate in the classroom. Becoming literate values students engaging with texts, with



one another, and with the world as an evolving, indeterminate, felt process. This is different from controlling the predetermined, fixed definition of what it means to be literate. This is too limiting for our students and has often worked to dehumanize students who veer from the idealized path.

In his featured speaker session at ILA 2019, scholar David Kirkland urged educators to start not with *what* we teach but *who* we teach. When we think about the teaching of literacy and what defines a successful literacy learner, reading levels, test scores, or assessments are most frequently the markers of success. This is the dominant system within which we are working. However, we must also work against this system because, at its best, it marginalizes the multiple, diverse literacies our students affectively engage with every day, and at its worst, it harms our most vulnerable students—black, brown, poor—when labeled, sorted, and punished through normed enactments of schooled literacy.

Indeed, it is not what we teach, but who we teach. An affective perspective moves forward efforts to (re)humanize literacy teaching and learning in classrooms. The (re) signifies the move to humanize differently from before. How might affect move educators to (re)humanize literacy pedagogy in a way we have not yet experienced? Affect theory pushes us to look toward what we do not yet know but what *could be*. ■

### ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

The digital edition of *Literacy Today* includes an additional Literacy Leadership article by **Michael Haggren** about steps administrators can take to serve as literacy leaders and create a culture of literacy. Print readers: Log in at [literacyworldwide.org/literacytoday](https://literacyworldwide.org/literacytoday) to read the digital issue.