

## The Insights of Literacy

By Yasmim K Alves da Silva

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My retired great-grandmother was the one person I had the most contact with during the first seven years of my childhood. She was a tough woman who raised her four daughters as a single mother, against all the traditional standards of a regular woman living in a small community located at the Brazilian amazon in the 20th Century. She never had the chance to attend school, since the closest one was miles away from her home and the only transportation available was by walking. None of her family members could read or write either. Consequently, she had to work in the manioc plantations to make a living and literacy was something she would never be able to focus on.

By the time I was born, my single mother moved in with my great grandmother and she would let me by her watch most of the time, since my mother was finishing high school and working. Later on, my mother would be traveling a lot and my great grandmother would become the biggest influence in my early education.

As a consequence, I did not have someone to read me stories before going to sleep or anything possibly related to reading and writing. That situation made me grow as a kid who would project in my mind a mistaken idea upon literacy, not only I thought of it as something mysterious and almost like a secrete shared with only a few selected people, I also felt frustrated by the thinking of how hard it would be for me to comprehend such a knowledge and it affected my confidence upon my capacity of learning.

Since my mother was the closest person related to me that was literate, her continuous absence would contribute to the way I saw literacy, as something mysterious and hard to reach out to. Although it certainly reflected like a set back to my development, it also made me think ambitiously about learning that challenging thing, because I wanted to attract my mother's attention and have her to be proud of me somehow.

One obstacle I faced was the fact that, in the city I was living, there was no public early education system. There was only public middle schools and then I would have to wait until I turned seven years old so I could attend school.

The first time I had access to children books was by a very kind teacher who lived in my neighborhood and knew that I was not attending any educational program until I was old enough to go to middle school. So quite often she would bring me some used books that I was very grateful for, the one book I recall tracing my way to a world of imagination and curiosity, was about the Amazon folklore, its title I don't remember, but there were many legends about mystique entities captivating stories.

Something to be considered is that I was the only child in my home, living under the super protective care of my old great grandmother and I would only go to school by the age of seven years old. As consequence I would grow to be an introverted and shy child. My escape from reality and the way to



keep me busy was to focus on those books and imagine what was its content, some of them had pictures and drawings that was very helpful for me to create the stories I thought was written there.

Certainly, learning how to read is not something we can do without help and guidance, and I realized that very soon. I wanted to completely understand how to decode those elegant patterns called words. So, I would do anything to catch my mother's attention every time I got to spend time with her, she seemed to be surprised by my obsessive interest and I could see that she was appreciating my personal initiative. I knew she was tired, but as a kid I did not fully understand what that meant and being told "not today" would make me very upset.

Finally, being able to attend school was a big event in my life. Excitement and nervousness took over myself during the weeks prior to the first day of classes. The first day of school I remember waking up two hours earlier to the time I should be there. I was very focused to what my teacher was explaining and looking forward to have homework to do. Therefore, even though I was a little behind my classmates I learned how to read really fast and soon enough I would be advanced to the class I was in, then my teacher (who I had a close relationship by then) said that I should skip one grade. And so I did with Ms. Suzane's intervention. That grade skipped made a big difference, with that I could be placed in a class with same ages classmates.

Just to clarify, I was living in a Portuguese speaking community, which is indeed my native language. I, personally, love to read poems in Portuguese since I was the age of thirteen and one of the things that influenced me to enjoy poetry happened during a year of middle school, in which I would be presented to poetry. And further, read like a writer, because I would need some inspirations to write my own poems.

One of my favorite moments as a middle school student, for sure, was a national poem contest that my teacher chose me and my best friend to represent our class and surprisingly we won the contest in our school, but did not make to the national contest. The contest required us to write a poem about the place we lived giving the details about the special characteristics that made that place unique. It was an awesome way to start using writing more seriously, and since then I got really interested about writing.

Not only did this contest made me gain interest in writing, but it also expanded the way I would see writing, since it gave many aspects to take in consideration like having for the first time a designated audience, the genre and the purpose. Such details would bring me closer to a few aspects that L. Lennie Irvin pointed out as "Academic Writing" situation in a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 1*.

One important observation that I was realizing about my writing was that it continuously changed accordingly to what I was reading and, in fact, I can see clear now that I was exercising what Mike Bunn said about reading like a writer in a chapter extracted from *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 2*. Not only I was using the contents as an inspiration to create my own stories, I was also copying some styles I could notice on my readings. The poem phase of my



adolescence was pretty intense, basic almost everything I was seeing and reading I could associate with the poem's structures and create my own poem versions of many fairy tales.

What really changed my writing style during my adolescence was becoming part of a theatre independent group, which turned out to be my favorite discourse, during two years. There I had contact with comedy and a lot of drama texts, all written by an university professor who had acted in that group years before. Between the many acting exercises we had to practice frequently, there was a writing exercise, which we had to write unique drama monologues and perform it. It definitely helped me expand my writing abilities, be more conscious about the audience reaction upon what I wrote and use reflection, such as Kathleen Blake Yancey explained in "Reflection in the Writing Classroom".

Being able to write made me feel fortunate and possessing a powerful tool, such a versatile method of expression was something I really appreciate during my whole life and I could not think of myself without this ability. Nevertheless, life comes to surprise and challenge us. When I moved to United States without any previous direct experience of English using, I felt really lost and underestimated in so many ways that all I could do was feel frustrated for a while.

I felt like a child who was neglected with not only the abilities of reading and writing, but talking as well. All my self-conceit in communication and using of language was dropped so quickly that it affected my confidence and how I would think of myself as a literate person. Many thoughts were going on in my mind, like "Everything that I valued as a concrete knowledge does not mean anything anymore?".

This phase was a confusing self-evaluation and how to make old knowledges add up to new contexts and ways to continue the started path of learning such things as grammar and creative writing. As an autodidact, I used many available tools to learn English and about the American culture itself, such as TV shows, books and music. Obvious it was not easy (and still it is not sometimes), but it certainly changed for the best, as I needed to face this new challenge and get out of my comfort zone. It really is a matter of opening myself to different realities and being able to change how to act upon new places and culture.

Something that I really missed was being part of a discourse that I would be expressing myself, and that changed when I saw myself in a Latin Dance Club and fell in love with dance right away, I felt tuned and connected with a group of people once again, and only by the fact of interacting with diverse people contributed to my writing relearning process, as I had people to write text messages and have face-to-face conversations. Not only that all, but doing something I love is just incredible itself, it affected positively in my social life as I was becoming a more outgoing person and I remember identifying with a quote I read from an autobiography book I was reading at the time. Maya Angelou's wrote "Dancing liberated me and even made me feel as if my body had a reason to be." I could not use better words to describe it.



### Works Cited

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